

# Mediations

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## **Mediations 26.1-2 Fall 2012-Spring 2013**

### **Before and After Neoliberalism**

- 1 Editors' Note
- 7 Robert Pippin: Back to Hegel?
- 29 András Bozóki: The Transition from Liberal Democracy:  
The Political Crisis in Hungary
- 53 Maria Chekhonadskikh and Alexei Penzin: From One Election to Another:  
Breakthroughs and Deadlocks of the Anti-Putin Movement in Russia
- 63 Imre Szeman: Conscience and the Common
- 71 Andrew Pendakis: Joking Seriously:  
The Artful Political Science of Besti Flokkurinn:  
An Interview with the Best Party's Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir
- 85 Max Haiven: Finance Depends on Resistance, Finance is  
Resistance, and Anyway, Resistance is Futile
- 107 Sarah Brouillette: Antisocial Psychology
- 119 Evan Mauro: The Death and Life of the Avant-Garde:  
Or, Modernism and Biopolitics
- 143 Jackson Petsche: The Importance of Being Autonomous:  
Toward a Marxist Defense of Art for Art's Sake
- 159 Matthew MacLellan: Capitalism's Many Futures: A Brief History of  
Theorizing Post-Capitalism Technologically

### **Book Reviews**

- 181 Robert Ryder: Immer Aktuell
- 187 David Janzen: Void of Debt: Crisis and the Remaking of Indebtedness
- 195 Andrew Pendakis: Moderation and Its Discontents:  
Liberalism, Totality, and the Limits of Centrist Prudence
- 205 Adam Carlson: Acropolis, Montreal: Charles Taylor at 80
- 215 Contributors



## Editors' Note

The world, as ever, is in turmoil. Even as dictators and autocrats are overthrown in some parts of the world (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya), in others, even the most minimal conditions of liberal democracy — freedom of the press, freedom of association, free and fair elections — are under threat. In many countries, including Hungary and Russia, right wing governments are picking apart constitutional guarantees (sketchy to begin with) in the name of stability and the protection of their electorates from foreign powers with (they claim) questionable motives; as one might expect, such populisms (without exception) benefit the few at the expense of the many. In those places where liberal democracy and capitalism have been meshed together and passed off as the final stage of human history, the global legitimation crisis that should have arisen from the causes and consequences of the 2008 financial crash can be found only in dribs and drabs, hither and yon. There certainly was a before to neoliberalism — the specific configuration of governmentality that we continue to endure, and which remains the vocabulary of state decision-making worldwide. And there certainly will be an after. What form this *after* might take depends on how we understand the unfolding political and cultural dynamics of the present, which depends in turn on a nuanced sense of the forces that shaped the codes and logics of neoliberalism, transforming them into a doxa that has proven difficult to shake even as the meltdown of its certitudes occupies front pages around the world.

This issue of *Mediations* offers insights into the past, present and potential future(s) of neoliberalism. It begins in what might seem a surprising place: Robert Pippin's assessment of Slavoj Žižek's *Less than Nothing. Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (2012). The ambitious project of Žižek's book is to produce a new model of dialectical materialism through a return to Hegel via Lacan; though Žižek has thought through the implications of this particular conjunction many times before, here he engages in a thoroughgoing account of a system intended to perform one key task of philosophy: to apprehend our time in thought. Though Pippin praises Žižek's commitment to Hegel (Žižek returns to Hegel in a serious and rigorous way), he is more critical of the Hegelian-Lacanian conjunction that Žižek proposes to map, especially at the most basic and important level of producing an ontology of the subject. To put it bluntly, Pippin argues that Žižek gets the subject wrong: apperception simply doesn't demand the self-negating gap that Žižek feels is so important to the subject.

It is because the connections between self-consciousness and reason are significant for Žižek's larger philosophical and political project that Pippin focuses his critical attention here. "What Hegel thought was the greatest accomplishment of modern civil society — its ability to educate (as *Bildung*) its citizens to their equal status and profound dependence on each other, and so to educate them to the virtues of civility and trustworthiness — has become a lie," Pippin writes. Our ability to navigate the blind alleys of neoliberalism depends as much on a clear articulation of philosophy as it does on the identification of political limits; Pippin's engagement with Žižek is an example of how the former is essential to the latter.

The next articles offer frontline accounts of two recent political developments with repercussions well beyond the national settings in which they take place. In "The Transition from Liberal Democracy: The Political Crisis in Hungary," political scientist and former Hungarian Minister of Culture, András Bozóki, offers a precise and thoroughgoing account of the current political situation in Hungary. Since taking power in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has used the advantage of its super-majority (it holds more than two thirds of the seats in parliament) to reshape the Hungarian political landscape. Despite the criticism it has endured from within and without, Orbán has worked quickly and aggressively to undo democratic checks and balances, creating in the process a political and administrative landscape that means his party — Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Union — will be difficult to remove from power for many years to come, if ever. A new constitution has been pushed through, with an amendment in the works to make the major left party in the country illegal (due to its links to Soviet-era governments); state-run media have become little more than mouthpieces of the state, while independent media have come under enormous state pressure to toe the government line; political appointments have been extended in some cases to a decade, ensuring that traces of Fidesz will remain behind even when the party is voted out; courts have been packed with party loyalists; and perhaps most alarmingly, ethnic tensions have been aggravated through the mobilization of a political narrative that identifies Hungarian problems as the result of outsiders intent on manipulating the country for their own benefit. In great detail, Bozóki lays bare the causes and consequences of the rise of the Orbán government, and identifies the all-too-real challenges facing those who oppose the direction in which Hungary is heading.

The situation in Hungary is mirrored in recent events in Russia. Maria Chekhonadskikh and Alexei Penzin describe the public emergence of an opposition movement to the Putin government between the two stages of the recent federal elections in that country (December 2011 and February 2012). The long-expected announcement that Putin was once again going to run for President still came as enough of a shock to send opposition groups out into the streets. Chekhonadskikh and Penzin lay out the complex and unstable political composition of the protestors, who represent a wide range of opinions, aims, and ambitions. While much of the

population remains entranced by the “stability” promised by a Putin-government that insists that Russia is still in a special period of transition, the promised alternative offered by the opposition is becoming more and more real. “The heated political debates on the streets, in families, at workplaces, and in universities are a fresh and stunning reality here,” Chekhonadskikh and Penzin write. “Something irreversible has already happened — mass politicization and a rising political consciousness cannot be stopped and trapped in banal mantras of representative democracy or closed off by Putin’s dubious electoral results.” Most promising of all is the manner in which this opposition is, finally, cutting the automatic link made between any new Left in Russia and the old Communist Party, a connection that for too long has cut the feet out from under active political contestation in the country.

It is not only in “transition” countries that governments can mobilize the promise of stability to manage the threat of change. Imre Szeman asks the question: what guides the faith that liberals such as Paul Krugman have in the concept of “conscience”? Krugman and other liberals — indeed, perhaps anyone and everyone who still professes faith in capitalism — believe that the excesses, pains, injustices and inequities of the current economic status quo can be reigned in through the proper application of conscience; in sum, capitalism only goes bad when bad (or incompetent) people are in charge. It is why Krugman’s analyses as of late voice ethical imperatives as much as the examination of economic axioms. It is easy to dismiss this appeal to conscience as pure self-delusion, or, more generously, as casting one’s lot too much in the camp of agency at the expense of attention to structure. But is conscience of necessity a ruse of capitalism? Conscience has been a paradigmatic concept in Western philosophy, one that has been framed as essential to ethics, politics, and community; it is that amorphous yet essential space in which the connections and conjunctions between individual and social take place. Szeman speculates on whether the Left needs something like an idea of conscience in its arsenal of ideas as a mechanism to bridge the gap between the one and the many, the individual and a new, reinvigorated common that will come into being after neoliberalism.

One intriguing response to neoliberal policies has come about in Iceland, where the Best Party (*Besti Flokkurinn*) has shaken up the formerly staid politics of the island-country that found itself at the heart of the 2008 market crash due to the fantasy professed by its banks of massive profits unencumbered by risk. The complete collapse of Iceland’s banking system (and subsequently its national economy) left Icelanders ready for a new form of politics. Enter the “anarcho-surrealist” Best Party, led by comedian and artist Jón Gnarr, which claimed the mayoralty and a plurality of city council seats in Reykjavik’s 2010 civic election. One of the keys to the success of the Party was a relentless attack on the deadened protocols and practices of official politics — those self-same standard ways of doing business that led to draining of Iceland’s banks. Through an interview with the party’s general secretary and chief strategist, Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir, Andrew Pendakis learns about the party’s formation, its



political goals, and its understanding of the shape of contemporary politics. Can the humor and irony on which the Best Party relies be the basis for a new politics in Iceland and elsewhere — a salvo against neoliberalism from a direction it might have least expected?

Max Haiven's contribution explores strategies of resistance to neoliberalism by investigating the consequences of (to use Randy Martin's phrase) the financialization of everyday life. Haiven's provocative intervention takes the digitization, globalization, and neoliberalization of the financial sphere as the terrain on which politics is (of necessity) played out today. This produces political limits and challenges that need to be clearly mapped out and understood, not least because finance depends on resistance rather than being unsettled by it. As Haiven notes, the power of finance emerges in part because of the necessity of individuals to engage in it "as an ultimately tragic form of resistance to their material conditions of life under neoliberalism." The idea of "resistance" on which the Left so frequently anchors its hopes is flawed in yet another way. Because we live at moment in which "there are very few if any spaces of autonomy, solidarity, and possibility that have not been co-opted by financialized neoliberalism and whose seizure we must resist," Haiven argues that we need to constitute a new political rhetoric that more accurately names our political circumstances. His astute critique of the assumptions shaping left discourse at present offers us a beginning from which to do just this

The four essays comprising the second half of this double issue offer probing narratives of the before of neoliberalism by returning us to the mid-century roots of discourses of creativity, the avant-garde, and technological society. Sarah Brouillette explores the emergence of social scientific studies of the importance of creativity and innovation for the economy — a link that has become a mantra in the twenty-first century. Brouillette offers accounts of the studies of Frank Barron, Abraham Maslow, and Teresa Amabile, all of whom influenced the writing of influential management guru Tom Peters. In a perversion of an avant-garde impetus, these writers argued for the creation of new modes of labor and society in which work constituted a space of self-actualization, and where one's individual creative ends would (magically, it seems) equate with that of the social whole. Brouillette shows that, long before Richard Florida, artists and writers offered organizational psychologists and management theorists models of the ideal worker in a knowledge economy: self-starters who find life in their work, and who in doing so maximize development of the economy as well.

Evan Mauro urges us to reconsider the political productivity of the avant-garde. Though much critical discourse has disavowed it — in part because of the kinds of uses to which Brouillette shows its discourses to have been put — avant-gardist practices, objects, and theories persist. What are we to make of the fact that these continue well past the point when (according to Peter Bürger and others) they are supposed to have died off? Mauro offers an alternative genealogy of the twentieth-century avant-garde organized around the concept of "life" at its core. He argues that "the



avant-gardes' eventual appropriation by capital was not the negation or perversion of a state-revolutionary project, but a contingent and labile value struggle that wanted to find new modes of aesthetic valuation, and became attached to larger revolutionary projects at specific conjunctures." As evidenced in all manner of contemporary political and aesthetic struggle, the fight over life and social reproduction at the heart of the avant-garde remains key to the fight to bring about an after to neoliberalism.

Jackson Petsche's "The Importance of Being Autonomous," explores the positive potential, for the present moment, of what might be considered the precise opposite of the historical vanguard: "*l'art pour l'art*," as mobilized by the Decadent writers of the *fin de siècle*. Petsche's essay is the winner of the 2010 Michael Sprinker Graduate Writing Competition, which recognizes an essay or dissertation chapter that engages with Marxist theory, scholarship, pedagogy, or activism.

A third alternative genealogy is offered in Matthew MacLellan's, "Capitalism's Many Futures." Many of the most prominent and influential economists and social theorists of the twentieth century imagined the outcome of technological and knowledge society to be the end of capitalism. From Hilferding to Hayek, Schumpeter to Keynes, and Galbraith to Daniel Bell, and in surprisingly congruent ways given their differences of outlook and opinion, the development of the economy from industrialism to post-industrialism was understood as (of necessity) also generating a shift from capitalism to post-capitalism, i.e., socialism. MacLellan explains why these thinkers believed that technological advances developed in contradiction to capitalist accumulation, and considers the ways in which neoliberalism has squared this apparent socio-historical circle through changes in class structure, the absorption of culture and the everyday into work, and a reframing of the importance of knowledge for the economy.

This issue also includes reviews of Richard Dienst's *The Bonds of Debt*, Miriam Hansen's final book *Cinema and Experience*, and Michael Berubé's controversial *The Left at War*. The themes and issues addressed in all three of these books speak to the questions and concerns animating contemporary left politics, and contribute to our understanding (in more and less successful ways) of the causes and consequences of neoliberalism. Finally, Adam Carlson offers us an account of his experience at *Charles Taylor at 80: An International Conference*. Wither liberal political philosophy? Can it manage its contradictions even within the social and economic conditions of this new century?

Imre Szeman, for the *Mediations* editors



Robert Pippin. "Back to Hegel?" *Mediations* 26.1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013) 7-28.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/back-to-hegel](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/back-to-hegel)

*Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*

Slavoj Žižek

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## Back to Hegel?

Robert Pippin

It takes some courage to give a book this size the title "Less than Nothing." Žižek must know that the first, powerfully tempting phrase that will occur to any reviewer, even before reading the book, will be "Aptly titled." The book has already inspired dismissive reviews in widely read publications, reviews which seem to be reviews (and dismissals) of Žižek himself (or of the Žižek phenomenon, the Symbolic Žižek), and which mostly ignore his massive tome. But he has written a serious attempt to re-animate or re-actualize Hegel (in the light of Lacanian meta-psychology and so in a form he wants to call "materialist"), and in the limited space available to me I want to try to summarize what he has proposed and to express some disagreements.

The question of the possible relevance of Hegel to contemporary concerns divides into two questions and immediately confronts two objections that have long proven deeply compelling for many. There is first the question of what can be said about Hegel's "system." He is taken to be a hyper-rationalist holist whose central claim is that the Absolute (something like what Kant called the unconditioned) is the Idea, and that everything there is can be understood as the actualization, in nature and across historical time, of the Idea. (And, of course, contra-Kant, he is thereby claiming to know what Kant had denied we could possibly know.) Second, there is the question of Hegel the *Versöhnungsphilosoph*, the philosopher of reconciliation. On some accounts of this side of Hegel's project, Hegel believed that we had reached the "end of history," both in philosophy (his own position had successfully accounted for all possible philosophical options, in their interconnection with each other), and in politics, art, and religion. Human freedom had been realized in the modern state as described in his *Philosophy of Right*, in the rather doctrinally thin Protestant humanism Hegel

championed, and in romantic art, an art form in the process of transcending itself as art, actualizing art in a way that signaled its end as a significant vehicle of human self-knowledge. (The link between the two aspects of Hegel's position is taken to be his theodicy, the role of the Absolute's [or God's] self-actualization in time in accounting for the rationality and culmination of political and intellectual history.)

The objections to both versions of Hegel and Hegelianism are well known. There are a host of objections to Hegelian rationalist holism from the empiricist, scientific naturalist, and analytic approaches to philosophy. (The Anglophone version of that school famously began with the rejection of Hegel.) But in Europe the objections were more often directed at Hegel's uncompromising and supposedly "totalizing" rationalism: his inability, it was charged, to do sufficient justice to the concrete particularity of human existence, to the unconceptualizable human individual, to the role of unreason in human motivation, to the contingency of historical change, and to the phenomena of interest to psychoanalysis, like repetition and the death drive. Objections to the second dimension are more varied and more interesting, because Hegel succeeded in convincing even many of his critics (like the "young Hegelians") that philosophy must have a historically diagnostic task (it must be "its own time comprehended in thought"), even while many also rejected Hegel's "idealist" version of that project and his conclusions about "where we are" in any such process. Others simply point to the fact that no one has succeeded in writing *The Phenomenology of Spirit, Part Two*. The historical world that developed after 1831 and after the twentieth century cannot, it is assumed, be properly understood in Hegelian terms, the world of mass consumer societies, post-colonial states, globalized capitalism and therewith greatly weakened nation states, the culture industry, pervasive reliance on technology in all facets of life, and so forth. Moreover, it is argued, it is not possible to extend even a roughly Hegelian analysis to such phenomena, especially to reason-defeating, irreconcilable-with phenomena like Nazism, the Holocaust, Stalin's crimes, or a communist China full of billionaires.<sup>1</sup>

Simply put, Žižek's ambitious goal is to argue that the former characterization of Hegel attacks a straw man, and that, when this is realized in sufficient detail, the putative European break with Hegel in the criticisms of the likes of Schelling, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Deleuze, and the Freudians, will look very different, with significantly more overlap than gaps, and this will make available a historical diagnosis very different from the triumphalist one usually attributed to Hegel. (One of the surprising things about the book is that despite its size, what interests Žižek, by a very wide margin, are the theoretical presuppositions for such a diagnosis rather than much detail about the diagnosis itself.)<sup>2</sup>

The structure of the book is unusual. It is based on the adage that the second and third most pleasurable things in the world are the drink before and the cigarette after. Hence we get "*the drink before*," the pre-Hegelian context needed to understand Hegel's option (a lot of attention is devoted to Plato's *Parmenides*, Christianity, the death of

God, and Fichte); “*The Thing Itself*” (twice! once with Hegel, once with Lacan); and “*the cigarette after*” (Heidegger, Levinas, Badiou, and a concluding chapter on “the ontology of quantum physics”). A lot of this, especially occasional digressions about Buddhism and the quantum physics discussion, not to mention the intricacies of Lacan, are well above my pay grade, so I will concentrate in the following on the interpretation of Hegel and the implications Žižek draws from that interpretation.

▪

Let us designate the basic problem that the book addresses as the ontological problem of “subjectivity”; *what is it to be a thinking, knowing and also acting and interacting subject in a material world?* Žižek begins by claiming that there are four main kinds of answers to such a question possible in the current “ideological-philosophical field”: (i) scientific naturalism (brain science, Darwinism); (ii) discursive historicism (Foucault, deconstruction); (iii) New Age Western “Buddhism”; (iv) some sort of transcendental finitude (culminating in Heidegger).<sup>3</sup> Žižek’s thesis is that these options miss the correct one, which he calls the idea of a “pre-transcendental gap or rupture (the Freudian name for which is the drive),” and that this framework is what actually “designates the very core of modern subjectivity.” (6-7)

This all means that the discussion must proceed at a very high level of abstraction, and will require a difficult summary of the basic positions of the “Gang of Four” (Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) that Žižek thinks he needs on the table in order for him to present the core issue he wants to discuss. In the language developed in this tradition, at that high level of abstraction, the problem is the problem of the ontological status of “negativity,” nonbeing, what is not (or is not simply the fullness or presence of positive being). In the simplest sense, we are talking about intentional consciousness, say in perception or empirical judgments, and the ontological status of agency. Consciousness is not a wholly “positive” phenomenon in this (Kantian and post-Kantian) way of looking at it. If it were it would be something like a mere complex registering and responding device (of the same ontological status as a thermometer). But an empirical judgment about the world (“there is a red book on the table”) is not simply wrung out of one by a perceptual episode. One is not simply wholly absorbed in the presence of the world to one, and that “not” is the beginning of all the German problems Žižek wants to trace out in order to get to his own interpretation. In making any such a judgment I “negate” the mere immediacy or givenness of perceptual content, negate it as immediate and putatively given, and take up a position of sorts about what is there.<sup>4</sup> And in agency I am not simply causally responsive to inclinations and desires; there is no fullness of positive being here either. I interrupt or negate merely positive being (what I feel inclined to do, experience as wanting to do) by deliberating and resolving what to do. Any such inclination cannot count as a reason for an action except as “incorporated” within a maxim, a general policy one has for actions of such a type.<sup>5</sup> So when Hegel reminds us in the Preface to

the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that we must think “substance” “also as subject,” he does not, it would appear, mean for us to think subject merely as an attribute of substance or an appearance of what remains, basically, substance, or an epiphenomenon of substance.<sup>6</sup> The whole point of speculative idealism is to think substance as not-just-substance, the negation of mere substance as such; and to think subject as substance, what is not-mere-subject, but still, after all, substance again. A tall order. The closest first approximation of what he means is Aristotelian: subjectivity (thinking and acting according to norms) is the distinct being-at-work (*energeia*, Hegelian *Wirklichkeit*) of the biological life-form that is the human substance. This in the same sense in which Aristotle says, if the eye were body, *seeing* would be its form, its distinctive being-at-work. (Spontaneously mediated consciousness is the distinct being-at-work of human substance, its actualization.) This being-at-work is how that substantial life-form appears, and not any attestation of the self-negating Gap that is substance. (This is in disagreement with Žižek’s Lacanian reading, as at 380, *inter alia*.)<sup>7</sup>

The way Žižek poses the question itself, then, reveals a deeply Schellingian orientation at the beginning and throughout the whole book. (This will not be surprising to anyone who has read *Tarrying with the Negative* or *The Parallax View*.) That is, the question this observation is taken to raise is: what could such a subject with such a negating capacity, *be*? And even more sweepingly: what must *being* be, such that there are, can be, “positive” beings and such “negating” ones. For the early Schelling, this led to the conclusion that the distinction between such subjects and objects could neither be an objective distinction, nor a subjective one, so the “ground” of the possibility of the distinction must be an “indifference point,” neither subject nor object (prompting Hegel’s famous, friendship-destroying remark, that this is “the night in which all cows are black.”)<sup>8</sup> And in what could be called the Schellingian tradition, the assumption has long been that neither Kant nor Fichte had, could have, an adequate answer to this question because for them, “being” is “secondary” not primary (an “appearance,” or a posited “not-I”), and the “Absolute” is such a “groundless” or putatively (but impossibly) self-grounding subject.<sup>9</sup> The interesting question has always been how to locate the mature Hegel in this field of possibilities.<sup>10</sup> As already noted, for Žižek that position involves a commitment to a “gap” or “rupture” in being. “[S]peech (presup)poses a lack/hole in the positive order of being” (75). “[T]he void of our knowledge corresponds to a void in being itself, to the ontological incompleteness of reality” (148). There are many such formulations.<sup>11</sup>

This all has deep connections with the original Eleatic problems of non-being (how I could possibly say “what is not” in uttering falsehoods; a problem because what is not is *not*, is impossible), hence Žižek’s sustained attention to the second half of Plato’s *Parmenides*. But the German version has a unique, different dimension and that dimension is the beginning of my deepest disagreement with Žižek. To see the problem (or to see it as I see it), consider what Hegel draws our attention to when he is stating his understanding of his deepest connection to Kant:



It is one of the profoundest and truest insights to be found in the *Critique of Reason* that the unity which constitutes the essence of the concept is recognized as the original synthetic unity of apperception, the unity of the “I think,” or of self-consciousness. — This proposition is all that there is to the so-called transcendental deduction of the categories which, from the beginning, has however been regarded as the most difficult piece of Kantian philosophy...<sup>12</sup>

It is *for this reason* — the apperceptive nature of conceiving, the fact that conceiving is apperceiving — that perceptual awareness, judgment, actions, any determinate intentional awareness, cannot be understood as simply being in a mental state (in the fullness or positivity of being, in the manner in which we would say that a computer “is calculating”). For in perceiving, I am also conscious of perceiving, conscious of myself perceiving. In believing anything, I am conscious of my believing, of myself committed to a belief. In acting, I would not be acting, were I not conscious of myself acting. (An action is not something that goes on whether I am conscious of it or not, like water boiling. It is only action if I am conscious of myself acting.)

There are then two complications in this view which require extensive discussion but can only be noted here. The first: as Sebastian Rödl often notes in his book on self-consciousness, the above should not suggest, as the grammar might, that there are two acts of mind involved.<sup>13</sup> There is only one. Action is consciousness of action; there is no action unless I am conscious of myself acting.<sup>14</sup> The second: apperception is not a two-place intentional relation. I am not self-conscious in the way I am conscious of objects (or an obvious regress would threaten). One could say that I am conscious of objects apperceptively or self-consciously; never that I am conscious of objects and also conscious of myself as a second object.<sup>15</sup> (This is also why first-order self-knowledge is not observational or inferential [not of an object “already there”] but constitutive.<sup>16</sup> In any respect relevant to my practical identity [and not any empirical feature], I am what I take myself to be [professor, citizen, social-democrat-liberal]. Or at least I am provisionally; I must also enact what I take myself to be or it is a mere confabulation or an untested pledge about what I will do. In Žižekian language, there is no self except as posited and enacted, and the apparent paradox [who is doing the positing?] is no paradox.)<sup>17</sup>

When Žižek takes on the apperception claim in his own terms (347-8), he notes how implausible it is to think that every act of consciousness is an act of self-consciousness. It seems clearly empirically false. But that is because the supposition concerns two acts, consciousness of the object and consciousness of the subject aware of the object, and the most important claim in the idealist treatment of the issue is that this is not so. There is only one act. Self-consciousness is not consciousness of an object. We do not need Deleuzian “virtuality,” or an ontology with an “actuality of the possible” to account for this. And there is no link in the treatment of this issue by Kant, Fichte,

and Hegel to Žižek's own negative ontology, his claim that "What, ultimately, 'there is' is only the absolute Difference, the self-repelling Gap" (378).<sup>18</sup> What there is, in the sense of this inquiry, is a possible space of reasons, into which persons may be socialized, and within which constant self-correction, self-"negation," is possible.

This may all already be "too much information" for a reader interested in how Žižek proposes to offer a renewed version of dialectical materialism and so a critical theory of late modern capitalism. But this path through German Idealism is the path he has chosen and it is important to know if his version is leading us correctly. With many more pages to demonstrate it, the point of the above formulation would be to suggest a different way of understanding the problem of "negativity" in that tradition, one that will not lead us to gaps or voids or holes in being (or "groundless Acts" in the absence of "the big Other"). I do not fully understand the claims about holes in the fabric of being, and at any rate, we do not need the claim if we go in the direction I am suggesting. For if that formulation of apperception is correct, it means we are able to account for the inappropriateness of psychological or naturalist accounts of such states, all without a gappy ontology (in the sense, if not in the same way, that Frege and the early Husserl criticized psychologism without an "alternate" ontology). If believing is to be conscious of believing, then it is impossible just to "be" believing. For me to be conscious of my believing something is to be conscious of why I believe what I do (however fragmentary, confused, or unknowingly inconsistent such reasons may be). When I want to know what I believe, I am investigating what I ought to believe.<sup>19</sup> Such grounds may be incomplete and may commit one to claims one is unaware of as such, and much belief is habitual and largely unreflective, but never completely so. In any case not connected or connectable with some grounds for belief, the matter would just be a view I am entertaining, not what I believe. Likewise with action. It is constitutive of action that an agent can be responsive to the "why" question, and that means to be in a position to give a reason for my action. (Again, the exchange "Why did you do that?" "I don't know, I just did it." is not a possible one. If that is the case, your body may have moved but you didn't do anything.)<sup>20</sup> Doxastic, cognitive, and intentional states are thus "in the space of reasons" and to ask for, say, neuro-psychological causes for having come to be in that state, is to make a category mistake; to have misunderstood the question; to offer something we cannot use. Such causes are irrelevant to my having the reasons I have (the "for-itself" of any such "in-itself" in Hegelian lingo), and your understanding the reasons I have, all of which must be enunciated and "backed" first-personally. No gaps in being need apply; any more than the possibility of people playing bridge, following the norms of bridge, and exploring strategies for winning need commit us to any unusual gappy ontology to account for the possibility of norm-responsive bridge following. Anyone playing the game is not just acting out responses to cues, but is, at the same time as playing and making moves, always "holding open" the possibility of revising their strategy, challenging someone on the rules and so forth. This is *what it is* to be following rules, not to be

instantiating laws.<sup>21</sup> This capacity is possible because it is certainly actual, and that means that materially embodied beings are able to engage in complex, rule-following practices, the explanation of which is not furthered by reference to their neurological properties. (In his *Phenomenology*, Hegel's formulation of this sort of logical negativity is that consciousness is "always beyond itself," and he frequently, for this reason, characterizes consciousness as a self-negation.)<sup>22</sup>

Now it is possible for Žižek to say that just *that*, that possibility for norm-responsiveness, since a materially embodied capacity not explicable in material terms, just is the gap or void or self-negation he wants to attribute to Hegel's ontology, the "more than material, without being immaterial."<sup>23</sup> But that seems too anodyne for what he wants to say and for the connection he wants to make with Lacan. For, on this way of looking at the matter, there is no need for a paradoxical negative ontology. Of course, it is possible and important that some day researchers will discover why animals with human brains can do these things and animals without human brains cannot, and some combination of astrophysics and evolutionary theory will be able to explain why humans have ended up with the brains they have. But these are not philosophical problems and they do not generate any philosophical problems.<sup>24</sup> (The problems are: what is a compelling reason and why? Under what conditions are the reasons people give for what they do "their own" reasons, reasons and policies they can genuinely "identify with"?)<sup>25</sup>

Put another way, Žižek is quite right to note the importance of the shift from the early to the mature Hegel, which involves at its core Hegel's realization that "logic" was not a preparation for "metaphysics," but that logic was metaphysics. But this means that a consideration of being-in-its-intelligibility is the only sort of metaphysics that is possible (to be is to be intelligible, something like the motto of Greek philosophy and so the beginning of philosophy).<sup>26</sup> But this also means that the "movement" in Hegel's *Encyclopedia* from a "logic of nature" to a "logic of *Geist*" has nothing to do with any "materialist evolutionism" (238). Hegel's metaphysics is a logic, and the intelligibility of nature at some point, speaking very casually, "runs out," is unable in its terms to account for the complex, rule-governed activities materially embodied beings are capable of. This is not a new, non-natural capacity that emerges in time, but it emerges in a systematic consideration of the resources for rendering intelligible that are available if limited to natural-scientific accounts.

There is a phenomenological account in Hegel of the context within which materially embodied organic beings, living beings in a minimal self-relation (a self-sentiment necessary to preserve life) can be imagined interacting in a way that "for them" transcends mere self-sustenance, a "move" that will not be comprehensible as a move in the purposive activities of mere animal life. That is the famous account in Chapter IV of the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The problematic is to imagine such living beings struggling, perhaps over resources, to the death if necessary, when the possibility is introduced of a participant's indifference to his own life in the service

of a demand to be recognized (a “non-natural” norm), when what one demands is not mere submission, but a pledge of service, an acknowledgment of the other’s entitlement. “Spirit” emerges in this imagined social contestation, in what we come to demand of each other, not in the interstices of being. This is a phenomenological account (what it is like to be and come to be *Geist*) not an encyclopedic logic, but it also introduces the Hegelian account of reason. We see that it is not to be understood as a mere capacity for calculation or merely strategic, but as a socio-historical practice, what Brandom calls the “game of giving and asking for reasons,”<sup>27</sup> and it introduces the central question of Hegel’s historical narrative: is it plausible to claim that we are getting better at justifying ourselves to each other, or not?<sup>28</sup>

One can see this (that the above account is not Žižek’s direction) in his very detailed treatment of Fichte.<sup>29</sup> Žižek follows closely the account of Fichte in the recently published undergraduate lectures given by Dieter Henrich at Harvard in the seventies (*Between Kant and Hegel*), and this creates two problems.<sup>30</sup> In the first place, Henrich confuses the problem of apperceptive consciousness in experience and action with the problem of reflective self-identification; how to find and identify my unique self. Those are two different problems and there is no indication that Fichte confused them, and plenty of evidence that he was aware of the difference.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, Žižek accepts Henrich’s charge that Fichte confused “logical” with “real” opposition, switching from one to the other, and so could provide no satisfying account of the relation of the I to the not-I. But Fichte was quite clear on the difference and his remarks track closely the remarks made above about the status of the normative in Kant and the early idealists. A few examples will have to suffice. Here is Fichte in a typical statement of general principles:

The basic contention of the philosopher, as such, is as follows: Though the self may exist only for itself, there necessarily arises for it at once an existence external to it; the ground of the latter lies in the former, and is conditioned thereby; self-consciousness and consciousness of something that is to be — not ourselves, — are necessarily connected; but the first is to be regarded as the “conditioning” factor, and the second as the conditioned.<sup>32</sup>

But we don’t know just from this what “condition” means and especially how it relates to the key term, “positing” (*setzen*), the positing of the *nicht-Ich*.

When he tries to explain what he means, though, he reverts to the “autonomy of the normative” language invoked above. From the 1797 “Introductions to the *Wissenschaftslehre*”:

So what then is the overall gist of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, summarized in a few words? It is this: reason is absolutely self-sufficient; it exists only

for itself. But nothing exists for reason except reason itself. It follows that everything reason is must have its foundation in reason itself and must be explicable solely on the basis of reason itself and not on the basis of anything outside of reason, for reason could not get outside of itself without renouncing itself. In short the *Wissenschaftslehre* is transcendental idealism.<sup>33</sup>

From the “Second Introduction” to the 1796/1799 *Wissenschaftslehre (nova methodo)*, translated as *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy*:

The idealist observes that experience in its entirety is nothing but an acting on the part of a rational being.

There then follows a gloss on “the viewpoint of idealism”:

The idealist observes how there must come to be things for the individual. Thus the situation is different for the [observed] individual than it is for the philosopher. The individual is confronted with things, men, etc., that are independent of him. But the idealist says, “There are no things outside me and present independently of me.” Though the two say opposite things, they do not contradict each other. For the idealist, from his own viewpoint, displays the necessity of the individual’s view. When the idealist says, “outside of me,” he means “outside of reason”; when the individual says the same thing, he means “outside of my person.”<sup>34</sup>

Or, in an even more summary claim from Fichte’s notes: “the I is reason.”<sup>35</sup>

Now this rational self-satisfaction is only something we can “strive” for infinitely according to Fichte, but the larger point is the one of relevance for Žižek’s reading. That point concerns the necessary link between the self-conscious character of experience and action, understood this way, and *reason*, a norm that does not play a prominent role in Žižek’s Schellingian account. (The other Hegelian issue that does not play a major role for Žižek is sociality, *Geist*, and the issues are related, as I will try to show in the next section.) The condition of modern atheism means for Žižek, in Lacanian terms, that there is and can be no longer any “big Other,” any guarantor of at least the possibility of any resolution of normative skepticism and conflicts. But no transcendent guarantor is not the same thing as no possible reliance on reason in our own deliberations and in our claims on others. Even a position (like Nietzsche’s, say) which held that most conscious appeals to reasons are symptoms, that true reasons lie elsewhere (not the slave’s virtuousness, but his *ressentiment* motivated his submission), is committed to the link. (*Ressentiment* is his reason, counted by him — in self-deceit — as warranting action, submission, and moralistic condemnation



of the Master; otherwise there would be no satisfaction in what he did.) To claim something or to do something is to offer to give reasons for the claim or the deed, and if there are reasons either to reject the reasons or to reject the claim of sincerity, we are still in, cannot exit, the space of reasons. (An immediate consequence: the first sentence of Žižek's conclusion ["The Political Suspension of the Ethical"] — "What the inexistence of the big Other signals is that every ethical and/or moral edifice has to be grounded on an abyssal act which is, in the most radical sense imaginable, political" — makes zero Hegelian sense. Something understood by an agent as an "abyssal" act is a delusion, the pathos of self-inflating and posed heroism, and the gesture belongs in the Hegelian zoo along with The Beautiful Soul, The Knight of Virtue and especially The Frenzy of Self-Conceit.)<sup>36</sup> And if the act is "abyssal," then "politics" simply means "power," power backed by nothing but resolve and will, likely met with nothing but resolve and will.)

To see the relevance of, on the contrary, the connection between self-consciousness and reason to Žižek's project in the book, we need to turn to his long, explicit discussion of Hegel.

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In this sense, the post-Hegelian turn to "concrete reality, irreducible to notional mediation," should rather be read as a desperate posthumous revenge of metaphysics, as an attempt to reinstall metaphysics, although in an inverted form of the primacy of concrete reality. (239)

Truer words were never spoken in Hegel's voice. In explaining such a claim, Žižek makes a number of salient points about Hegel. For example, one of the most curious things about Hegel's basic position is that it can be fairly summarized by saying that there is no independent, positive position. Rather it is the right understanding of the other logically possible positions. Žižek gets this aspect of Hegel exactly right (cf. 387 ff.) and has a number of useful things to say about it and its implications. Moreover, Žižek's interest in Lacan leads him to three other aspects of Hegel that are quite important but often neglected in both conventional (what Žižek calls "textbook") interpretations and more "up-to-date" contemporary reconstructions. This is the dimension, first, of "retroactivity," also sometimes known as "belatedness" (*Nachträglichkeit*), or what Žižek rightly described as Hegel's insistence on the logic of a deed or claim or event which can be said to "posit its own presuppositions" retroactively. (A dream's meaning is constituted by the telling; is not "recovered." A trauma becomes *the trauma* it is retroactively, in its interrogation.) In Hegel the notion is most important in his account of act descriptions and intentions. There is no literal backward causation, but what it is we did and why we did it can be said to come to be what they are only after we have acted (after we have seen what we were actually committed to doing; what others acknowledge, or not, as what we did.)<sup>37</sup> Secondly, in



a related claim, Žižek takes much more seriously than most other commentators the unusual and initially paradoxical thesis that Spirit must be understood as a “product of itself.” Žižek’s discussions of all these topics are, in my view, on the mark and valuable.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, because he does such justice to these themes, especially the latter, he can, third, reject the picture of Hegelian historical action so familiar in critical theory criticisms, especially by Adorno and Adornians. This is the picture of *Geist* externalizing itself in its products (its “self-negation”), thereby alienated from them, until it can “return to itself” in its externality, negate this otherness, and so be reconciled with itself in a sublated self-identity (the negation of negation). This is also “the great narcissistic devouring maw” picture of Hegel, devouring and negating otherness in a mad project to become everything, the cartoonish and grossly unfair picture so beloved by Adorno in his dismissal of Hegel as the epitome of “identity thinking.” (Cf. 300.) But however right he is in rejecting that caricature, Žižek’s own picture seems to me too influenced by his picture of Lacan (not to mention middle Schelling) and so does not allow the true Hegelian alternative in these very abstract possibilities to emerge, especially with respect to the problem of reason (Hegel’s “big Other”) and sociality (*Sittlichkeit*, another version of Hegel’s big Other, “actualized reason”).

Given what has been said so far, we can summarize this Hegel-Lacan problem by recalling Hegel’s extraordinary (and one might say Lacanian) claim that *Geist* is a “breach” or “wound,” but one that is self-inflicted (i.e. it is a result; no ontological tear in the fabric of being as such), and one that *Geist* can heal, even without “scars.”<sup>39</sup> (Not at all a Freudian thought. Much more needs to be said about the Hegelian notion of reconciliation than is possible here.) More generally, entry into the signifying realm, the space of meanings, is for Hegel necessarily at the same time the space of reasons because of the profound sociality of meanings; the fact that they must circulate in a larger social economy, an economy always of claims, rejections, contention, struggle, and resolutions (self-inflicted wounds), not just a personal or libidinal economy. And this is an economy that is profoundly historical, one not capturable in a mythic/archetypal meta-psychology limited to a primarily individual ontogeny.<sup>40</sup>

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This brings us in other words to the more practical and “critical” question, as Žižek puts it, of “how to be a Hegelian today,” whether it is possible, what the implications are of Žižek’s interpretation of the notion he places at the center of a Hegelianism — a “self-negating” or “gappy” phenomenal reality. With that ontology as a background, philosophy is supposed to be its own time comprehended in thought. Our time is still the time of bourgeois capitalism and its central institutions: private property, commercial republics, individual-rights-based legal institutions, the privatization of religion and the ideal of religious tolerance, romantic love, love-based marriages, nuclear families, and the (putative) separation of state and civil society. What does

“thought’s comprehension” — in this case “dialectical” thought — “comprehend”?

One broad-based starting point for such a Hegelianism, shared by Žižek and most “Hegelians”: a commitment to the historicity of norms, but without a historical relativism, as if we were trapped inside specific assumptions and cannot think our way out of them. The “universal” for Hegel — the clearest name for which would simply be “freedom” — is always accessible in some way but as the “concrete universal,” a universal understood in a way inflected by a time and a place, partial and incomplete, requiring interpretation and re-interpretation and dialectical extension. For example, if we want to understand why gender-based division of labor became so much less credible a norm in the last third of the twentieth century, and exclusively in the technologically advanced commercial republics of the West, one begins to become a “Hegelian” with the simple realization of how implausible it would be to insist that the injustice of such a basis for a division of labor, the reasons for rejecting such a practice, were always in principle available from the beginning of human attempts to justify their practices, and were “discovered” sometime in the early nineteen-seventies. And yet our commitment to such a rejection is far stronger than “a new development in how we go on.” The past practice is irrational and so unjust, however historically indexed the “grip” of such a claim clearly is.

Žižek proposes to defend a Hegel for whom any claim about historical rationality (like this one) is always retrospective, never prospective and predicting, and in this “open-ended” Hegel, he is surely right. (It often goes unnoticed that Hegel’s famous claim that the owl of Minerva takes flight only at dusk, that philosophy can begin to paint its grey on grey only when a form of life has grown old, means that he is announcing that the form of life “comprehended by thought” in the *Philosophy of Right* has grown old, is dying, and only because of this can it now be comprehended by Hegel. It is hardly the image one would propose were one trying to claim that we had reached some utopia of realized reason. [Cf. 263]) Moreover, the retrospective dimension is quite important. It is only after the world-historical influence of Christianity that Greek philosophy could come to seem unable to provide the resources to account for what would eventually come to be understood as Christian inwardness, subjectivity, and so a very different view of agency. There is no World-Spirit puppet master in this picture.

But the alternative to any “shadow of dialectical materialism” must be something like a “dialectical idealism.” This of course means simply that there are no “material contradictions.”<sup>41</sup> Contradictions result from some self-opposition in an action or practice directed by a subject. This can be in the form of “performative contradictions” in a speech act, or practical contradictions in action. (Hobbes gave us a fine example of the latter: in the state of nature, everyone doing what is maximally rational from the individual’s point of view — preemptively striking others — produces what is for everyone the worst possible outcome. Agents contradict *themselves* by acting rationally.) On the assumption of collective subjectivity (*Geist*), one can imagine how

one might try to show that some institutional practice in a form of life “contradicts,” in the means it rationally chooses, the overall ends genuinely sought by that society. And all of this depends on what one can show or not; whether a successor social form can be said to be achieving more successfully what a prior social form was attempting, or not: hence, determinate negation, internal critique, all the Hegelian desiderata. (Gender-based division of labor came to be understood as inconsistent with the already existing ideal of equal protection under the law and meritocratic social mobility, and at a time when changes in the technology of production and the need for many more workers in the greatest period of economic prosperity in history made possible such a realization.)

But we are certainly far enough from the (“dead”) particular historical form of bourgeois society that Hegel thought he had comprehended, and our own form of life could plausibly be said to be growing sufficiently “old” (dysfunctional at least) before our eyes, for us to ask: what is the Hegelian account of the large-scale collapse of the state-civil society distinction so crucial to him, the disintegration of the *Stände*, or estates, central to his account of political participation, the emergence of mass consumer societies totally unlike anything in Hegel’s political philosophy, the changes in the technology of warfare that make the notion of an occasional war to shake us out of our prosaic complacency suicidal (not to mention the end of citizen armies), the creation of a globalized financial system that renders obsolete even the notion of the “owners” of the means of production, and on and on in such a vein?

Žižek’s answer is not surprising, and that answer raises the largest question of all, the one I found the most dissatisfyingly addressed. Like many others, he wants to say that bourgeois society is fundamentally self-contradictory, and I take that to mean “unreformable.” We need a wholly new ethical order and that means “the Act.” That society’s pretense to having a rational form is undermined by the existence of a merely contingent particular, a figurehead at the top, the monarch. (A better question, it seems to me, is why Hegel bothers, given how purely symbolic and even pointless such a dotter of i’s and crosser of t’s turns out to be.)<sup>42</sup> And, following many others Žižek claims that the admitted *aporia* of “the rabble” (*der Pöbel*) in Hegel, what appears to be a permanent underclass of the poor, is another mark of the fundamental irrationality of the Hegelian picture of modern ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). He agrees with the analysis of a recent author, Frank Ruda, and says that Ruda “is fully justified in reading Hegel’s short passages on the rabble in his *Philosophy of Right* as symptomatic of his entire philosophy of right, if not of his entire system” (431). In other contexts, Žižek claims that modern secular bourgeois culture and late capitalism produce their own opposite, evangelical fundamentalism, for example, for which there is no “*Aufhebung*” no return to an elevated form of bourgeois politics and reformed capitalism. (All this in the Lacanian manner in which what is repressed is “created” by the act of repression itself.)

Whether these relatively brief interludes demonstrate that bourgeois society and a

capitalist system of production are fundamentally contradictory (even in the idealist sense sketched above), and so for which calls for reform would be as absurd as calls for remaining in the state of nature but “reforming it” would be in Hobbes, is too large a topic for this sort of discussion. I can only say that if the basic norm of such a society is, according to Hegel, some institutionally secured state of equal recognitive status, where this also means direct political attention to the material (familial, cultural, economic) conditions for such a possibility, or some egalitarian idea of freedom (no one can be free unless all are), I see no reason to think so, at least given the occasional remarks here. The fact that there appears to be ever weakening political will in, for example, the United States, for any attention to such a common good (even public schools are now slowly but surely emerging as a target for the ever more powerful far right) is very likely a pathology that needs explaining.<sup>43</sup> Perhaps we need the help of Lacanians to do this (although Hegel was content simply to point out the danger and irrationality of romantic nationalists in his own day) but that great dream of social democrats everywhere — “Sweden in the Sixties!” — does not seem to me something that inevitably produces its own irrational and irreconcilable Unreason, or Other. More lawyers for the poor in Texas, affordable daycare, universal health care, several fewer aircraft carriers, more worker control over their own working conditions, regulated perhaps nationalized banks, all are reasonable extensions of that bourgeois ideal itself, however sick and often even deranged modern bourgeois society has become. (Citizens United was not a logically inescapable result of capitalist logic. It was the result of the ravings of several lunatic judges. We are the only advanced capitalist democracy on earth that allows legalized bribery.) But these are topics for another context (and a soapbox). I will close with a reflection in the Žižekian spirit.

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Žižek gives us two images, a literary and a cinematic image, to help us understand the dialectical gymnastics involved in his attempt to re-actualize Hegel for contemporary purposes. The first concerns the problem of Hegelian “reconciliation,” and the example is the mysterious and moving ending of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*. Žižek invokes the basic logical structure for rendering “negativity” intelligible that he uses throughout his book. David Lurie appears to have “negated” the status quo, the big Other of prudence, trust in the police, holding individuals responsible for their deeds and seeking to redress wrongs done to individuals (justice), because he has come to see the inadequacy of such a faith for the current, post-apartheid reality of South Africa. That is all “negated” by his simply doing whatever he can do to minimize the indignities done to euthanized dogs, satisfied with the gesture of providing for a respectful disposal. That, of course, is, pitifully, not very much in the way of reconciliation. He seems to have accepted his daughter’s guilt-burdened acquiescence to her neighbor’s complicity in her own rape, and internalized it in his own way, as the price one must pay to continue living with some “ethical dignity”

(Žižek's phrase) in South Africa. In the world of unavoidable complicity in the South African crimes, the loss of *everything* is a "wager" that "this total loss will be converted into some kind of ethical dignity" (326).

But Žižek claims that there is "something missing" in this ending, some gesture of defiance and revolt that could be called the "negation of this negation," some "barely perceptible repetitive gesture of resistance...a pure figure of the undead drive" (326), by which he means a *Versagung*, a refusal, of the initial or first negation that would not return us to the status quo ex ante, but that would originate the realization of "the fantasmatic status of the *objet a* (the fantasy frame which sustained the subject's desire), so that the *Versagung*, which equals the act of traversing the fantasy, opens up the space for the emergence of the pure drive beyond fantasy..." (326). The natural thing one wants to say to this suggestion is that any such gesture that would satisfy what Žižek is after would presuppose that everything about David's original position was a "fantasy frame," that there is no big Other, and by disabusing ourselves of this delusion we would be in a position to open up that space for the emergence of a "pure" drive beyond fantasy. *But just this latter sounds like David's original romantic fantasy itself*, that he is a Byronic servant of Eros, can see through the hypocrisy and phoniness of big Other conventional morality, and so forth. That is the fantasy *he has disabused himself of*, and why his gesture of wholly symbolic generosity is at once so affirmative and dignified and so pathetic and so limited. There is no Žižekian gesture of defiance because David has seen through the dangerous self-deceit in presuming one is "he who is supposed to know." His assisting Bev in euthanizing the dogs and caring for their remains is in a different way than that expected by Žižek a "negation of his first negation," a refusal of mere acceptance of his and his daughter's fate. In the last gesture of the novel, he "gives up" the dog Bev had expected him to save, even as he has "given" himself up to his fate, not merely suffered it. Finally, said another way, there is nothing more un-Hegelian than the idea of the "emergence of the pure drive beyond fantasy." David's gesture means he remains the subject of whatever drives he has, not subject to them. The idea of "pure" drives (or "pure" anything) belong in the Hegelian zoo mentioned before.

The second example is equally interesting. It is Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Here the idea of a negation, and a negation of negation, is easier to track. Scottie loses Madeleine, or the woman he thought was Madeleine; she dies. But it was all a plot by Elster to murder his wife. Madeleine was not Madeleine, but Judy, a working class woman Elster had enlisted in the plot. When Scottie finds this out, he can be said to have lost his very loss, lost the meaning of his first loss. He had not lost Madeleine because Madeleine was Judy. He discovers the bitterly ironic truth that the woman he was trying to "make up" to look like a fake Madeleine was (is) actually the real Madeleine, because his original Madeleine was a fake. So, as with *Disgrace*, we get an ambiguous ending: Scottie gazing "into the abyss," looking down where Judy has fallen, either a broken man, disabused of all the idealizations and fantasy that sustain love, or a "new"



man, freed from his illusions and reconciled with this new realism. Žižek makes use of this structure to suggest a limitation in a Hegelian “negation of negation,” that both the suggested readings of Scottie miss something, understand the “antagonisms” at issue still too “formally” (what I called before and defended as “dialectical idealism”). Here Žižek insists that we need to do justice to what falls “outside” of either resolution, an “excess,” a “contingent remainder,” a “little piece of reality.”

As Žižek goes on to explain what he means by this, he seems to me to come close to reverting to the kind of positivistic, pseudo-realist metaphysics he had rightly rejected. (See the quotation at the beginning of Section II above.) And the talk of excess and remainders makes it irrelevant that Žižek does not mean something that “simply eludes dialectical mediation” but is a “product of this mediation” (480). Such an excess or remainder still functions in his criticism as “unmediated” and that notion remains profoundly un-Hegelian, for reasons I have tried to present throughout.

But there is something quite right about the relevance of the *Vertigo* structure to the German tradition as, I want to say, Hegel would see it. For in that tradition there is certainly the notion of modernity itself as “loss.” Hölderlin and Schiller come to mind, and the mourning for the lost “beauty” of the Greek world can certainly mirror the sorrow of Scottie over the lost Madeleine-version of Judy. Then one can say that Hegel became Hegel when, for him, that loss was lost, that negation negated, with a more prosaic view of Greek accomplishments. I mean when, under the influence of the Scottish enlightenment thinkers, he came to see that there was no simple loss in the end of the Greek ideal, and losing that notion of loss was a gain, as he appreciated the development of modern civil society and the error of fantasizing the loss of a more natural harmony.<sup>44</sup> The Helen-like “Madeliene” was really “Judy” all along, (This all in its own way confirms Žižek’s insistence that Hegelian mediation does not issue in a “third,” synthetic position, but in the right understanding of the antagonism between the “negation” and the “negation of the negation.”) This can even be put in terms of Hegel’s secularized Christianity — Madeleine was really Judy, or Judy had successfully, for Scottie, become Madeleine, all prompting her plaintive, “Why can’t you just love me for who I am?” Every “Judy” is also a “Madeleine”; every “Madeleine” really a “Judy” in this egalitarian, Christian vision.

This is of course something Scottie cannot appreciate, and for reasons also relevant to Hegel. For the very structure of the appearance of Judy as Madeleine had been manipulated for gain by Elster, in a way parallel to the ideologically distorted and so false pretensions to achieved equality in contemporary bourgeois societies (“fair exchanges between labor and capital in the marketplace”). The truth of the identity was ruined, made an untruth, because it was staged. What Hegel thought was the greatest accomplishment of modern civil society — its ability to educate (as *Bildung*) its citizens to their equal status and profound dependence on each other, and so to educate them to the virtues of civility and trustworthiness — has become a lie (if it ever was the truth), and the shipping magnates and tycoons like Elster “steer” this



*Bildung* in a way that ends up wholly theatrical, as in the “theater of Madeleine” put on for Scottie’s benefit and to manipulate him. He cannot be educated to the truth of the speculative sentence that “Judy is Madeleine,” that essence is its own appearance, because of this distortion. Accordingly, Scottie’s attempts to remake Judy into Madeleine, rather than being a way of realizing that Judy already is Madeleine, comes off as manipulative and as reifying as Elster’s. (Another, more depressing identity: Scottie and Elster, creators of a false Madeleine.)

This forces the question of whether there is much left in contemporary society that provides any sort of material basis for Hegel’s aspirations about these potentially transformative and educative potentials of modern civil society. No one can be anything but profoundly pessimistic about this possibility, but the search for such possible “traces of reason” seems to me a more genuinely Hegelian and still possible prospect than anything that could result from “abyssal Acts.”<sup>45</sup>

## Notes

1. See Žižek’s remarks on Hegel and contemporary finance capitalism (244). Perhaps Zadie Smith’s trenchant summary is the best: States now “de-regulate to privatize gain and re-regulate to nationalize loss.” NYR Blog, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jun/02/north-west-london-blues/>, June 2, 1012.
2. There is a sober, clear statement of what, from a Hegelian point of view we now need: “breaking out of the capitalist horizon without falling into the trap of returning to the eminently pre-modern notion of a balanced, (self-) restrained society...” (257). But as he goes on to explain his position, the core turns out to be “the subject has to recognize in its alienation from substance the separation of substance from itself” (258). I have not been able to understand how that helps us do what the sober statement insists on. This is an issue that will recur frequently below.
3. Lots of quibbles and qualifications are possible here. I can’t see why anyone would take (iii) seriously. I would include “deconstruction” under (iv) not (ii), would argue for more categories (pragmatism, of the analytic (Brandomian), Rortyeian or Habermasian variety; anomalous monism; phenomenology is still alive and kicking in some quarters; Wittgenstein’s approach) and I would defend a Hegelian version of compatibilism. But what is important here is what Žižek is for; his own position.
4. In a more extensive and so more careful discussion, several caveats would be necessary here. The case of perceptual consciousness, while apperceptive, is obviously not of the same logical type as a judgment, an empirical claim to knowledge, and more care would be needed to account for the role of spontaneity. But perceptual consciousness is not mere differential responsiveness and that is what we need for the “negativity” problem. See my discussion of this issue in “Brandom’s Hegel,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 13:3 (2006) 381-408.
5. The “incorporation thesis,” given that name by the Kant scholar, Henry Allison, emerged as an explicit theme relatively late in Kant’s work (*His Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* [1793]) and it does not mean that “causes only affect me insofar as I allow them to affect me” (169-70). “Only in so far as I count them as reasonable grounds to do something” would be more accurate, and inclinations do causally affect me (I can be powerfully inclined to do something), they just cannot be said to produce the bodily

movement if that movement is to count as an action. There are not many such errors and slips, but they are irritating when they occur. *The Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781, not 1787 (8); Henrich's famous article referred to "Fichtes ursprüngliche Einsicht," not his "Grundeinsicht." (11) And (for me the most significant), the newspaper editor at the end of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* did not say "when reality doesn't fit the legend, print the legend" (420). He said something much more relevant to Žižek's concerns: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

6. I say "it would appear" in order to acknowledge that for Žižek, we should say something like "substance" negates itself, creates a kind of "gap," and incompleteness, and that "space" is the subject. (But in what sense could the subject also be said to "substantialize itself"? Negate itself as subject just by being substance?) At any rate, Žižek doesn't mean that a subject is just a kind of property of material substance. I think I understand what the gap or self-negation view would mean in Freudian terms — that natural, even biological maturation itself produces a subject divided against itself, unable to realize, satisfy the primary processes — but that is only true of the human substance, and I don't think that is the problem the post-Kantians were addressing and will try to say why below.
7. I've no space to discuss Žižek's interesting parallel reading of substance-subject and id-ego except to agree that in neither case does "*wo es war, soll ich werden*" amount to a rational appropriation of or control over or simple reconciliation with the "nicht-ich." See 389 ff.
8. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, facing page translation, trans. Terry Pinkard, <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/phenomenology-of-spirit-page.html>, 14 (§16).
9. Not an unreasonable view. See G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) 84.
10. According to Žižek (144), Hegel's unique position is to deny that we need any "third" to ground both subject and object. "...his [Hegel's] point is precisely *that there is no need for a Third element*, the medium or ground beyond subject and object-substance. We start with objectivity and the subject is nothing but the self-mediation of objectivity." But this simply is objective idealism and has not yet differentiated Hegel's view, as I will try to show.
11. Cf. Žižek's claim that Marx and Freud can only understand "antagonism" as a feature of social or psychic reality, they are "unable to articulate it as constitutive of reality, as the impossibility around which reality is constructed." (250) I am with Marx and Freud (and, I think, Hegel) on this one. This touches on the most difficult issue for me in the book, what is announced by the title, that "reality" "is less than nothing." The official explanation of the title occurs on 495. I discuss whatever I can understand of this notion of how to "subtract from nothing its nothing(ness) itself" in the last section below.
12. G. W. F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 515. This quotation alone seems to me to foreclose the gloss given by Žižek on the Kant-Hegel-apperception relation (286).
13. Sebastian Rödl, *Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 2007) 17-64.
14. Cf. Rödl on a "non-empirical knowledge of a material reality," 122. See also 131, 133-4, 138.
15. Put another way, the self-consciousness that is a necessary condition of any human doing or thinking adverts to a way of one's doing or thinking, as if adverbially, and involves no self-inspection. See my *Kant's Theory of Form* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), ch. 6, 151-187. One does what one does, one is aware of what one is aware of, one thinks what one thinks, all *knowingly*. Apropos the discussion below, cf.

Fichte's formulations in the *Wissenschaftslehre*: "...the self and the self-reverting act are perfectly identical concepts..." (37) and "It is the immediate consciousness that I act and what I enact: it is that whereby I know something because I do it" (38). Or: "Without self-consciousness there is no consciousness whatever; but self-consciousness is possible only in the manner indicated: I am simply active" (41).

16. Žižek makes this same point himself, correctly, in my view, in an approving summary of Lukács (220). See also Hegel in the *Science of Logic*: The most important point for the nature of spirit is not only the relation of what it is in itself to what it is actually, but the relation of what it knows itself to be to what it actually is; because spirit is essentially consciousness, this self-knowing is a fundamental determination of its actuality. *Science of Logic* 37.
17. It is not paradoxical because there is no original moment of self-origination. One has always already come to be in some position of self-positing, is always becoming who one is. I think this is what Hegel means by claiming, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, that "one should not begin with oneness and proceed to duality," cited by Žižek (470), but rather with "the inherent self-distancing of the One itself" (471). There is a very great deal more to be said about this problem. For discussions of small subsets of these issues, see chapters 3 and 4 of *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfaction of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and ch. 3 of *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
18. And yet, in other contexts — when, for example, he is discussing the "self-consciousness" of the state — Žižek seems to me to state the point being made here in just the way it is made here. See 406 ff.
19. One of the most well known statements and defenses of this "transparency" condition is Richard Moran's *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Rödl, ch. 3.
20. This issue, like every other one in this paragraph, is much more complicated than this summary can do justice to. On this last point, the compelling films of the Dardennes brothers make clear how much more has to be said about the issue. In all of their films, characters certainly look like they are acting without being able to say why. What is especially interesting is that they manage to suggest a link between this compelling opacity and the disintegrating fabric of late capitalist working class life. They integrate these philosophical-psychological elements with the social seamlessly and brilliantly. See *Le fils* (2002) especially.
21. This is also relevant to how the way that animals have representations is different from ours. Theirs are intentional in their way, but they do not have the status of "cognitions" in the way ours do. A dog might see a human figure far away (upwind, let us say) and seeing an unknown person, begin barking, only later to start wagging her tail as the known person it really is comes into view. *But the dog did not correct herself*. Here we want to say that a perceptual cue prompted a response (one we can even call a rational response), and then a different perceptual cue (with more detail of visual features in view) prompted a different behavioral response. The fullness of positive being, we might say. (I've never noticed, for example, that my dog ever became embarrassed that she made such a mistake — which she often makes — since she has no way of knowing that she made a mistake that she ought to correct. That is not how she sees; she sees one set of cues then she sees another. This would be one way of saying she has no unity of apperception.)
22. However, consciousness is for itself its concept, and as a result it immediately goes beyond the restriction,

and, since this restriction belongs to itself, it goes beyond itself too. (*Phenomenology* 76 [§80]). Here is the “logical” formulation of the point from the so-called *Berlin Phenomenology*: The I is now this subjectivity, this infinite relation to itself, but therein, namely in this subjectivity, lies its negative relation to itself, diremption, differentiation, judgment. The I judges, and this constitutes it as consciousness; it repels itself from itself; this is a logical determination. G.W.F. Hegel: *The Berlin Phenomenology*, trans. M. Petry (Dordrecht: Riedel, 1981) 2.

23. This is Adrian Johnson’s formulation in “Slavoj Žižek’s Hegelian Reformation: Giving a Hearing to *The Parallax View*,” *Diacritics* 37.1: 3-20. Something like this position is available to Žižek if we understand the space of the Symbolic (in its Lacanian sense) as the space of the normative and so of reason. See his interpretation of Freud’s controversial remark about “anatomy” being “destiny,” “in other words a symbolic formation,” a destiny we must make. (216)
24. Not that such discoveries could not be relevant to philosophy. They certainly are for Hegel. In §12 of the *Encyclopedia Logic*, Hegel says that philosophy “owes its development to the empirical sciences”; and in the remark to §246 of the *Philosophy of Nature*, he says that the philosophy of nature “presupposes and is conditioned by empirical physics.” See also the Addition to §381 in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Spirit*. These passages are all relevant to the question Žižek raises at 458 and 462.
25. When Žižek addresses this issue, he adopts a Nietzschean stance that seems to me unargued for and question-begging. What kind of power (or authority) is it which needs to justify itself with reference to the interests of those over whom it rules, which accepts the need to provide reasons for its exercise? Does not such a notion of power undermine itself (429)? He goes on to call such a regime “anti-political” and “technocratic.” But appeals to self-interest are only one sort of reason, and the constraints introduced by such a requirement, if they undermine anything, undermine the notion of mastery and rule. They are not meant to be in the service of such notions, but replacement notions of authority.
26. The skeptical anxiety that we would thereby be treating being only as it is intelligible “by our finite lights” is the illusory anxiety that Hegel takes himself to have methodically destroyed in the *Phenomenology*, the “deduction,” as he says, of the standpoint of the *Logic*. The extraordinarily influential Heideggerian anxiety that this all represents the “imposition” of human will “onto” the question of Being is a matter for a separate discussion. See Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, Volume 4, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperOne, 1991), and my “Heidegger on Nietzsche on Nihilism,” forthcoming.
27. Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1994).
28. In Kantian terms, the role of reason can be said to emerge in any attempt to lead a “justified” life (and so a free one), to seek always the “condition” for anything “conditioned.” See my discussion of the issue in *Kant in Hegel on Self-Consciousness: Desire and Death in the Phenomenology of Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) 55-8.
29. It is also the case that this sort of interpretation would mean a disagreement with Žižek’s characterization of the beginning of all this in Kant. It is not the case that Kant and the Idealists conceived the subject as a “spontaneous...synthetic activity, the force of unification, of bringing together the manifold of sensuous data we are bombarded with into a unified representation of objects” (106). See also Žižek 149. This was certainly not the case with Hegel; see his *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. W. Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1977) 62-70. It is also not the case that “apperception...changes the confused

flow of sensations into ‘reality,’ which obeys necessary laws.” In the first place, Kant often says this impositionism is exactly the position he rejects, that it would give the “skeptic exactly what he wants” (B168). See also B138, B160n, and the “same function” passage at B105/A79. Secondly, it is not the case that this synthetic activity “introduces a gap/difference into substantial reality” (106). The negativity (“not mere being”) in question is a matter of the normative dimension of apperceptive experience and action. One could, I suppose, call this a “gap in being” but that seems to me to mystify everything needlessly.

30. D. Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, ed. D.S. Pacini (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). An unusual feature of Žižek’s book is his heavy reliance on selected secondary sources, “straight down the line,” with few exceptions (Lebrun is one with whom he disagrees.) Henrich, Malabou, Miller, Lebrun are the most heavily relied on.
31. I present this evidence in ch. 3 of *Hegel’s Idealism*.
32. G. Fichte, “Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *The Science of Knowledge with the First and Second Introductions*, ed. and trans. P. Heath and J. Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 33.
33. G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994) 59.
34. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo)* (1796/99), trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992) 105-6.
35. This is from the notes to his famous *Aenesidemus* review, in G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, eds. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Joacob (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1965) 11, 1, 287. It is important to get this aspect of Fichte right in order to avoid the commitments Žižek makes on 283, where we hear again about the phenomena’s “self-limitation,” the “ontological incompleteness of phenomenal reality,” and the ground of freedom in “the ontological incompleteness of reality itself.” Insofar as I understand these claims, they are as regressive and dogmatically metaphysical as the “ineffable particularists,” the worshippers of “the Other,” that Žižek rightly criticizes. The link between self-consciousness, reason, and freedom is not based on such appeals.
36. When it is described as it is, apparently approvingly, by Žižek on 427, a true Badiouian act, the “Act,” is said to be a “radical and violent simplification...the magical moment when the infinite pondering crystallizes into a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’.” “Magical” is the right word; close to mystified and unintelligible. One shudders to think how many such narcissistic Actors gloried in the “infinite” crystallizing itself in *them*. (The idea is supposed to be that the founding of a new ethical order must perforce be “abyssal,” ungrounded and contingent (460), that you can’t have 1789 without 1793 (319), and so forth. But this is a completely non-Hegelian notion of “new” and so of “contingency.”
37. All actions have such have ex ante intentions, but they are provisional until realized in the deed. Another vast topic. See my *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, ch. 6.
38. See especially his rejection of the “organic model” of Hegelian historical change (272), and remarks such as those at 466. (I think the difference between natural and rational necessity could be much clearer in these formulations. Likewise with the animadversions the “necessity of contingency” and “autopoiesis” on 467.)
39. G.W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 8. See also the *Phenomenology*, §669.

40. Nothing in this picture need be qualified even if we admit that it is also the case that any such signification produces its own “excess,” its unmediated and disrupting “remainder.” That may be, but that is another problem with human signifying practices, not the whole problem.
41. I see nothing in what Žižek has said to counter the traditional insistence that any claim about such a material contradiction could not be claiming anything, would not be a claim about anything. The argument seems to be: so much the worse for logic, there are such contradictions. But that does not answer the challenge. See Charles Taylor, “Dialektik heute, oder: Strukturen der Selbstnegation,” in *Hegels Wissenschaft der Logik: Formation und Rekonstruktion*, ed. D. Henrich (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986), 141-53.
42. The real problem with Hegel’s political philosophy is the absence of any account of political will and the politics of will formation. The legislature just affirms “what’s already been decided.” See Michael Beresford Foster’s invaluable and neglected book, *The Political Philosophies of Plato and Hegel* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1935).
43. When Žižek gives his list of “what Hegel cannot think” (qualified by a number of “yes, but...” suggestions), consisting of such things as repetition, the unconscious, class struggle, sexual difference, and so forth (455), I see no reason to think that Hegel would have any problem with such questions and issues, anymore than he needs to provide analyses and diagnoses of various individual and social pathologies. They are not his questions. A plague can completely erode the ethical life of some community and it can stay eroded for centuries. So can ever more frenzied and hysterical consumption; so can what may be the death spiral of global capitalism (See David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010]), and so can the beginning of a centuries-long environmental catastrophe.
44. The indispensable account of this is Laurence Dickey, *Hegel: Religion, Economics, and the Politics of Spirit, 1770-1807* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
45. Rüdiger Bubner’s phrase in “What is Critical Theory,” in *Essays in Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).



## **The Transition from Liberal Democracy: The Political Crisis in Hungary**

**András Bozóki**

Viktor Orbán's right-wing government came to power in Hungary in the spring of 2010; since doing so, it has significantly altered the country's public legal infrastructure. It unilaterally voted on a new Constitution, it has substantially weakened the balance of power, and it has done away with the principle of power sharing. Power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister, who does all that he can to establish a monopoly of power: his notion of a "central arena of power" has thus become a reality.

Between 1990 and 2010 Hungary had been a functioning liberal democracy, when judged against the principles and practices of a modern, Western-type democracy — that is, characterized by competition between political parties, the participation of civil society, and respect for civil rights. In 2011, democracy fell into a crisis in Hungary. It has not completely disappeared, but it is in deep crisis. Led by Orbán, the ruling party, *Fidesz*, has succeeded in destroying the components of a consensus-based liberal democracy in the name of a majoritarian democracy.<sup>1</sup> But Orbán has gone even beyond this, since the eliminating of independent institutions has transformed this so-called majoritarian democracy into a highly centralized, illiberal regime. The "majority" today is nothing but an obtuse justification for the ruling political party to cement its power further in a country where the qualified majority of citizens now believe that things have gone badly awry. If this so-called "revolutionary" process continues, the result will be a solidly authoritarian semi-democracy, both in the short run and, if they get their way, in the long run as well.

This anti-liberal, anti-democratic turn did not emerge out of the blue: it was a direct response to the hectic, incoherent reforms implemented between 2006 and 2010, as well as the corruption and the economic crisis that ensued. The rise of the Orbán regime has deeper roots as well, ones that point to structural, cultural, and political factors that evolved over the period of post-transition Hungary. These include the early institutionalization of a qualified majority consensus, which has obstructed reforms over the past two decades; a plethora of informal practices, ranging from tax



evasion to political party financing, that have stalled formal democratic institution-building; and the serious impact of existing democratic forms on competition between political parties (i.e., the phenomenon of “partocracy”), which has gradually killed off both the willingness of civic groups to engage in politics and incentives for results-based performance by governments, and has instilled a hatred in the populace towards politicians and politics. The survival of privileged and influential social groups on the other side of the transition has also destroyed networks of solidarity, thereby further discrediting democracy. Finally, the failure of meaningful economic reforms made the country defenseless against the global financial crisis that exploded in 2008. Taken together, these have produced a perfect political storm; let us now review these points one by one.

### **The Reasons behind the Establishment of the Orbán Regime**

#### **The Early Institutionalization of the Compulsion to Form a Consensus**

During the transition to democracy in Hungary, consensus-building was perceived as a “prestigious” political measure. The “Founding Fathers” wanted the new, democratic institutional system to be placed on as wide a consensus as possible.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the outgoing representatives of the old regime wanted to retain their voice in politics. As a result, a complete set of rules was born that sought to strengthen the new democratic order, its stability, and its governability, including the qualified majority rules, which affected a wide spectrum of policy issues. Apparently, the “Founding Fathers” believed that they could safeguard freedom by increasing the number of decisions that required a qualified majority vote.

These measures created a democracy in which between elections, the ruling government’s power became almost “cemented.” It became nearly impossible to remove an incumbent government from the outside; however, this simultaneously made effective governance more difficult. The government in power, due to the high volume of qualified majority rules, had to rely on the *opposition* to make decisions on basic issues. Paradoxically, the Constitution thus granted both much power *and* limited political responsibility to the government.

The 1989 “Founding Fathers” of democracy exhibited an ambivalent attitude toward the notion of power. They wanted a strong, democratic form of government based on wide popular support; at the same time, they were averse to the very idea of power itself. To ensure the country’s effective governability, the “Founding Fathers” provided excessive safeguards to the political system in comparison to other segments of society. Simply put, they overestimated the populace’s desire for stability. What the “Founding Fathers” did not take into account was that the “illusion of stability” over the long haul could make the system inflexible. The desire for stability is associated not only with the legacy of the era of János Kádár (1956-88); today, it is linked to the hectic, neocapitalist system of the past twenty years and the injustices it produced. Democracy in Hungary, in the formal sense, is the most stable in all of Central Europe,

because since 1990, all coalition governments completed their four-year mandates. Having said that, formal stability has come with a price, because regulation has prevented the political system from correcting itself. The constitutional system between 1990 and 2010 guaranteed that the government remained in power for the entire cycle, and it thereby ensured the governability of the country; however, it also straight-jacketed the incumbent government via the qualified majority rules. These measures, raised to the constitutional level, proved counterproductive. There are additional institutional-structural reasons that explain Hungary's inability to react to external challenges promptly, and why Hungary became more vulnerable than other countries during the global crisis. Psychological and institutional stability are valuable facets. However, it has become clear that treating the idea of stability as a fetish has thwarted the country's development.

#### **The Practice of Informality**

Throughout its history, Hungary was an occupied country, and occupation produced a political culture characterized by the lack of institutional accountability. Hungarians had learned that they only had to feign that they were obeying the rules imposed upon them by foreign invaders: below the surface, they established a system of informal rules governing society and culture. Hungarians lived with the duality composed of formal and informal rules, rules which most often were inherently ambiguous and contradictory. Therefore, Hungarians learned to amble their way around these rules in a conniving fashion, finding loopholes and cutting corners, and this behavioral pattern remains deeply ingrained in Hungarian society. They gave the proverbial emperor what the emperor demanded, as it were, but they also evaded taxes where they could. They began to push for individual interests vis-à-vis the government by organizing informal networks and small groups; however, they did not form formal organizations, such as unions. Civil society groups and unions helped individuals orient themselves and survive not through collective action, but rather via hush-hush negotiations.

The Kádár regime became a "soft dictatorship" because it was softened by lies. The reason it became more livable is that the system often did not take its own rules seriously. Practicing the system of double rules continued, and one had to navigate the maze of formal and informal rules with caution. Under Kádárism, citizens grew accustomed to those procedures that made the dictatorship bearable. For Hungarians, the old system was not nearly as bad as it had been for the Poles, the Czechs, or the Romanians. Thus, in 1989 Hungarians only broke with the formal system, but not with the customs and informal procedures associated with that system. The dictatorship became more corrupt and this sweetened the system, but it does not follow from this necessarily that every system is better corrupt. Moreover, illusions attached to the oppressive system made it all the more difficult to break with the political culture of Kádár's dictatorship.

The political sphere assumed increasing power over various segments of society, from the media through the economy, from education through the social sectors to the theater. Election results determine who may become the editor of a newspaper, school principal, theater director, or economic leader. In Hungary, in contrast to the standards in normal democracies elsewhere, it is extremely important which party is in power. This means that the financial security of many depends not on professional merit and performance, but rather on the given political circumstances and the ability of people to position themselves. This frustrates all of those who wish to deliver in their respective fields professionally. Such a clientelistic society is built on the phenomenon of informality, and the political parties try to deepen their influence through its practice.

The main issues during the past twenty years of Hungary's democracy were not primarily based on the constitutional problems of 1989, but rather the ambivalent relationship of Hungarian society to the formal political institutions. The period following the 1989 Revolution often surprisingly resembles the era before the revolution, because society often tries to fashion its own informal customs to the new rules.

#### **The Phenomenon of Partocracy**

During the second decade of democracy in Hungary party politics superseded almost all other aspects. The confrontation between the ruling government and its opposition became so intense that it became nearly impossible to solve the country's problems through negotiations, which would have required responsible policy debates and wide-ranging consultations. Fidesz initiated confrontation after 1998 as a means of strengthening its initially weaker political position; it was determined to divide society using a politics of symbolism. Public discourse was based on party allegiance and such discourse could not replace (or at least complement) the necessary policy dialogue or the unbiased popular discourse. The phenomenon of "partocracy" appeared: what had once been the party-state was replaced by the state of democratic parties.

There are several reasons for the political crisis in Hungary that unfolded after the autumn of 2006, and one of them is the rule of the parties. The reforms announced by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in 2006 did not take the power of partocracy into account. In a strong democracy, party pluralism unfurls within the legal framework and is checked by other actors in the system. As such, competition between the parties cannot transform into the dominance of the parties. In Hungary, however, a system was established whereby democracy almost exclusively is exercised by parties, and for this reason, the welfare of the public becomes secondary to the interests of the parties. A system of codependence has evolved that governs both the relationships within and amongst the parties, and one of the most important elements of this system is its policy of rewarding and issuing threats to individual members. Thus, party leaders can maintain both "confidence" as well as "solidarity" with one

another, because they know everything about each other's affairs.

In Hungary, parties assumed civic duties. It was the parties that had organized "movements"; it was the parties that had established "public benefit" foundations, "professional" groups, and the "civic" circles. Parties are the ones that delegate curators to various committees; they seek expert advice of their own experts; moreover, they have their own journalists write media reports. In such a system, there are no independent economic experts and market players, only think tanks that are sustained by the parties and their strawmen. In this system, affairs can only be settled through the parties and their clientele. The state is a state of the parties, together with its tax authority and security forces.

The particular features of the Hungarian political system — including the collection of candidate nomination slips, the high threshold for entering parliament, the large number of regulatory areas in which there is a requirement to have a qualified majority in order to create laws, the opacity of political party financing, the privileged position of political party foundations, and so on — facilitate the survival of already-existing parties and make it more difficult for new political forces to enter parliament. Hungarian electoral laws are among the least proportional in Europe. That said, a strong democracy does not equate to enshrining into law the opportunities provided by a multiparty system. The Hungarian system is characterized by an over-politicized society and the excessive say that political parties have in various areas of public life. This has led to the withering away of the autonomy of certain segments of society; furthermore, it has impeded the ability of the entire system for innovation. If society's progress depends not on performance but on the party that is in power, then people lose interest in producing genuine results.

As the proportion of "partocracy" increases within a democratic system, corruption becomes an increasing temptation. It is no coincidence that to this day Hungary has no fair party finance law, nor are there any strict rules against the conflict of interests within the decision-making bodies controlled by political parties. Corruption does not seem to be an external problem, but an integral part of the system.

### **Democracy of Privileges**

That people lost faith in democracy is presumably the responsibility of those who form public opinion. After 1989, the roles of the intellectuals changed: their goal was no longer to act as substitutes for a democracy that was missing, but rather to foster dialogue and offer alternatives, contribute to public affairs independently from political parties, participate in public debates, shape values, and raise doubts and fundamental questions.

Did serious journalists face the fact that several of their colleagues were becoming the mouthpieces of various political and economic actors, rather than expressing independent opinions and exposing issues without massaging the facts? Did these journalists even debate this issue amongst themselves? What should we think of the

Hungarian politico-economic elite, which over twenty years was unable to produce new ideas, behaving at times like a witch doctor by prescribing the same remedy for every illness? Is it true that by radically decreasing the role of the state, privatization and deregulation automatically cure the banes of the economy? Is it possible to view the state and the market in a more balanced light (i.e., that the economy and society have mutual effects on one another)? Political analysts have been stuck in giving their so-called “value-free” comments on the superficial power games of the political elites, and they do not offer any meaningful insights on the substance of democracy. Political scientists, if they are to take their profession seriously, must assess political phenomena in the social contexts in which they emerge; furthermore, political scientists must offer more profound analyses on the relationship between politics and society than they do at present. If civil society representatives turn a blind eye to the processes that are destroying democracy, it is no wonder that the politicians they themselves elected will do the same. Politicians do not live outside the parameters of society; they only do what society permits them to do. Democracy cannot be solely the affair of politicians, though naturally politicians bear greater responsibility for it than do others.

After around 2000, the intellectuals became the guardians of the status quo. It seemed that the patience of the lower classes of society was endless; it also seemed that many of those who had received higher levels of compensation from the state could “get away with” the economic transition. Not only did the memory of the transition become unpopular; the entire political class lost its credibility. A significant portion of the intellectuals is responsible for the fact that in the decade following the turn of the millennium, the consolidation of democracy turned into a farcical chasing of illusions.

Between 2002 and 2010, the proponents of the ill-conceived reform policies of the ruling former Socialist-Liberal parties tested the patience of hundreds of thousands of people, who were falling into poverty. One particular feature of the process of privatization in Hungary is that following an initial “spontaneous” period, foreign capital had the greatest ownership over the economy. Under these circumstances, the unconditional acceptance of the system, the discourse of “there is no alternative” suggested that its followers were on the side of foreign capital and not the local Hungarian population. The system did not become popular within the electorate, and as such, this perception sealed the fate of the Socialist-Liberal elite. The democratic center did not offer an alternative, for example, with an empathetic, plebeian-type of politicizing to voters. It thus gave way for the extreme Right, which in its campaign slogans sent the following message to hundreds of thousands of uprooted people: “Hungary belongs to the Hungarians.” Nearly by definition, if social solidarity from the politics of the Left is lacking, the values remaining on the side of the road are lifted up by the extreme Right based on ethnic rhetoric. In the battle for economic survival, the ethos for the fight for civil rights faded. Under neocapitalism, the labor market had already increasingly become divided into the “important people” and



the “redundant” camps. Furthermore, the technocratic elite often proved incapable of easing social tension. Exclusion from the labor market for extended periods and social marginalization served as the bases for the gain in momentum by radical anti-democratic movements.

#### **The Failure of the Reforms and the Economic Crisis**

The political transition of 1989 did not mark the end of the transformation from the old system. Economic reforms and new institutions were needed, and the new constitutional framework required content. Achieving this would have required credible politicians, or people who would swear on their lives that their ideas were not just empty rhetoric feeding the mass media. In the autumn of 2006, when its own credibility was shaken, the Hungarian government submitted a vote of confidence to go ahead with the reforms. Without this vote of confidence, society did not support the reforms. Against this backdrop, how could reforms have been pushed through? Perhaps the reforms would have succeeded had the Socialist-Liberal government clarified the rules of the game beforehand. At the time, former Socialist Prime Minister Gyurcsány’s proposed anti-corruption legislation was the only reform effort that could have garnered substantial popular support; however, this initiative also failed to pass, because the coalition parties of the time nipped it in the bud.

In Hungary, the terms “reform” and “austerity” became conflated. The political elite should have realized that instead of taking decisions in a coup-like manner — decisions that would affect the livelihoods of many — they should have held a dialogue with stakeholders. They should have been able to explain and convince voters of the anticipated long-term benefits of their policies. The disillusionment that followed was escalated by political mistakes. The prime minister’s radical speech of May 2006, held in closed circles at Balatonószöd (parts of the speech were leaked by opponents from within the party in autumn 2006), shocked popular opinion and made it impossible for the reforms to garner popular support. The credibility of the planned reforms was questioned at the core: the very person who had initiated them admitted before his fellow party members that he had earlier not spoken truthfully.<sup>3</sup>

The reforms’ poor design generated intense debates for several years to come. Yet none of the debates made it any clearer to voters whether the sacrifices they were making for the reforms would be worthwhile. The government had no vision concerning how health care, transportation, or education would improve for citizens; deregulation and pro-market economic policies, inherited from the transition period, were its sole plans. Moreover, communicating the reforms was limited to internal discussions within the political parties. The global financial crisis that started in the autumn of 2008 reached Hungary at a time when the government was increasingly losing its domestic political credibility. The result was the nose-dive of the Hungarian economy. Only an agreement with the IMF and a quick loan from the Fund was able to save Hungary. Gyurcsány’s resignation in the spring of 2009 was a direct result of the



economic crisis. His departure led to Gordon Bajnai's one-year "crisis-management" term in office, and, indeed, short-term crisis management presided over long-term reforms. It became obvious to everyone that the Socialist and Liberal forces behind the government would suffer severe losses during the 2010 general elections.

Over the past twenty years, the strategic vision that had existed in Hungary during the time of the transition was precisely what was needed for the reforms to succeed — yet it was entirely missing. The prime ministers who had exchanged hands often wanted both to implement reforms and to please those who opposed reforms. Not one prime minister tried to break with the rule of "partocracy"; rather, each had merely hoped that the "partocracy" would simply accept the reforms. In 2008, voters in a referendum rejected the introduction of tuition fees in higher education and the partial co-payment within the health care system. In addition, they supported the withdrawal of the already-implemented "visit fees" to be paid to doctors. It thus became apparent that the Socialist-Liberal coalition had exhausted its political reserves. Thus, the government became weak, burdened by the demands of political governance and the severe lack of confidence that people had in the bureaucracy. Consequently, by 2010 the government had become defenseless against the emerging autocrats. The promise of a "strong state" enabled anti-democratic endeavor to gain popular support.

The democratic state does not rest upon the tips of bayonets: it is strong when it enjoys the trust bestowed upon it by its citizens, and weak if this trust is lost. During the 2010 general elections, voters began to see the Hungarian conception of "government" as producing a weak "Weimarian" state that could not maintain order. Voters increasingly believed that this weak government had turned Hungary into the country that may be labeled as an "also ran" in the race for democracy in the region. The need for a strong majority increased, as well as for a strong state and strong political leadership. Many came to believe the following: "we do not know what is to come, but because what we have now cannot continue, bring on the unknown!"

### **The Orbán System and the Crisis of Hungarian Democracy**

Despite the serious structural problems described above, for twenty years the Hungarian political system was a liberal democracy characterized by a multiparty system, free elections, representational government, strong opposition, free media, strong and credible institutions that protected the rule of law (i.e., the Constitutional Court and the Ombudsman's Office), and independent courts. Barring a few striking exceptions, human rights were generally respected, and religious freedoms were not restricted. During the two decades after 1989, incumbent governments had lost every election (with the exception of 2006), the media criticized politicians heavily, democracy was consolidated, and in 2004 Hungary joined the European Union. The above-discussed problems notwithstanding, Hungary remained until relatively recently (until the eve of 2006) a success story of democratic consolidation.

By 2011, however, Hungarian society was forced to realize that the system that had become increasingly freer over the decades had come to a standstill, and it was turning autocratic. This raises the following questions: Is it possible to roll back history? Is it possible to return to an autocratic system as a fully-fledged member of the European Union?

### Conceptual Underpinnings

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policies are based on the pillars of "national unification," the "central arena of power," the change of the elites, power politics, and the era of "revolutionary circumstances."

First: almost all of Orbán's important messages are based on the notion of "national unification," which has both symbolic and literal importance. He expressly criticizes the Treaty of Trianon that concluded World War I, as well as the legacy of the Communist system and the forces of globalization, which together he takes to be the most important political issues of the day. Orbán suggests that the "nation" serves as the bastion that offers protection against these forces. The idea of national unification furthermore maintains that Hungarians living outside of Hungary are not minorities, but full members of the Hungarian nation with corresponding rights and privileges. As such, these Hungarians are now granted Hungarian citizenship upon request, regardless of where they live, and thus they are also automatically granted voting rights. Orbán believes that the civic right to freedom, membership in the European Union, and being a political ally of the West are only important insofar as these do not contradict the priorities of "national unification." Concerning domestic politics, "national unification" refers to the "system of national cooperation" introduced by Orbán, which has emerged as an alternative to liberal democracy. However, the priorities of Orbán's "system" are not to improve the livelihood of the poor, the marginalized, and the Roma communities, nor does it encompass the concept of the republic and the respect for social and cultural diversity. Through his words, Orbán wishes to give the impression of uniting the nation, yet the reality is that his words divide society. In his dictionary, the term "people" is defined not as the masses, but instead represents a national-historical category.

Second, Orbán's notion of a "central arena of power" eliminates the idea of competition endorsed during the transition to democracy. He wants to create a system based on the monopolization of the most important elements of political power. If from the above-mentioned three components of liberal democracy the option of competition is removed (through the modification of electoral laws) and the institutions that safeguard the rule of law are destroyed, hardly anything is left of democracy. That which remains resonates from the era of state Socialism: the "people's democracy." Orbán does not need economic, cultural, and political alternatives; he strives to establish a unitary, dominant system of values (i.e., his own system of values). Yet where no alternatives exist, there is no room for democracy either.

Third, Fidesz radically changed the elites by replacing top administrative, economic, and cultural leaders tied to the experience of previous decades. The first Orbán administration had used culture to strengthen its own power; by contrast, the second Orbán administration saw culture as a source of unnecessary costs and potential criticism — and it wanted to eliminate both. It did not engage in a cultural battle because it did not want to argue; rather, it simply changed the elites. The aim here was to dismantle the political independence of institutions and to put a group of Orbán loyalists in key positions. Anti-Communism was the ideology bolstering this move, which today is no more than a “cover” for this quest for power. This endeavor to solidify clientelism sent the message that life outside the “system of national cooperation” was unthinkable.

Fourth, the government’s policies were not based on any single ideology, because according to the prime minister, the era of ideologies has ended. Viktor Orbán is in no way a conservative thinker; he is simply an opportunistic politician. Instead of ideas, Orbán believes in maximizing power. For Orbán, it is not freedom, but a tight-fisted leader who can assure order. Moreover, Orbán believes that he embodies the traditional, patriarchal values of hundreds of thousands of rural Hungarians. Those who identify with this mindset are individuals who are servile towards their superiors, but stamp upon their own employees. There are also those individuals who are only obedient towards their superiors if they feel that they are under their watchful gaze.

Fifth, Orbán interpreted his electoral victory as “revolutionary.” This allowed Orbán, with a two-thirds parliamentary majority in hand, to employ exceptional methods by making claims to exceptional circumstances (i.e., “revolutionary conditions”). As a result, Orbán deployed warlike, offensive tactics, pushing legislation through parliament that quickly and systematically rebuilt the entire public legal system. Fidesz often refers to the ideas espoused in the 1848 Revolution led by Lajos Kossuth (i.e., “revolution and struggle for freedom”); however, Fidesz’s own “revolutionary struggle” has undermined freedom. In its stead, Fidesz has established a single-party state, where power rests with the party and the prime minister himself. At this moment, there are no powerful groups within the party critical of Orbán who could offer political alternatives. As such, the will of the leader is largely binding and faces no internal limits.

#### **The Building Blocks of the System**

Though Fidesz was silent during its 2010 campaign about the most important tasks that it would need to carry out after its anticipated victory, once in power, Orbán began constructing a new system to replace the “turbulent decades” of liberal democracy. As a first step, he issued the “declaration of national cooperation,” making it obligatory to post this declaration on the walls of all public institutions. The essence of the new system is that anyone can be a part of “national cooperation” who agrees with the

government. However, those who disagree cannot be a part of the system, because the system is based on submission to the ruling party.

The government majority, upon Orbán's recommendation, chose not to reappoint László Sólyom as president of the republic, an individual who while previously making significant pro-Fidesz moves, nevertheless guarded the autonomy of the presidency. Servile Pál Schmitt, a former presidential member of Fidesz and European Parliament representative, was appointed instead. In addition, the new government saw the 1989 Constitution as a heap of purely technical rules, which Orbán has since shaped to fit the needs of his current political agenda. If any of his new laws proved to be unconstitutional, it was not the law, but the Constitution that had to be changed. An extreme example of this was when the parliamentary majority in July 2010 enshrined the concept of "decent morality" into the Constitution, which in November was subsequently removed. Meanwhile, it cited "decent morality" only when it suited its interests. As such, this amendment sent the message that in the name of the "majority" the concept of "decent morality" can be modified at any time.

When in the autumn of 2010 the Constitutional Court repealed a statute that had retroactive effects which it found to be unconstitutional, Fidesz immediately retaliated by amending the Constitution and limiting the Constitutional Court's jurisdiction. Thus, the Constitutional Court overnight turned from being a controlling body, a real check of the legislature, into a feeble controller of the application of the law. The chairperson of the Constitutional Court hitherto had been chosen by the members from within their own ranks; however, according to the new rules, it was parliament that was to appoint him or her. In addition, the number of judges was increased from eleven to fifteen, and the Court was packed with right-wing personalities and former politicians known to be close to Fidesz. The governmental majority did not (despite the longstanding criticism of the rule) do away with the possibility of reappointing the judges, and hence they may continue to be kept under check politically.

The propaganda of the government aims to equate Fidesz voters with "the people." Thus it justifies the arbitrary decisions of the government by referring to the "mandate" it has from voters. Public institutions, for instance, have been renamed "government" institutions. Furthermore, the Orbán administration has introduced laws that have made the immediate dismissal of public employees without cause possible, and so, too, the cleansing of the entire government apparatus. As a result, central and local public administration have quickly become politicized, riddled with conflicts of interest. All important positions, including those in the independent institutions, have been filled with Fidesz cadres. For the position of attorney general, they appointed a cadre who had previously been a Fidesz political candidate, and who subsequently, during the first Orbán government, was the "trusted candidate" for the job. As president of the Court of Auditors they appointed a person who until May 2010 had worked as a Fidesz parliamentary representative. Another former Fidesz representative became the president of the Media Authority, and the spouse

of an influential Fidesz representative was appointed to head of the newly created National Judicial Office, which serves as the administrative body of the judicial branch. Similarly, the Hungarian Financial Supervisory Authority and the Budgetary Council came under political party influence. A Fidesz politician became the president of the National Cultural Fund, who simultaneously serves as the president of the Parliamentary Cultural Committee, and, for this reason, the person oversees his own job. A right-leaning government official took charge of the ombudsman office, thus forever doing away with the independence of the institution. Most of the above-listed cadres have been appointed for nine to twelve years. Therefore, they can stall or indeed prevent subsequent governments from implementing policies that go against those of the current one.

The members of the executive and President Pál Schmitt competed over who would become the most effective “engine” of legislation. They imposed a retroactive, 98 percent punitive tax on individuals linked to the previous governments. Moreover, they launched a central campaign against certain former politicians, members of the government or office-holders, as well as left-wing and liberal intellectuals, with the aim of criminalizing them. The state-sponsored television news reports increasingly started to resemble criminal shows. Instead of political debates, for example, they broadcast news of denunciations. Furthermore, the attorney general accused former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány with influence peddling (a statutory crime). Another example is the smear campaign that was launched against the philosophers and employees of the former Budapest School, who were accused of having received too much support for their research.<sup>4</sup> These latter accusations had strong anti-Semitic undertones.

State-backed media replaced public radio and television channels. Their programs heavily under-represented opposition politicians and intellectuals leaning towards the opposition. The media laws of 2010 created a media supervisory authority, and the individuals who are in the decision-making positions of this body are all close to Fidesz. The media authority can issue financial penalties at its discretion not only to radio or television programs that fail to abide by the media laws, but also to print or electronic media, and even to bloggers. The sum of the penalties can be so high as to be capable of silencing media outlets completely. The government does all it can to influence the media, ranging from personnel policies through to state-led advertising, and facilitated by the fact that the Hungarian language media market is relatively small and can be fairly easily shaped by financial means. Measures aimed to curtail press freedom, such as controlling the policies of news agencies and state television, the editing culture of even outright forgery and manipulation, as well as the mass dismissal of employees, created an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship among journalists and television reporters. As a response to the introduction of the media law, the European Parliament stated that these laws violated press freedom. Widespread European protests ensued. Under pressure from the European Commission, the



Hungarian government withdrew some of the provisions of the media law, and the Constitutional Court repealed some of the other provisions; however, the possibility of limiting the freedom of the press remains on the books. The broadcasting operations of Budapest's last opposition radio station, *Klubrádió*, were suspended. In its aftermath, television reporters carried out a hunger strike, calling for honest and transparent public media to be restored.

The minimal requirement of every democracy is holding free and fair elections, which allows for a peaceful change of the government, which enables an incoming government to implement policies that are very different from the ones of its predecessor. After coming to power, the Fidesz government filled the National Electoral Commission, the body which is responsible for conducting clean and smooth elections, with its own people. The government majority, shortly before the municipal elections of Fall 2010, changed the electoral laws to make it more difficult for smaller parties to gain seats in local government. New laws have been passed to govern the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2014. This will mean — under the pretext of aiming to reduce the differences between the number of voters among the electoral districts — a change to a one-round system and a complete redrawing of the electoral districts according to partisan interests (i.e. gerrymandering). That said, the boundaries of electoral districts are drawn to make the left-wing districts more populous than those of the right, to ensure that the votes from the left count for less. Until now, only those parties who lost an election could receive compensation for the votes cast for the losing candidates; however, from now on, winning parties will also receive additional parliamentary seats as “compensation.” The mixed system in place since the 1989 Hungarian Electoral Law will remain; however, the proportionality of the system will further decrease.<sup>5</sup> The total number of parliamentary representatives will radically decrease and there will be fewer and larger electoral districts.

Overall, the new electoral law aims to filter out smaller parties and political opponents. Meanwhile, Hungary is becoming one of Europe's least proportionate electoral systems, by aiming to maintain the five percent threshold to enter parliament, and by increasing the number of representatives to be elected in the individual districts to the detriment of the spots to be gained for votes cast to party lists. The goal of the new law is to increase the chances of Fidesz to win an election, which it hopes to achieve by reducing the electoral campaign period, removing policy issues from elections, and mobilizing voters to keep presumable opposition voters away from polling stations. The proposed electoral procedures in the law wish to tie the participation in an election to previous permanent addresses, which would affect the lower tiers of society, especially the Roma and the poor (i.e., the victims of the policies of the Fidesz administration), diminishing their opportunities to participate in elections.



### Snapshot of Society and Political Culture

By introducing a flat tax system, the government made clear that its social policies are intended to support the national bourgeoisie and upper middle classes rather than the lower middle classes and the poor. The original goal of the government was to make Hungary competitive amongst other Central European countries that have lower tax rates. However, the result of all of this was a substantial budgetary deficit, which the government tried to reduce by levying “crisis” taxes on banks and telecommunications companies, alongside a 98 percent penal tax, which was levied on severance payments and which cannot be reconciled with the concept of rule of law. In addition, the government increased sales taxes to 27 percent, the highest rate in Europe, nationalized private pension funds, and withdrew millions that had been spent in the areas of culture, health care, education, and welfare.

Fidesz’s sweeping electoral victory at first sight seemed to many a populist reaction to previous “weak” governments. After all, Fidesz promoted economic nationalism and “unorthodox” economic policies by levying taxes on banks, launching anti-bank campaigns, and attacking foreign investors and multinational financial institutions. In an effort to balance the budget, the government levied “crisis taxes” on banks and primarily foreign-owned large companies. At first sight, these measures may appear as typically “left wing” economic policies; however, this is a misleading interpretation, because Fidesz’s “unorthodox” economic policies were complemented with distinctly “anti-Socialist” social policies, as it were. For example, the government now grants tax benefits to families of working parents with children, which means that by definition families where the parents are unemployed and who live in deep poverty (most notably the Roma) are excluded. Social spending on the homeless and the unemployed has been decreased. What is more, homelessness has been criminalized. The timeframe for disbursing aid has been reduced, meaning that recipients should receive aid quicker; however, more money has been allocated to those mothers who temporarily leave the job market to remain at home with their child. These measure have been justified with the notion of traditional, patriarchal family values. The Orbán administration openly defends its anti-Socialist policies, and this is rare on continental Europe, where the majority of countries since World War II have aimed foremost to establish a social market economy, which they have since labored to protect.

The private pension insurance system was nationalized in such a way that people were left with no other rational choice but to move back into the state-supported pension system. By absorbing these pension funds, in 2010 the government was able to meet the Maastricht criterion of 3 percent annual budget deficit (which nonetheless turned out to be 4.2 percent). One year later, the government forced even those who had chosen to remain in the private system into the state pension system. By this point, there was no question of a “freedom of choice”: the government behaved like a cop turned thief: it put its hands on the wealth of the people. Thus, in Hungary the basic principles of constitutional law, such as the respect of private property, the

freedom of contract, and legal certainty came into question. Whilst the government's propaganda played anti-EU tunes, it designed measures to reduce costs, following EU directives, all in the name of the "economic crisis." The leaders of the government launched a verbal crusade, lambasting the sins of economic neoliberalism, by promising a "national rebirth"; however, in reality, the government itself was carrying out neoliberal policies, and the sole purpose of these policies was to protect and benefit its own elites and a narrow class of people.

The government took several steps to prevent people from expressing opposition or dissatisfaction in a formal and organized fashion: it made the Labor Code more strict, which hurt workers, and it abolished traditional forms of dialogue between employers and employees. Moreover, unions were forced to merge with an emerging corporate structure. Limiting union rights curtailed the rights of workers to call for a strike. Furthermore, government-supported media outlets launched a smear campaign against the new, more radical generation of union leaders.

Shortly after coming to power, the government established a new, so-called "Counter-Terrorist Center," partly to guarantee the personal safety of the new prime minister. The annual budget of the organization exceeds the amount set aside for the National Cultural Fund. One year after, it seems that the strengthened security services cannot sufficiently guarantee the safety of those in power, either. The Minister of Interior has proposed to establish a new secret service, though this is still under debate in the cabinet; because leaders in power could keep other parties in check via this service, this measure has (understandably) aroused controversy.

The new law ensures that public education is managed and controlled by the central government. Local government and foundation schools are being nationalized, and a significant number of these schools are being placed in the hands of churches. Moreover, through these new laws the government is homogenizing the curriculum of public schools, and it has reduced the age until which students must attend school from eighteen to sixteen years. The law on public education merges the anti-liberal traditions enshrined in the dogmas of Communism and Catholicism; it is no longer about education, but rather about discipline, and it declares that the state has the right to intervene in the lives of children and parents. The self-proclaimed "family-friendly" government strives to "re-educate" families for them to become "worthy" of participating in the system of national cooperation. Similar patterns can be observed in higher education. The proposed new bill on higher education aims to limit radically the number of students that can be accepted to universities and colleges with financial aid from the state. The new laws would even require that students retroactively repay tuition fees should they choose to live abroad after completing their studies. On top of it all, the Orbán government proposes that some university degrees can only be pursued upon payment of full tuition, which will make the more lucrative professions available to only the wealthy. It is the unspoken goal of the government to reduce social mobility, to bring the process of change of the elite to a close, and to "finally"

entrench the social hierarchy that has emerged through a “revolutionary” process in the post-Communist era.

The government is paying special attention to the members of the national bourgeoisie and is placing high expectations on these individuals to carry out certain functions. The Orbán system creates incentives through tax breaks for popular team sports, such as football, the prime minister’s favorite. Sándor Csányi, the CEO of OTP Bank, became the president of the Hungarian Football Association, and millionaire Tamás Leisztinger, who had strong ties to the left, was “encouraged” to become the president of the DVTK, another football club. The “team of the political regime” was Honvéd in the 1950s; now it is Videoton, a club based in the city of Székesfehérvár. Government and party officials regularly attend Videoton’s home games, observing from the grandstand (today this seating is referred to as the “VIP box”). The government announced its plans for building a state stadium. It has spent hundreds of millions of forints on football academies, such as the Puskás Academy, which has ties to Orbán.

Though the government stresses that it does not wish to return to the past, it nonetheless feeds nostalgia for the period between 1920 and 1944, characterized by Admiral Miklós Horthy’s nationalist and revanchist policies. Prime Minister Orbán has proclaimed the day of the Trianon Peace Treaty that concluded World War I as the “day of national unity.” The government is politically absolving individuals extolled during the Horthy regime by conferring new awards upon them. Under the guise of “national unification,” Orbán is granting citizenship and voting rights to Hungarian minorities living outside of Hungary to increase the number of right-wing voters, given that the majority living in the diaspora tend to vote for the right-wing parties (and will perhaps return the favor for receiving the automatic right to Hungarian citizenship). Orbán declared that he wishes to deal politically with the extreme-right party, Jobbik, the same way that Horthy dealt with Nazi Nyilas (Arrow Cross) movements back in the day: “give them two slaps on the face and send them home.” Meanwhile, various extremist right, paramilitary organizations have appeared in villages across Hungary, bearing a range of eerie names, such as “Magyar Gárda” (“Hungarian Guard”), “Véderő” (“Protective Force”), and “Betyársereg” (“Outlaw’s Army”). These organizations take away the government’s monopoly on force and launch racist campaigns aimed to intimidate the Roma. Courts that ban these extremist paramilitary groups are unable to prevent them from reorganizing under different banners.

In the area of culture, the policies of Fidesz and Jobbik overlap: both have an exclusionary interpretation of the idea of “national values.” Under this label, both parties go against the equal-opportunity policy of recent years. Though the government protected the National Theater’s director against homophobic and extreme-right attacks, compensation to the right was not long to come. In exchange, they appointed an extreme-right-wing actor as director of the New Theater, where he will now be working alongside István Csurka, the former President of Magyar Igazság és Élet

Pártja (MIÉP) (“Hungarian Truth and Life Party”), a former extreme-right party. To the helm of the Opera, Orbán (deceiving his own minister) placed a government commissioner, who through his deeds and declarations would within a few weeks come into confrontation with the major representatives of Europe’s cultural scene. Within a year and a half, all theater directors across Hungary were replaced. In many towns, relatives of the Fidesz clientele have become the directors of the theaters. By stopping the activities of the public foundation for film, the government in effect ended one of the most successful branches of Hungarian cultural life: film production. Thus, producers dependent on the government have secured the “right to the last cut,” and as such, censorship in filmmaking has become institutionalized yet again. The government even decides which religion is “established” (Islam and Mormonism, for instance, are not), and it has the authority to conduct a complete data search on all “non-established” congregations.

The Orbán regime considers some of the most outstanding artists and scholars to be its enemies, including the pianist András Schiff, writer Imre Kertész, conductors Ádám Fischer and Iván Fischer, filmmaker Béla Tarr, economist János Kornai, sociologist Zsuzsa Ferge, philosophers Ágnes Heller, Mihály Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and many others. The government had requested some of its artist friends to create illustrations for the new basic law, so that it may leave visual footprints of the historical periods of its preference next to the text, displayed on the mandatory “basic law tables” in government offices. They are redesigning Kossuth Square, the large area just in front of the Parliament, to restore the “conditions of 1944.” Their actions are full of contradictions: they simultaneously laud Chinese Communism and the anti-Communist neoconservatism in the United States; they banned pro-Tibet protests during the Chinese Communist Party Chairman’s visit and at the same time put up a statue of President Ronald Reagan, who had called Communism the “Evil Empire.” They turn away from previous symbolic figures of Hungarian democracy, such as István Bibó and Imre Nagy, turning instead towards the successors of Li Peng, with whom they “forge an alliance.” In addition, they declare that the Communist Party of the past is a “criminal organization,” including its predecessor and successor organizations; however, they welcome the former members of the Communist party in the government; what is more, they have these former members write parts of the basic law.

The central propaganda machine rises to protect nationalism, patriarchal family values, power politics, and “law and order.” The Criminal Code has also been modified so that teenagers can now be thrown behind bars for minor retail theft or painting graffiti. The independence of the justice system has also suffered: the government is making the Office of the Attorney General dependent upon personal loyalties; it is curbing the rights of lawyers in criminal proceedings; and by forcing early retirement upon Supreme Court judges, it is launching a siege against the courts. When it created the “Kúria” (i.e., the supreme court in Hungary before the judicial system

was reorganized after World War II), it did not extend the term of the president of the Supreme Court (though his mandate had not yet expired). Instead, the government replaced the president with a cadre loyal to Fidesz. In 2010, the Fidesz majority in parliament changed the Constitution nine times in a six-month period. Thus, the government itself placed the principle of legal uncertainty under doubt, shaking its own credibility.

It was surprising that — despite its qualified majority in parliament — the steps of the Fidesz government are followed by blitzkrieg tactics, especially where legislation is concerned. If a government announcement of a new law is expected, parts of it are leaked days before, and thus the government can “prepare” public opinion for its receipt. Thereafter, the party’s parliamentary faction leader, or the prime minister’s spokespersons, duly delivers the announcement, which is then immediately submitted to parliament, and, by way of an individual representative’s motion, the bill is voted into law. The Minister of Justice, who in theory should be responsible for legislation, in effect has no say in the legislative process. There is no society-wide debate, no professional talks, no impact assessments, and there is no need for other such procedures considered “orthodox” in a democracy. The opposition’s voice is divided and it does not filter through the state-sponsored media. Furthermore, a modification of house rules limits parliamentary debate explicitly: proposals deemed important by Fidesz pass through parliament smoothly. This clearly contradicts the notion of a parliamentary democracy, which is based on the idea of holding public debates. During the past year and a half analysts, journalists, and commentators hopelessly chased after events as they unfolded; the remaining democrats could barely keep track of this chaotic pace of legislation, which had been intentionally accelerated. By the time the involved parties and non-state-controlled media outlets realized what had happened, the event had already concluded.

On first sight, this raid tactic gave the impression of a government determined to govern. Yet what has become clear is that the determination of the government is to centralize power. When criticized, the government has regularly responded by saying that the “most important talks” with society had already taken place, namely at the polling stations in 2010. As such, the government claims that its policies reflect the will of the people. Yet what is not clear is the following: if it is true that the majority stands behind the government, why does the government have to govern in a coup-like fashion? Because there is no denying that between 2010 and 2011, a constitutional coup unfolded in Hungary, and the speed of this coup was dictated by Viktor Orbán and his cronies.

#### **The New Basic Law**

The icing on the constitutional coup was the approval of the new basic law. Armed with a qualified majority in parliament, Orbán provided only two months for parliament and society to deliberate the issue. The democratic opposition parties, MSZP and



LMP (the Hungarian Socialist Party and *Lehet Más a Politika*, or “Politics Can Be Different,” respectively) were not included in the parliamentary debate. However, Jobbik did participate, though in the end it voted against the new basic law. Under the label “society-wide debate,” Fidesz circulated a survey. Professionally speaking, this survey was of low quality and impossible to process. That said, Fidesz called this survey a “national consultation.” Only a fraction of voters responded to the survey.

The Constitution approved by governmental majority in April 2011 was the result of a unilateral governmental process which did not reflect a national consensus — because Fidesz did nothing to reach such a consensus. The new text kept several portions of the 1989 Constitution; however, it “protects” individual freedoms by lumping them together with communal interests, and as such, it does not in fact value individual freedoms. The basic law openly refers to Hungary as a country based on Christian values, and this is not only an exception for Europe, but also unusual among the neighboring Visegrád countries. Though the basic law (in one sentence only) formally maintains the form of a republic, it breaks with the essential notion of a republic, by changing the name from “Republic of Hungary” to simply “Hungary.” The new basic law increases the role of religion, traditions, and the so-called national values. It speaks of a unified nation, yet certain social minorities are not mentioned with the same degree of importance. In its definition of equality before the law, it mentions gender, ethnicity, and religion, yet it does not extend this definition to include legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The 1989 democratic Constitution was ideologically neutral; by contrast, that of 2011 replaces the two preambles of the 1989 text with one of the longest preambles in Europe, composed of a whopping twenty-six paragraphs. This serves as an expression of a “national religious belief system”; it is a vow in which the Hungarians list all of their sources of pride and hope and pledge to join hands and build a better future, parallel to Orbán’s “system of national cooperation.”

The idea of a “national faith” has a selective and biased take on Hungarian history. It does not contain any references to the 1848 Revolution, the first democratic republic of 1918, the “small Constitution” of the Republic of 1946, nor to the Constitutional revolution of 1989. St. Stephen has become the positive figure of Hungarian history, as has the turn towards Christianity, the 1956 Revolution, and the parliamentarians who were elected during the first free elections on May 2, 1990. It is unusual that the preamble speaks about the negative periods of Hungarian history as well, among which it mentions the German occupation that began on March 19, 1944, the Nazi and the Communist periods, and the 1949 Communist Constitution. The preamble of the basic law simply removes the period between 1944 and 1990 from Hungarian history and establishes that it does not accept legal continuity with this era.

Fidesz sees the history of Hungary as a menu from which it can select items to suit its tastes. This arbitrary and voluntaristic approach to history undoubtedly characterizes all revolutions. For example, during the French Revolution, the names of



the months of the year were changed and a “revolutionary calendar” was introduced. Yet the current, belated “revolutionariness” is led by retroactive, psychological need for some kind of compensation. Breaking with the legal continuity of the past is absurd for a number of reasons; among others, one has to note that the new basic law gains its legitimacy in part from the 1989 Constitution.

The new text stresses the role of Christianity in gluing the nation together, which is debatable in a largely secular country; it does not respect the belief system of other religions, and it only respects the “traditions” of other religions. Therefore, it views them as important to the extent that they form part of Hungary’s history. The wording of the new basic law says a lot about contemporary Hungarian politics: it speaks extensively about Christianity, taking sides with the founder of the state, St. Stephen, who promoted European integration and took sides with the West, vis-à-vis General Koppány, who remained a “euro-skeptic” (the two were in conflict over a thousand years ago). This may in effect be a positive aspect of the new law. However, the text visibly turns its back on atheists and agnostics, who, because they were (supposedly) unable to contribute intellectually to Hungarian national culture, have been shut out of the system. The text sees “culture” as synonymous with the unified and indivisible Hungarian national culture, because the notion of cultural pluralism does not even emerge.

The ideas of democracy, republic, and human rights are missing from the preamble of the new basic law; however, the traditional notion of the “true rule of the people” appears, which is not based on rights, but on duties of the state. The text is classically Orbánian in its ending: “We, the citizens of Hungary stand prepared to base our country’s order on national cooperation.” Since no one knows for sure what the “system of national cooperation” is exactly, it is Orbán himself, as chief leader, who is entitled to determine how it is to be interpreted.

The text turns away from the ideals of democracy, republic, and freedom, and turns toward a world based on the state, the nation, system cooperation, an indivisible national culture, and Christianity. Emphasis shifts from rights toward obligations. The opening statement of the U.S. Constitution is *We, the People*, but its Hungarian counterpart quotes the nineteenth-century poet Ferenc Kölcsey’s thought *God Bless the Hungarians!*, a verse from the Hungarian national anthem. The signing of the new basic law took place on the first anniversary of the electoral victory of Fidesz on Easter Monday 2011, which blasphemously claimed to symbolize the “rise” of Christianity in Hungary. All of this drew bizarre parallels between the rise of Jesus and the new Fidesz Constitution, which also made it clear how one is to interpret the “separation” of church and state in Hungary today.

#### **Power and Society**

During his first administration between 1998 and 2002, Prime Minister Orbán was more *primus inter pares* in his leadership; today, by contrast, the informal center of

power, composed of the prime minister, his advisors, and Fidesz cronies, simply nod in agreement with the decisions of the “system’s founding father.” For Fidesz, the “center of power” serves the purpose of limiting the possibility of democratic elections in every way possible. With its tendency to adopt the “worst practices” in Europe, it aims to lengthen its own rule. Concerning the government’s mandate, it was Orbán’s explicit goal to create additional qualified majority rules, which has killed off the possibility for a change of government. And even if a change in government did take place, the administration strives to ensure that the would-be new government cannot carry out policies that contradict its own. Furthermore, the Orbán cabinet has restricted the right to strike and the rights of employees; it has reduced the rights to assembly, religious freedoms, educational freedoms, and social rights. Rather than maintaining the system of local government, the Orbán administration, after restricting the resources of local governments, places the majority of their functions under the jurisdiction of the central government.

The Fidesz government promised that after gaining its exceptional majority in government it would take on the fight against poverty and the social crisis. It promised jobs, order, and security. It suggested that although some of its measures would be controversial from a rule of law perspective, it would in turn guarantee economic and social development. Millions believed this promise. Perhaps they thought that certain democratic practices could be sacrificed in exchange for economic well-being. Now, however, one observes the following: the government has dismantled the limits on the rule of law and it has bid farewell to liberal democracy; yet, in return, not only did it fail to lessen the social burden of the Hungarian population, it has sent the cynical message that it has (and had) no intention of doing this. Thus, it opened the avenue for the rise of the extreme-right party Jobbik.

Despite the destructive efforts of the government, Hungary at the beginning of 2012 still retains a few of the basic characteristics of a multiparty democracy. Liberal democracy, however, has been replaced with a wrecked version of “majority” rule, renamed “the majority,” where the freedom of speech is limited by self-censorship (people do not speak up, for fear of losing their jobs) and press freedom is clearly being reduced to the blogosphere. The state-run television channels have taken a turn towards the tabloid. The aim is to depoliticize the news or remove political issues from media reports. State-sponsored media outlets, for instance, either did not report or underreported the anti-Orbán mass rallies and demonstrations. There is no denying that during the next general elections, Fidesz will have a clear advantage.

To ensure that elections continue to be fair and free and to guarantee a return towards liberal democracy, strong opposition parties are needed that are willing to cooperate, along with social movements and an independent press, civic organizations, and heightened international attention. By the end of 2011, the main points of opposition had already begun to appear, including independent unions and increasingly active civic groups that overshadow the dispersed opposition parties,

which today remain unable to join forces.

In January 10, 2011, the group entitled “One million people for the freedom of the press!” sent 10,000 protestors to the streets; by March 15, and October 23, two of Hungary’s most important national holidays, their number had swollen to 30,000 and 70,000, respectively. Labor unions organized larger gatherings in April and June. On October 1, the Hungarian Solidarity Movement was formed, which organized a demonstration of 30,000 people in front of parliament, and in December it announced that it would become a countrywide organization. On Christmas 2011, representatives and activists of the opposition Green party (LMP) chained themselves around the parliament building to prevent parliamentarians from entering. They aimed to draw attention to the legislation that was being passed by parliament that threatened the rule of law. The police, Ukrainian- and Belorussian-style, accused the protestors of “restricting personal freedoms.” On January 2, 2012, about 100,000 people protested against the new Constitution and the rise of autocracy.

If society is unable to balance the system against governmental leadership, democracy is in danger. The proponents of autocracy, however, can hardly cement their power and they cannot stop the clock, adjusting the present moment, which is favorable for them, for eternity. It is an important lesson for those who believe in democracy: they cannot pretend as though all is well, as they have in the past decades.

History does not end with the transition to democracy. Democracy is never a complete condition; rather, it is a dynamic process, full of tension. In essence, it is but a fragile balance of forces and counter-forces. If Hungarian democracy survives these authoritarian challenges thanks to resistance from society, there is a good chance that it will subsequently be stronger than ever. The political crisis calls attention to the fact that democracy cannot be narrowed down purely to institutions, because institutions can be easily hollowed out by leaders who do not respect freedom. Democracy can only be preserved if, along with its values, a plethora of dedicated people help it thrive.

## Notes

1. Fidesz (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, Alliance of Young Democrats) was founded in 1988 as a youth anti-communist party. Now taking the name Fidesz: Hungarian Civic Union, it is the major conservative party in Hungary.
2. The reference here is not to a specific and familiar group of figures but to all those involved in making reforms to the 1949 Hungarian Constitution after 1989. Hungary was the only one of the former Eastern Bloc countries that did not adapt a new constitution — one of many preconditions for the current problems facing the country.
3. A recording made at a private meeting of Gyurcsány's MSZP party held on May 26, 2006, surfaced in the press in mid-September of that same year. Gyurcsány was heard admitting that “we have obviously been lying for the last one-and-a-half to two years.” This resulted in a series of demonstrations against the government. Even though Gyurcsány and the MSZP did not deny the veracity of the recording, the prime minister refused to resign.
4. The reference here is to a police investigation currently under way against Ágnes Heller and other left-liberal philosophers in Hungary (including Mihály Vajda, Sándor Radnóti, and János Weiss) for misuse of public funds. A politically-motivated attack (those allegations that have been tried in court to date have ruled in Heller's favor), the charge against the philosophers has been challenged by intellectuals across the world, including Jürgen Habermas and Julian Nida-Rümelin, who published a letter in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on January 25, 2011. An English translation of the letter is available at: [http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/01/translation-of-habermas-and-nida-rümelin-on-the-hungarian-situation.html#\\_ftn1](http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/01/translation-of-habermas-and-nida-rümelin-on-the-hungarian-situation.html#_ftn1)
5. The Hungarian electoral system is a mix of direct election of representatives in single-seat constituencies (176 members in the National Assembly), proportional representation (152), and fifty-eight “compensation” seats, which are determined through a complex system in connection with voter turnout and votes that in each electoral round do not get counted because they do not go to the winning member. The aim of this mixed system is to try to capture optimally voter preference in the actual numbers of representations of each party in the National Assembly.



## **From One Election to Another: Breakthroughs and Deadlocks of the Anti-Putin Movement in Russia**

Maria Chekhonadskikh and Alexei Penzin

### **Context: Russian Post-Shock Society of the 2000s**

In the early 1920s Vladimir Lenin coined the popular formula for communism: "Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country." In the early 1990s, the ideologues of "liberal reforms" in Russia began a dangerous game with another, dark and destructive side of electricity, through the application of "shock therapy" in the course of the breathtakingly fast transition from so-called "real socialism" to an extremely brutal and barbaric capitalism. Post-Soviet society now finds itself occupying a peculiar political and institutional landscape. It differs both from the social-democratic model of early Perestroika and from liberal "pro-Western" dreams about an open country close to presupposed European social, political, and cultural "standards." If in Western Europe the welfare state was slowly and gradually dismantled by neoliberalism, and societies therefore had more time and resources for the organization of resistance, in Russia the destruction of the previous social order happened very quickly. Contrary to liberal dreams, "real capitalism" has appeared as something absolutely other — as complete precarization and as difficult survival for the vast majority of the population.

In the 2000s, the social chaos of the 1990s was transformed into many localized catastrophes connected to the exhaustion of old Soviet infrastructures and industries — a long series of catastrophic events, starting with the crash of submarine *Kursk* and continuing up until the recent explosions of power plants, train crashes, and massive forest fires. During a period marked by Vladimir Putin's glorified "stability" program, the forms of post-shock "precarious life" were normalized rather than abolished. The structure of the narratives about a "new stability" invented by the Kremlin's ideologues bears a similarity to myth. It culminates in one founding event: the transition from that "chaos" of the 1990s to new positive "order." This narrative excluded all elements which did not support the picture of a new, stable order: pensioners, students, inhabitants of "depressed regions," migrants, and cultural



and educational workers. In other words, stability was an ideological and mass-media representation of everyday life focused on the “pleasures of consumption” of a minority of the population: the new ruling elite of big businessmen and corrupt state officials.

Precarization and the population’s shared quotidian vulnerability led to development of mafia-like networks of “alternative” forms of social protection, causing widespread skeptical attitudes to any form of open public or political life. People united into groups and tried to organize patriarchal, community-based circles of mutual assistance and mutual dependence. The result of this system was vast depoliticization and broad mistrust of any form of public or political life. At the same time, these networks of informal relations were themselves put into question when, over the last years, the system of double corruption — personal relations as a key to realization of any project, combined with economic bribery and nepotism — expanded onto the whole web of social institutions from top to bottom. Facing a host of problems — both at the workplace or in private life — indignant people who were not willing to join this informal system developed alternative networks of resistance. Gradually, this took the form of independent trade unions, political organizations, or social movements, in which many “new left” groups took part (groups of anarchists, anti-fascists, socialists, separate groups of intellectuals, and politicised cultural workers).

Of course, the mass explosion of protests against voting fraud during the parliamentary elections in December 2011 could not have come out of nothing, nor was it occasioned solely by formal procedural violations. For several years, the “Movement of the Cheated Share Holders” (people who had invested personal money in building houses, but were cheated by developers) has created a huge network of mutual help and juridical assistance for prosecuted activists and organized protest actions in many Russian cities. Another bright example of a successful protest movement was the movement for “Accessible School Education for Russian Children” — hunger strikes of tutors and parents that have since 2010 provoked similar actions all across Russia. Another recent example was the movement focused on saving Khimki Forest, situated near a small town next to Moscow. A significant part of the town’s population was opposed to the development of a new highway that would bring about the destruction of a considerable part of the local forest. This protest has grown into a wide and energetic civil movement, labelled by journalists as the “Battle for Khimki.” Some independent trade unions recently gained visibility by organizing several resonant strikes, including a strike at the Ford factory near Petersburg. On the liberal side of the political spectrum, a number of active and militant organizations and networks have been working against the violation of constitutional and human rights, and there have been many advances in building an alternative public sphere on the web, blogosphere, and social networks.

### **Mass Mobilization after the December Elections: Are We 146 Percent?**

The first trigger for ongoing civil protest was the September 2011 Congress of the United Russia Party (the pro-Putin “ruling party”), at which then-president Dmitry Medvedev declared that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin would participate in the next presidential elections. This surprising declaration (though expected by some observers) meant that Putin — applying the recently approved changes to the Constitution of the Russian Federation — had a real chance of being elected again for the next six years, and then maybe then for *another* six years. For many, this twelve-year perspective implied a clear and depressive prolongation of the current status quo of fake “stability.”

Explosive mass politicization became visible on the day of the parliamentary elections held on December 4, 2011, when a large number of city dwellers participated as civil observers at voting stations. It seems that almost every official percentage of votes for “United Russia” became not just a banal fraud, but manifested the quickly shifting balance of power and resistance in Russian society. It seems that virtually every report of the number of votes for “United Russia” was fraudulent. It was a fraud that had the positive effect, however, of provoking the first clashes between obedient and mercenary proponents of Putin’s regime, and a resisting multitude from below. These “proponents” of the regime included passive, lumpenized citizens, ready to forge ballots for fifteen Euros of hush money, as well as the heads of local election committees, police officers, and civil servants, all obeying orders under the threat of being immediately fired. Nevertheless, this huge army of fraudsters could not suffocate a revived civil resistance. Minute by minute, observers uploaded countless outrageous cases of violations of election procedures to web pages and social networks. The fraud was so absurd and clumsy that the ridiculous errors of official media were easily exposed. For example, when a table of voting results from the Rostov region was shown on one state-controlled TV channel, it was easy to see that the sum of the votes given to all the parties equalled 146 percent! The indignant reports of independent observers at voting stations were followed by reports about arrests carried out during spontaneous protests after the elections. They were not simply isolated incidences of a transition from neutral “observer” at a voting station to indignant witness and then to a mobilized activist. Rather, this transition can be extended to a considerable part of Russian society at the present time.

The first big mobilization in Moscow happened on the day following the elections (December 5), when about 7,000 people protested against voting fraud. After an official meeting, some protesters (mostly activists and young people) moved towards Lubyanka Square — the symbolic place of power where state security offices are found. However, the protesters were blocked by police and quickly dispersed, while some of the opposition leaders were arrested. The situation repeated itself the next day when people went to Triumfalnaya Square, another symbolic place in the center of Moscow, marked as a meeting point for the liberal opposition movement “Strategy

31,” which has struggled to defend the right to peaceful assemblies and freedom of speech over the last few years.<sup>1</sup> Authorities forbade the meeting and blocked the area with special fences, and military and police cars patrolled all along Tverskaya Street. On the perimeter of the square, Kremlin-sponsored youth organizations, protected by police, chanted and shouted incessantly “Putin! Russia!” — an uncanny and nightmarish spectacle. The police operated in their habitual mode of aggressive dispersal and the arrest of protesters. That evening, both ordinary participants and journalists were cruelly beaten, and police stations overflowed with arrests.

This action was the starting point of the government’s tactic to create the image of an “enemy” for the “good part of society” that had declared support for “stability” in Russia. The next meetings and rallies were prepared with growing anxiety in the protest community. The fear of the violence seen in 1993 during a rebellion against President Boris Yeltsin’s neoliberal reforms, when tanks shot at Parliament and several hundred participants were killed, found its expression in the popular mantra “Peaceful transition, not revolution!” Facebook users created special instructions aimed at preventing possible “provocations” in upcoming meetings. Many people, who probably took to the streets for first time in their lives, wanted to show the “peaceful and friendly” atmosphere of the rallies as opposed to imitating the provocative style of radical political activists.

The rally in Bolotnaya Square in Moscow on December 10 collected an unprecedented number of participants — from 60,000 to 100,000 people according to evaluations of the opposition press. Other Russian cities also joined in with demonstrations “for fair elections,” with an impressive number of protesters and inventive slogans and banners. People expressed their political opinions and feelings through subversive humor, or equally through genuine fury. For safety reasons, nobody from the opposition committee moved toward the Kremlin in conjunction with the prominent writer and politician Eduard Limonov, leader of the National-Bolshevik party. From this moment on, the protest split into a radical militant part and a previously apolitical, mostly liberal part made up of civil activists and urban citizens. Police tactics also changed. This change was caused by two factors: the negative reactions of international media and the decline in the Russian stock exchange after the violence at Triumfalnaya Square, and the rapid growth of the movement — police authorities were well aware that they would not be able to control the December demos through the exercise of brutal violence.

Thus the huge mass of protestors started to govern themselves. On December 10, the participants of the movement agreed to suppress any attempts at radical actions or appeals to mutually aggressive behavior, even in speeches and slogans. This new agreement about the securitization of protest was, again, the effect of a “post-shock” way of thinking — a kind of deadlock that arises when nobody believes in the positive changes made by revolutionary measures (after the Soviet experience and the 1990s) and nobody really believes in peaceful transformation without more

or less radical action. This tendency to self-securitization continued at the next gathering on Sakharovsky Prospect on December 24 and during the more recent protest march on February 4, 2012. In any case, it was clear for everyone that the peaceful atmosphere of the protests existed only during the biggest meetings and rallies. For example, when people went out to support Sergei Udaltsov, the coordinator for the Left Front coalition arrested during the elections on December 4 in Moscow for allegedly “resisting police officers,” and kept incarcerated for more than two weeks even while on a hunger-strike, the police answered again with the standard methods of violence against activists.

### **Class Composition of the Movement and Struggles for Hegemony**

From the very beginning, the social and political composition of the protest was unstable. Its changes became visible in the shift from the first actions, dominated by political activists and youth, and those protests that followed after, which included middle-aged people, pensioners, precarious cultural and educational workers, as well as managers, office workers, and “middle class” citizens. The balance of power also fluctuated from the hegemony of liberals to attempts to legitimate the ultra-right, which was co-opted into the committee of opposition chaired by Alexei Navalny, a well-known populist blogger with nationalist inclinations (he became well-known after his many investigations of corruption in the biggest Russian corporations). Unlike liberals, leftist voices in the committee were not very strong, partially because of the unspoken agreement to forget about any radical leftist “rhetoric.” The history of the post-Soviet radical Left is another story; suffice it to say that, until now, the Left in public opinion has often been associated with the outdated and conservative Communist Party of Russian Federation and the vicissitudes of the Soviet past. On the other hand, thanks to local activism both from new Left organizations and critical intellectuals and artists, as well as the recent visible traces of global economic turmoil, the social agenda of the Left has acquired increasing importance in public debates.

Liberals attributed rising dissatisfaction with Putin’s politics to the so-called “middle class,” which has grown during the 2000s — during Putin’s era of “stability.” They very quickly adopted the rhetoric of “Peaceful transition, not Revolution” as an argument for future “normal market competition” of political forces in the election process. This idea of a political awakening of the middle class was transferred onto the whole of the Russian protest against unfair elections. However, this monolithic construct reduces or eliminates the many differences among protesters. It is not only a simplification, but also a conscious decision to ignore the social and political differences inside the movement. In fact, we heard demands on behalf of this “middle class,” and official mass-media *post factum* already assigned the label of “revolt of the urban middle class” to the movement.

But what about thousands of newcomers from small Russian towns who don’t have the official status of “registered” Moscow citizens (or similar status in other

big cities)? People from other towns are required to be officially registered with local authorities; without such registration, it is very difficult to cast a vote, as well as to receive medical treatment and other forms of social security. Renting an apartment in Moscow costs more than half of an office worker's average salary. The story is similar for students, teachers, artists, scholars, and pensioners, who now fall into the category of the "extremely poor" — nobody knows how they survive with the incomes they have (200 to 500 Euro per month). There is in fact an invisible army of the poor within the movement. These protesters are a symptom of more profound social dissatisfaction with the humiliating living conditions experienced by many in this well-educated urban population.

"You cannot even imagine/represent us!" This slogan, playing on the Russian verb with the double meaning of both "to imagine" and "to represent," sparked by a Petersburg radical student group in December, has become widespread as the most striking expression of the critical part of the movement. The protesters' distrust of liberal opposition leaders has provoked the mass self-organization of people who wanted to speak about their issues and make different suggestions about the tactics of struggle. For example, at the Sakharovsky Prospect rally on December 24, there were alternative platforms of students, teachers, cultural workers, and traditional civil movements. During the meeting there was an open people's microphone and a "Making your slogans" workshop organized by the Union for Cultural Workers and the Occupy Moscow Movement. Every day, new alternative committees, platforms, and activist initiatives have emerged since January 2012. The "constitutive power" of the people was growing and becoming more aware of the stalemate of all forms of mainstream representative politics. The rallies and actions on February 4 and 26 demonstrated exactly this — the joyful creativity of a network-organized multitude of protesters and their skeptical attitude to traditional political leadership.

### **After the Elections: The Divided Society**

The ideology of the "urban middle class" definitely played a negative role in the protest. For small towns and villages, where people often do not use the Internet at all, the movement was represented via official television and the press as a revolt of the wealthy, who, moreover (as represented by the state media in the form of a bizarre conspiracy theory), are making use of funds from the United States in an effort to come to power, destroy the newly built "sovereignty of Russia," and continue the anti-social politics of the 1990s. Putin's PR supporters were quick to catch up on this "middle class" topos, and to speculate on class differences between Moscow and the provinces, between the well-fed middle class and the poorest segments of the population. The state-controlled media opposed the turmoil brought about by protesters to the populist idea of "stability." If in the beginning this propaganda image of the "enemy" did not have any social face, then it was clear that this image, ironically, was an inversion of old Soviet dogmatic Marxism schema: it was designed as the



face of the enemy of traditional working class, which now in Russia is concentrated mainly in the provinces — as a “bourgeoisie,” concentrated in Moscow, Petersburg, and other big cities.

Such a dangerous scenario formed a key part of the election campaign of the main Kremlin candidate, which has had some real results in raising Putin’s approval ratings. The “United Russia” party and the “Popular Front,” created by the Kremlin to imitate grassroots support of its politics, organized meetings in Moscow and across Russia to praise this notorious “stability” and its almighty champion, Vladimir Putin. A huge number of industrial workers in smaller cities, led by several treacherous trade unions, as well as state-dependent civil servants, were forced to attend the meetings via administrative coercion, blackmail, or payoff. Obsessive propaganda concerning this sacred “stability” and its sole guardian on central TV channels, all of which were fully subordinated to Putin’s campaign headquarters, also had a deep effect on mobilization of his supporters.

The results of the elections were shocking for the opposition movement, which had been full of hopes for the coming destruction of the current political regime after its repetition of the events of December — massive election frauds, followed by new waves of even stronger indignation, the mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people, and occupations of city centers until a final victory. Many thousands of people in Moscow, Petersburg, and other big cities applied to be observers at voting stations, and spent the night after Election Day on March 4 struggling to prevent or stop voting fraud until the final count and issuance of voting protocols. There were several initiatives launched for parallel and independent counts of the ballots. Indeed, there were many documented election frauds again which, by different estimates, added from 5 to 10 percent to Putin’s tally. But the official result of the election gave Putin 63.6 percent of the vote, which meant victory without the second round of elections expected by some optimists. Official media and authorities were fast to start solemn praises for the “absolute victory” of the new old sovereign.

Of course, independent of the balance of real votes for Putin and the frauds organized by his faithful servants in local administrations, the opposition committee declared the illegitimacy of the whole electoral procedure and new protest rallies were organized on March 5 and 10. The first rally at Moscow’s Pushkinskaya Square gathered fewer people than expected — around 20,000 participants. The desperate attempt to exceed the time limits of the gathering and to proclaim permanent occupation of the square by the militant wing of protesters led by the coordinator of Left Front, Sergei Udaltsov, was cruelly prevented by riot police, who arrested more than 200 participants. For most of the protesters, the return of police violence to previously peaceful meetings was a sign of the general attitude of authorities to repress any more or less radical protest against the state prior to the time of turmoil, and demonstrating once again “Putin’s strong hand.” However, most people who were arrested were released on the same day or the day after in Moscow, as well as



in Petersburg. The next protest in Moscow brought around 25,000 people into the streets, which clearly indicated a stagnation in mobilization efforts, though people came with the same outraged or hilarious banners — subversive appropriations of mass culture, such as a man wearing a Robocop costume promising to “clean the city from bandits.”

One cannot predict how or at what point the protest might reach its peak again, nor when it will be able to dismantle the regime of so-called “managed democracy” that has dominated Russia for the past decade. After a break in order to permit the rearrangement of actions and strategies, new massive opposition rallies were planned around the date of inauguration of the president on May 7. The obvious question raised by members of the opposition was the notorious “what is to be done?” What should be the next steps taken by protesters? What common political program should they voice in the future? And is it possible to generate a common program at all, taking into account the strong ideological differences within the movement? One part, reformist minded, has elaborated plans to make changes to the constitution, and to democratize laws regulating access to elections and to establish new political parties, and dreams of carrying out work at the micro-level of the municipalities; another is designing new creative and radical actions for civil disobedience. Radical-left participants criticize the liberal part of the movement for its conformism and elitist focus on the demos in Moscow and Petersburg, thus avoiding the difficult task of political work with the obedient pro-Putin voters in smaller towns. Many activists are thinking about long-term struggle and putting their hopes in the democratic elaboration of a more socially and economically attuned political agenda, dealing with topics such as the global crisis of neoliberalism and the question of social justice in front of expectations of a new wave of economic crisis and a new series of anti-social reforms in Russia.

Thus in the great “exodus” from a repressive and corrupted state, undertaken by a multitude of protesters in the last three months, it now looks as if we are in the negative and ambivalent phase of “murmurs in the desert” (to pick up on the well-known episode from the adventures of Moses’s people after their flight from Egypt). And as a whole, after the elections Russian society is deeply divided between passive support for Putin’s mythical stability and vibrant demands for radical change. The heated political debates on the streets, in families, at workplaces, and in universities are a fresh and stunning reality here. Something irreversible has already happened — mass politicization and a rising political consciousness cannot be stopped and trapped in banal mantras of representative democracy or closed off by Putin’s dubious electoral results. This situation of openness is itself an achievement of the movement, an openness which was unthinkable only three months ago in the midst of the despair of imagining the persistence of this uncanny “stability” for the next six to twelve years.

Even taking into account all its specificity, what is happening in Russia is not alien to the whole agenda of mass global protests initiated last year by the revolts in Tunisia

and Egypt, with all their breakthroughs and failures. The paradoxes and deadlocks of representative democracy have become more and more visible today on a global scale. For example, where you have formally correct procedures of representation and non-falsified election results, you also have Occupy Wall Street or the indignados movement as genuine expressions of the disappointment of 99 percent in the capacity of such procedures to really “represent” or transmit their needs and interests, or to address their social and economic concerns. In Russia, we have these representational procedures in violated and cynically distorted forms, and the same mass mobilization of indignant people, aiming (consciously or unconsciously) not only to repair the electoral process but to recognize the same unresolved economic issues and social injustices faced by the majority of citizens in all countries.

### Notes

1. Article 31 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation concerns freedom of speech and assembly.



## Conscience and the Common

Imre Szeman

One of the aims of *After Globalization* (which I co-authored with Eric Cazdyn) is to probe mainstream liberal arguments as to where we should move from here — here being the moment after the ruling ideologies of globalization have foundered on the shoals of the 2008 global economic crisis.<sup>1</sup> This crisis took down with it, in addition to banks and national economies, the political aims and ambitions of the Washington Consensus that for two decades pushed governments around the world to adopt market-friendly (that is, neoliberal) policies and to abandon or curtail such meek social policies as once may have existed within capitalist societies. For us, the best way to understand globalization is as an ideological parlor trick: a loud and extended public pronouncement of a new stage of the zeitgeist that meant new economic policies had to be adopted of historical necessity: lower (and lower, and lower) taxes on businesses, fewer public services, austerity for taxpayers combined with plentitude for corporations from the public purse. At a time in which global GDP has never been larger, everyone seems to believe that there is less money to be spent on all that once constituted the imagined (social) good life: such things as great schools and universities, universal public health, full and meaningful employment, and community and social programs of all kinds. One might have expected the obscenity of the new Gilded Age to be exposed for even doubters to see when, in the fall of 2008, the curtain was pulled back on the desperate machinations of a global financial system extracting surplus from (amongst other dark crevices) the public's desire for decent housing.<sup>2</sup> The huge sums paid out by governments around the world to major corporations and banks (under the guise of protecting the little guy) in order to limit the blow of the financial crash on capitalists should have meant that the lights were turned on and globalization was finally exposed as a well-staged political performance whose scale and spectacle we found all too engrossing and distracting.

But this is not what has happened — or if it has, only to a limited degree. What has come after globalization? More globalization — more tax-cutting, more austerity measures, and increasing levels of economic and social inequality — with the sole

difference being that the imperatives of globalization continue to be carried out even as many of its ideological operations have been abandoned or eclipsed. Tax-cutting and the slashing of social services has now become naturalized as the rational and normal function of states; the ideological element of globalization discourses (e.g., the need for states to be lean and mean so that they might remain competitive against other polities around the world) no longer seems to be required in order to legitimate these processes or to underwrite the moralizing language that has flourished in their wake. Corporations and governments can't afford pension plans, so individuals have to stop spending and save for their own retirement; debt is bad, so individuals and states have to reign in their spending and stick to the basics — food and education (since states can no longer afford this!) in the first instance, prisons and the military in the latter; and, since the economy is dependent on consumption, individuals had better start spending money again to keep it alive and their jobs intact. The impossible circle of saving more while spending more is squared by making everyone feel guilty and inadequate all the time, and so always also in need of redemption, whether through the process of beefing up their bank accounts (saving only to spend later) or by buying things to make themselves feel better in a landscape defined by permanent austerity and emptied of larger social goals. The necessity of a new language of the political has never been clearer, even if the possibility of putting one together seems to be more difficult than ever; the Occupy movements and the energy of the Arab Spring confirm rather than challenge this point.<sup>3</sup>

One of the thinkers whose ideas we critique at length in *After Globalization* is Nobel Prize winning economist-turned-political pundit, Paul Krugman. Admired by many on the left, and emblematic of liberal solutions to our current crisis, we find Krugman's ideas as wanting — and as dangerous — as those of the neoliberals whom he seeks to displace from the center of our political imaginary. Our main criticism of Krugman (and other liberals) is that while he seems well-aware of the conditions endured by today's global collectivity, his proposed solution to push the United States in a new, more equitable and just economic and political direction is...more of the same, more of precisely those mechanisms that brought the globe to where it is now. Krugman likes capitalism as an economic system — indeed, he can imagine no other. He doesn't like (some of) its negative outcomes, including income inequalities and profit-taking by the few at the expense of the many. Krugman believes that the "bad" outcomes of capitalism can be reigned in and its "good" aspects (e.g., competition, innovation, efficiencies, etc.) made to flourish through the intervention of a social ethic that has been allowed to deteriorate. He terms this ethic a "liberal conscience." While he doesn't explain or expand on what the *content* of this conscience might be — that is, what it enables or proscribes, what its premises or presumptions are — the *form* that this moral feeling takes appears to be the classic "inner light" of conscience that guides one to act in the right way. Globalization thus becomes for Krugman and other liberals a case of moral misbehavior or ethical misdirection, whether

knowingly so (as in the case of those who want to benefit at the expense of others) or as a result of misinformation (the fault of bad epistemology or limited information, or simply that which arises from the difficulty of managing a planet-wide economic system comprising hundreds of national actors each intent on maximizing their own positions to the detriment of the whole). For Krugman, the solution to the present crisis is not to make fundamental changes to economic and political organization, but for everyone to once again operate in tune with their liberal conscience or moral compass, which would, one presumes, reduce income inequalities and ameliorate the blunt, brute impact of capitalism on most individuals in contemporary societies.

It is hard not to read this invocation of conscience as little more than self-delusion. If only everyone acted in accord with their conscience, the problems that capitalism generates would disappear! Capitalism is a problem not due to its very structure, but because bad people have been allowed to play the game of competition and profit badly! Insofar as capitalism needs to be operated with conscience, it is clear that it — capitalism — is being granted priority as a social or historical formation: we're stuck with capitalism (the idea of necessity rears its head here again), so something is thus required to make it work as best as it can. One could easily imagine a different solution. If this economic system or axiomatic produces outcomes that are other than we desire them to be — outcomes not in accord with our conscience — why not change the economic system (since conscience, if it is to operate at all as intended — that is, as an unswerving guide as to how to act or not — *cannot* be malleable)? As employed by Krugman and others, conscience can be read as the resolution of a social problem at the level of the individual; it is a moral or ethical solution to a properly political crisis, a politics that is allowed to retain its (apparent) necessity through an equation that renders capitalism a fixed rather than variable element of human society. As I suggested above, the insistence on conscience transforms globalization into a moral problem: temporarily, human beings took leave of their senses, only to receive a wake-up call in the form of an economic crisis (and perhaps as a result of their nation's military misadventures, too); from now on, we'll all once again act in accordance with our conscience and avoid the temptations that produce bubble economies. But what Krugman takes to be misdirection or a collective, protracted error in judgment is better seen as a deliberate political program of neoliberal moral education in the language of the market — a program that extends well beyond the U.S. party politics Krugman uses as an analytic, and which speaks to the more general logics of contemporary capitalism expressed (in different ways) by thinkers from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello.<sup>4</sup>

Conscience, then, is a ruse of capitalism, constituting little more than a strategy by which socio-economic relations can remain the same underneath by removing some of the grime off the surface of society. Or is it? The concept of conscience has been explored and developed from innumerable vantage points — religious, philosophical, sociological, and psychological — over the history of Western thought. Though it



is hard to do it justice in a short space, it would not be much of an exaggeration to suggest that conscience is perhaps *the* paradigmatic figure of Western philosophy, one into which is condensed a whole range of epistemological, ontological, and ethical preoccupations and anxieties. Conscience is a concept that combines contradictory impulses (more on this in a moment); it is also one that is essential to what we have come to understand as the primary dynamic of the *political*, which is to say, of the relation of the individual to the social — both the constitution of the individual by the social and the constitution of the social through the accumulation of individual desires and actions (a transformation of quantity into quality if there ever was one). Whether it is understood as god-given, as a core element of human Being, or as a product of socialization and psychological development, at its most basic level conscience ensures that the individual acts in accord with the social. Though Krugman's appeal to conscience might well be misplaced, it may be that in order to conceive of a common after capitalism, one has to think about conscience and the manner in which this inner compulsion of the individual enables ways of being together differently. At a minimum, the process of re-working this old, dusty concept to a new political end might point to the shape, character, and/or limits of some of the ideas of the common with which we are now working.

But before I consider what conscience might have to do with the common, it is essential to ask a prior question that bears upon its import and function. What do we mean today when we invoke the political (as I have above)? There seem to be two dominant ways of understanding this term and the demands that it makes on us. The political is *either* the social mechanisms through which collective life is organized or it is a break into or interruption of these selfsame mechanisms. Construction on the one hand, destruction on the other, both taking the political as their name. These two modes of the political seem to be in direct contradiction; yet both senses circulate freely today, as when we imagine the day-to-day management activities of state bureaucracies in the West *and* the revolutionary protests of Egyptian youth on the streets of Cairo as constituting examples of political actions. Is this (apparent) contradiction anything more than the consequence of a semantically rich and complex word with a long history, which has expanded from naming the affairs of state (*politika*) or science of government to include revolutionary acts aimed at taking over or undoing the existing state of affairs? Does it point to some third thing lying behind these two modes of the political which organizes and gives meaning to both — something like the concept of power?

The political as construction or organization: "All human beings require warmth, rest, nourishment and shelter, and are inevitably implicated by the necessities of labour and sexuality in various forms of social association, the regulation of which we name the political."<sup>5</sup> The regulation of social association emerges out of strict material necessity: human beings are social animals, who unless they are (in Aristotle's terms) "a beast or a god" have to live in concert with other humans (*socius*: a comrade)

since they are not creatures who are sufficient in and of themselves.<sup>6</sup> The demands generated by the necessity of the social can (of course) be fulfilled in various ways; there is no necessity to any particular form taken by the social, and there are certainly better and worse forms, especially as measured by the degree of equality that exists among a society's members.<sup>7</sup> "Regulation" can quickly become excessive prohibition and intrusive management — that is, a form of consent to social organization that is coercion by any other name.

And thus the need for the other form of politics — the political as destruction — one whose aim is to liberate the deadened form that social association can sometimes take. The need for revolutionary politics is directed not only at the politicians in charge, or the form of state politics and the commitments spelled out (or not) in constitutions, but to the lifeworld that political forms have generated in their wake — habits and practices of daily life that make contingent political forms into a necessity felt at the level of the body. "Moments of sensation punctuate our everyday existence, and in doing so, they puncture our received wisdoms and common modes of sensing....I argue that such moments of interruption (or what I will variously call disarticulation of disfiguration) are political moments because they invite occasions and actions for reconfiguring our associational lives."<sup>8</sup> In this recent turn to affect in political theory, the political becomes disruption through the simple act of feeling and sensation, whose very possibility is clung to as an indicator that there is still occasion for politics as rupture in a world in which official politics have become little more than "a routinised game, a form of hyper-politics, with no possibility of changing the game itself."<sup>9</sup> What would come after "an interruption of previous forms of relation" is left to the imagination.<sup>10</sup> This second form of politics passes judgment on the first, but resists naming or defining forms of social association other than those which constitute the received and common to be interrupted today; what might be intuited from this stance, however, is that on the other side of the political rupture, disarticulation and disfiguration (whether through sensation or otherwise) would become unnecessary, as daily life is now reanimated as the mechanics of sensation are returned to some ontological purity such that simple feeling no longer constitutes a political interruption of routine relations, i.e., it is no longer a depressingly minimal site of utopia (as long as one feels, politics is possible).

The word "association" appears in Davide Panagia's description of the political as interruption, just as it does in Terry Eagleton's definition of politics as regulation. It is a word no longer much used in relation to politics, even though it was prominent in early revolutionary politics. The name of the First International (1864-76) was the International Workingmen's Association, an organization divided between two philosophies of the political which mirror the ones named above. Mikhail Bakunin favored direct action against capitalism and advocated a politics of rupture. By contrast, Karl Marx and his followers come off as liberals in the vein of Eurocommunism, advocating a politics of the party that attends carefully to the social mechanisms and

regulation of collective life — not without revolutionary intent and an imperative to generate true collectives, but also a form of politics willing to work against existing norms, habits, behaviors and political systems by working with and through them. Association of any kind would seem to demand regulation and coordination. The decision to kick Bakunin out of the International can be read as a failure on the part of the Association to be as revolutionary as the situation demanded. But it can also be taken as an example of the fundamental character of human association, which is that it requires regulation as a way of organizing all those individual quantities into a social quality — a mechanism of coordinating scale, managing desire, and generating a social freedom that is other than the crude freedom of the individual imagined within libertarianism. Both modes of the political are essential. The politics of destruction begets the politics of organization. The tendency of contemporary critical thinking is to emphasize the first at the expense of (or even in fear of) the second, either by framing the politics of construction as always already a dangerous fixing in place of possibility (which can only result in populism or totalitarianism) or by imagining that on the other side of the *here* comes a moment in which there is but a single mode of political being that extends from the individual to the state — something akin to what Michael Hardt advocates in his re-description of the concept of “love.”<sup>11</sup> (There are resonances in what I am saying here with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s distinction of paranoid from reparative reading, but I’ll leave that aside here).<sup>12</sup>

To imagine the common, to think an after to globalization, demands that we pay more attention to the politics of organization — which means, too — and it surprises me to say so — to think about conscience in relation to left politics. As I said above, conscience combines contradictory impulses. It can be conceived of as the product of social authority, as the outcome of forms of socialization that generate appropriate behavior in individuals; just as frequently, it is imagined as that mechanism of moral reflection or deliberation that pulls *against* the insistence on appropriate ways of being or behaving (as captured by the actions of “conscientious” objectors or in the phrase “follow your conscience”). Both of these aspects of conscience fit well with liberal political philosophy: the first, an example of the place where the social contract takes effect and is acted out, the second as that impulse to greater forms of individual and social freedom that can impel this social contract to reshape itself to better effect, undoing the contingency of specific historical political forms and the always-present danger of group-think through the bravery of individuals who manage through their actions to identify (supposedly objective) moral and ethical codes that have yet to be added into the liberal social equation.<sup>13</sup> For the Left, this second dimension of conscience comes across as both philosophically (in its suggestion of some objective horizon of morality) and historically (in its easy appeal to a slowly accreting progressive society) suspect, while the first is but another way of describing the operations of hegemony (what “keeps a people in the ways it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by force of habit”).<sup>14</sup> This no doubt

explains much of the aversion of the Left to conscience. But let's be clear: hegemony need not always be imagined in the negative, as if one of the goals of politics was to create a social without it. Antonio Gramsci's description of a mode of civil society "in which the individual can govern himself without his self-government entering into conflict with political society — but rather becoming its normal continuation, its organic compliment" sounds like a description of conscience, though one drained of any sense that conscience must always exemplify a herd mentality in which it is little more than a "civilizing" suppression of primal drives that are at the core of human Being — and human freedom (Freud's and Nietzsche's view of conscience, if for different reasons).<sup>15</sup>

In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Eagleton writes:

The avant garde's response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communiqué; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Equally, of course, they are wrong. Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over to the political enemy.<sup>16</sup>

Could the same not be said of conscience? It may well be a liberal ruse that mistakes (deliberately) the mechanisms of hegemony for ethical and moral consensus, mitigating interruptive politics through an insistence on the necessity of social rules and organization. But is it not the case that such organizing mechanisms are needed to constitute the common, especially as a means of bridging that scalar gap between the one and the whole? Conscience is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the common; one needs something like it, even if the dominant variants of the concepts are linked to ethics rather than politics, or to systems of rights (in the liberal sense) as opposed to systems of obligations. As it moves past the easy comforts of the politics of destruction to a politics of construction, the Left should produce its own version of conscience — one that begins by challenging and rejecting those ideas to which Krugman and others appeal as the ethical standard of behavior within the deeply unethical social form of contemporary liberal capitalism.

## Notes

1. *After Globalization* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
2. The desire for housing is still too often treated as an example of an acquisitive, "bad" consumerism: for many commentators, those who jumped into subprime mortgages got what they deserved when their interest rates were boosted and they lost their houses as a result of being unable to afford payments. Without wishing to affirm the role played by housing in affirming property regimes, it seems to me that access to housing should be deemed not a privilege but a universal right — a legitimate desire exploited by the finance industry to generate profit. For a recent discussion, see Jimmy Carter, "Decent Housing

Is Not Just a Wish, It Is a Human Right,” *Guardian* (20 June 2011).

3. The discussion that took place at the recent policy convention of the Canadian New Democratic Party is emblematic of the degree to which political rationality has changed since 1989. Though no decision was made in the end, it seems all too likely that in the future the word “socialist” will be removed from the preamble to the party’s constitution, since this term seems to be an impediment for the Party to achieve what has apparently become its goal: electoral victory within the existing Parliamentary system.
4. For a fascinating account of neoliberalism as a form of moral (re)education, see Jörg Wiegratz, “Fake Capitalism? The Dynamics of Neoliberal Restructuring and Pseudo-Development: The Case of Uganda,” *Review of African Political Economy* 124 (2010): 123-137.
5. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London: Blackwell, 1990) 410.
6. Aristotle, *The Politics and The Constitution of Athens*, ed. Stephen Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 14.
7. In the words of Jacques Rancière, “politics...is that activity that turns on equality as its principle.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999) ix.
8. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009) 2-3.
9. Bülent Diken, “Radical Critique as the Paradox of Post-Political Society.” *Third Text* 23.5 (2009): 579.
10. Panagia, *Political Life of Sensation* 3.
11. Michael Hardt with Caleb Smith and Enrico Minardi, “The Collaborator and the Multitude: An Interview with Michael Hardt.” *minnesota review* (2004): 61-62.
12. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 123-51.
13. As Rousseau puts it, the most essential form of the law is one “which is not graven on tablets of marble or brass, but on the hearts of the citizens. This forms the real constitution of the State, takes on every day new powers, when other laws decay or die out, restores them or takes their place, keeps a people in the ways it was meant to go, and insensibly replaces authority by force of habit. I am speaking of morality, of custom, above all of public opinion; a power unknown to political thinkers, on which nonetheless success in everything else depends.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, ed. Drew Silver, trans. G.D.H Cole (New York: Dover, 2003) 36.
14. Rousseau, *Social Contract and Discourses* 36.
15. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: International, 1971) 268.
16. Eagleton, *Ideology of the Aesthetic* 372.

## **Joking Seriously: The Artful Political Science of *Besti Flokkurinn*: An Interview with the Best Party's Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir**

By Andrew Pendakis

*Besti Flokkurinn* (The Best Party) is a political party that was founded in the anxious aftermath of Iceland's 2008 financial collapse. Originally envisioned as a parodic, "anarcho-surrealist" response to the incompetence and short-sightedness of Iceland's governing elite, the party immediately set about promising everybody everything — trips to Disneyland, a polar bear for the zoo, "sustainable transparency" — in an attempt to isolate and render visible the hollowness of contemporary political culture. Led by a comedian/artist named Jón Gnarr with no pre-existing interest in politics and accompanied by a handful of equally inexperienced representatives who included avant-garde musicians, a carpenter, and a well-known Icelandic architect, the party unexpectedly captured the mayoralty of Reykjavik in 2010 with 37 percent of the vote. It is now preparing to contest elections on a national level and many believe it likely to be the next governing party of Iceland.

Gnarr and the party he leads have generated no small amount of controversy and skepticism. On the night he took office he deadpanned "Welcome, hooray for all kinds of things." Asked about possible solutions to the financial crisis in Iceland he has suggested — half-ironically, half-sincerely — that people should listen to Lady Gaga as a means of shaking off their depressionary mindset. At times, his answers border on an almost Warholian naiveté: "I hope they will smile more. And laugh a lot," he answered when asked about the political changes he envisioned for the citizenry of Reykjavik. For political scientists, the party's success has been mostly attributed to the frission and ephemerality of protest; far from replacing or challenging the existing political order, it is seen instead as only temporarily altering its basic pace and tone. Yet the party insists that it is better able to govern than its competitors, that its "cultural" (aesthetic) approach to politics and total inexperience place it closer to the population and its actual needs.

It is in the transition from ironic outside to full-fledged governance that the party



has had to set about moving beyond its original mandate as a “huge work of art” and into the information-dense, protocol-laden, highly “literal” space of policy. Does Besti Flokkurinn represent a new axis of politics, a new style and practice of the political, or are its claims to novelty simply the latest in a long line of post-political gestures? How does a leader who admits that he would abolish capitalism in Iceland if he had the power govern within the quotidian limits of a mayoralty? I interviewed Heiða Kristín Helgadóttir, the party’s general secretary, in Calgary in February 2012 in the hopes of clarifying some of these issues and getting a basic sense for the ideals of the group.

**Heiða, could you please begin simply by telling us a little about your own personal and political history? Where did you grow up? What early relationship did you establish with politics?**

I was born in Washington, DC while my father was studying journalism there. I think from an early age I had this curiosity about politics and had a sense that there was more at stake in politics than the usual, miserable bickering. I don’t know if this originates with my experience of Washington, but I was very fascinated by that city and the scale of its energy as well as by American politics and history more generally. After I graduated, I went to university back in Iceland and got a B.A. in political science. While I was studying I had two children, which is not that uncommon back in Iceland. Women there do a lot of things while they’re having kids. And most of us have children very young and then create a whole other family when we’re older [laughing].

I had always had this fascination with politics and come from a family who are all very passionate and clear about their political positions. But I had never found anything that I was happy with, never really believed in or supported a particular party or leader. Politics fascinated me, but only as a possibility, as something I hadn’t yet experienced, as something I could only imagine. After I graduated, I wasn’t quite sure what I would do with my degree. Like many of my generation, I wandered a little and couldn’t find anything that really gripped me. I was looking for jobs with the Social Democratic Party, but didn’t ultimately want to be associated with them. I didn’t feel, to be honest, that they meant what they said; I didn’t feel that what they represented was heartfelt. We sometimes forget how powerful sincerity remains, how necessary it is to politics and life. I thought they were more a union of people interested in securing their own individual futures, that it was a means for them to get what they wanted personally. Politics for the Social Democrats seemed like a hobby or simply a career. This was not the kind of politics I dreamed of. I wanted politics to be closer to life and to the feeling of being alive.

Of course, during this time, the crash had happened in 2008, and this also had an effect. It was not as if my whole world collapsed; I had never really believed in the boom to begin with. I always had this sense that there was something off about it, a trick, and I didn’t understand why all these bankers were suddenly being touted

as economic geniuses. The growth was too easy. How can one trust something so effortless? Building up a history of banking is something that happens over generations; you have to know what you're doing and it has to be done with respect, a sense for the fact that you are using somebody else's money. There was something magical about this money. When the collapse came there was a general feeling of fear and panic — people had become accustomed to the easiness. I did, of course, fear for Iceland. The journalists threatened apocalypse. But I knew that things were at once very serious and yet, oddly, at the same time, that things would be fine. It was important to see through the whole discussion of crisis and understand that we could still build a future without this false money.

After graduation I worked in an A.I. lab for a time. Then my friend Gaukur Úlfarsson, who is the director of *Gnarr*, a documentary made about the Best Party campaign, mentioned that he would like to introduce me to this guy named Jón, who was always going on about this political project he had envisioned. He used to work at a youth center. When I did eventually meet Jón he thought that he was running for prime minister [*laughing*], not the mayor, so he was not really sure about all the levels and protocols of government. But he did have a very clear idea about what he wanted to do: he wanted to make a mockery out of everything, the whole existing political process in Iceland. He had never followed politics until the crash. He then watched with horror all the things that were happening, this huge amount of rage and public fury. Nobody was willing to take any responsibility within the existing government — they were just pointing fingers and evading responsibility.

Jón's own history is very interesting and, in one sense at least, is representative of the membership of the Best Party as a whole. Though it will sound strange, he, like a good many other members of the party, participated in the Alcoholics Anonymous program. I think this is important to note, however funny this may seem. It means that a significant segment of our party can be said to have had a certain kind of "spiritual awakening," some kind of collective, therapeutic experience or "self-help" encounter. Many have known real addiction and weakness and powerlessness. In part, this explains the whole worldview that we have, our sense that our joint well-being is more important than our individual selves, that we can only get to ourselves through each other.

And that was Jón's idea; he didn't understand where we were heading as a nation and he felt it would lead to something terrible or at least very boring. Jón has a phenomenal talent, an amazing ability to spread joy, to make people laugh. He loves doing it. And I simply was immediately drawn to his idea, the notion that we could create a "Best Party" that would parody existing political practices in Iceland. The name itself is ridiculous. Everybody promises everything: there is this false sense that you can tie your trust to a politician and that they will save you. We were suspicious of the genre of the political promise, its tone. We distrusted its scope. At the same time, I found all of this, the whole project, very entertaining and funny. If nothing

else we would have some fun.

But on a deeper level I thought it would immediately serve a purpose simply to spread some joy into an atmosphere that was so crippling and dry and fearful. There is a difference between this political joy — joy that fills the street, joy that means something — and some stupid, catchy commercial. Many Icelanders left or considered leaving the country at this time; we felt that this psychological atmosphere had to be changed. It was not as if anybody had died; there was an economic collapse, but people were framing it as if they had been through a holocaust or something. We wanted to show that this crisis was at once very real, but also something invented — something we had to believe in for it to threaten us.

**Tell us more about this atmosphere of catastrophe. What kinds of reactions did it generate in the public?**

Everybody immediately began to downsize, save, and think through things differently. The reduced opportunities were something very present and visible. But at the end of the day we still had lines at the Apple Store when the new iPad came out [*laughing*]. And at the same instant, people are screaming over the fact that we are raising taxes a little bit to be able to afford day care for the citizens of Reykjavik. It was, then, on some level a healthy change. Cheap growth is not good for anyone. It feels pleasant at the time, but it leaves society hollow and empty. One gets used to having it all, is if by magic. It creates a certain kind of greediness, a lazy greed that isn't even aware of itself. We needed to face the fact we couldn't keep on going forever taking and taking without contributing back. That is not a society. We were accustomed to the fact that we had handed over our power to some kind of political thing, some entity, that was just supposed to take care of us. Then, when it didn't, we were stupidly angry. This crisis showed us just how much we'd given up, just how much the boom had cost us. It wasn't free. And it was hurting us even before the crash.

**What is specific to Icelandic neoliberalism? What about the politics of the nation in the years leading up to the crisis?**

Well, the funny thing is, is that it was the same people over and over again. There was this one prime minister who was the mayor of Reykjavik before he became prime minister. He was a prominent figure in the privatization of the banks (in 1999-2000), which were once state-owned. That whole process was, to say the least, compromised. The government set up committees that had the appearance of legitimacy, but which were often simply staffed by friends of the parties in government. These assets were divvied up politically: one bank was handed over to friends of the Independent Party, another to friends of the Progressive Party, and so on. This propped up our system of coalition government by spreading out the “benefits” of governance. We were members of the European Economic Community, so we had regulations, but we

had very weak political and bureaucratic infrastructures, because many of the best overseers and regulators simply got hired by the banks themselves on the promise of higher salaries, bonuses, and so on. The regulators initially told them that there were instabilities in the system, but the political elite kept insisting that the regulators themselves simply didn't understand the complex structure of "new banking." They lacked "sophistication."

Of course, it turned out this banking was too sophisticated for the bankers themselves, that many of them simply had no idea what was going on [*laughing*]. But I think this played a big role in the crisis itself: the simple inability of people to admit that they didn't understand something, but also the use made by finance of this impression of sophistication. Nobody could admit to ignorance. Professional knowledge became a screen behind which there was a lot of manipulation, but also shame. We are in many ways raised to be smarter than the next person, to compete, and we often fear the admission of weakness. We want to avoid the shame of failure or error of failure. In this case, something personal like shame became political and public and very dangerous.

Truly ironic was the fact that just as the crisis was beginning our prime minister, Geir Haarde, was on a tour of the United States trying to convince people that the media coverage of the situation in Iceland was exaggerated. The banks, he said, were actually okay. And then they collapsed. There was simply no oversight. There were some warnings that came from abroad and some investigative journalists who felt that Iceland was a deck of cards waiting to fall. The prime minister, however, wrote all this off as jealousy, foreigners coveting the Icelandic miracle.

**Just as in the United States and Britain, financial services have constituted a high percentage of the new growth in Iceland in the last twenty years. The onset of the sovereign debt and currency crisis in 2007, however, has decisively ended this finance-based model of growth and with it any clear future prospects for growth in the country. Do you not think, Heiða, that it is time for countries like Britain and the United States, but also France and Iceland, to concede to their populations that the era of continuous growth has ended and that this is not the catastrophe it is thought to be? That there is life — perhaps not quite capitalist life — after growth?**

**How will your party on the national level deal with this question? Rather than continuously invoking the need to expand demand, might the party be interested in the idea of attempting to attune the population to an era of diminished expectations, and to see this not as disastrous loss, but as a kind of opportunity — a way of getting out of the growth-centric policies of the last thirty years and a return to a politics built around a new set of values?**

I think this is a very important question. That is one of the most important issues facing politics globally today. As I mentioned above, it is the expanding growth-centrism that has driven us to this breaking point in the first place. We as citizens

are demanding infinitely more and at the same time want to pay less and less for it. It doesn't add up. So what was and still is the key to what it is that we are doing is that we must see ourselves as servants to the life of our city. I believe that in order to be able to turn this growth train around we have to do it at a very micro level — each of us needs to take a good look at what we are demanding from our society and what we as citizens can do for ourselves.

**Though you've touched a little on this, could you speak to us a little about the formation of the Best Party?**

We have crashed and burned a lot in Iceland. We have our own little currency, our own little monopoly money. We are a nation of fisherman that export fish, so if everybody is buying seafood we're good; if not, things get scarce quickly. Ups and downs are parts of this dependency. It gives the people a certain mindset. We have had crashes and good times, but the financial crisis was on a large scale, very global and public.

Despite everything, however, maybe even because of this context, we have always been a nation of poets and writers, artists and musicians. However odd this might sound, the Best Party really has its origins in this tradition and in a love of creativity, and this was definitely a factor in Jón's desire to found the party. He considers himself an artist first and foremost and has been able to do phenomenal work. Artists are always wealthy, even if they never have any money. They run on some other fuel. Shouldn't we learn from this? Our group feels that artists in Icelandic culture have not been given the credibility and respect they deserve. For example, Halldór Laxness, one of our great novelists, was given a Nobel Prize in literature in 1955. When he arrived back in Reykjavik after having received the award people lined the shores to greet him, but there was a conspicuous absence of officials. This great author returned to Iceland greeted only by the people. He was a Communist, he had spent time in the Soviet Union, and he was frowned upon by those in power. So there was no official acknowledgement, even though he had received one of the highest awards of cultural excellence.

We have so many incidents in which great artists' achievements have gone ignored by officials. This shows us where a government's heart lies; it is a symptom of a much bigger problem having to do with the role of bureaucracy and boredom and money in government today. Our government's attention, especially in the last twenty years, has been reserved for the bankers. Why are we surprised when a system built around such priorities fails? A system that focuses on money becomes more and more like money itself.

Why not instead become more like art? Or music? This was something, from the beginning, that Jón wanted to highlight. What if power governed closer to art, if it learned from art? Essentially, Jón envisioned *Besti Flokkurinn* as a huge piece of art. Jón was a piece of performance art, an image of the falseness of today's politician. He took on the appearance of the smooth, power-hungry politician, the false smiles and



gestures, the greedy underbelly. He kissed babies. He would say that he was running for office because it was about time he got a raise in salary. And all the while, he didn't know what he was doing in terms of practical politics. He knew nothing about politics. He thought that we needed fifty members for a clear majority until I told him it was eight. He had no interest in politics at all. He thought of it as performance.

**Is it true that he had anarchist sympathies, but not anything in the way of an active political history?**

Jón was basically an old punk. He mostly read poetry at punk concerts. He's always seen himself as an anarchist; we actually describe *Besti Flokkurinn* as an "ancho-surrealist party." We googled it and as far as we can tell this configuration doesn't appear to exist, so we may have to trademark it [*laughing*]. Jón has always really been a surrealist, always very close to the tradition of surrealist art and poetry. So much of his work comes from a fear of boredom, fear of an everyday life without joy and surprises. He's just written a play that is going to be premiered in March. It's called "Hotel Volkswagen" and is about a former Nazi guard who is hiding away in Argentina at a hotel called the Hotel Volkswagen. I tried to read it — it made no sense at all, but it is really, really funny.

The emergence of what we might call "gag politics" — the Pirate Party in Germany, the Beer Lover's Party in Poland, and now *Besti Flokkurinn* in Iceland — arguably reflects not just the exhaustion of Western democracy's various political establishments, but the waning of an entire sensibility, of a mode of address long imagined as the condition for the possibility of legitimate political speech. This was, of course, the way of earnestness, the politician bound to transparency, authority, and universal promise. Though wit has always very subtly inflected the tone of modern politics in the West — think of Harold MacMillan or even Thatcher in England — the shift I am speaking to is that of a transition from one regime of meaning to another, a quantitative inflation that in some sense becomes a qualitative change. Wit was once thought necessary to decorate or fringe an oration, a rhetorical exception to the rule of plain speech; today, these parties seem, rather, to come from irony, to live and die by it. I wonder, Heiða, how you understand this phenomenon and what you think may be its possibilities and limits?

I ask this because it would be possible to comprehend irony today as the form, par excellence, of ideology: every advertisement or sitcom today begins at the border of its own existence as representation, tipping us off to its artificiality. What can protect *Besti Flokkurinn* from this satirical spiral, which leaves it in a place indistinguishable from the already self-parodying properties of the existing parties? In other words, what kind of power, today, is the joke and what do you see as its limits and possibilities? Is the joke — your party's promise to buy a new polar bear for Reykjavik's zoo — merely an electoral gag or a spirit which you imagine



**to inform the party from within, a new way of doing and thinking about politics for Iceland? What would this involve concretely? Is there a limit to the politics of irony?**

We started out not knowing if anybody would find this the least bit funny or if they'd get the underlying joke and the seriousness of purpose beneath it. We kept being asked everywhere by journalists, "Is this a joke?" And, of course, at the beginning it was! We were playing. We were mocking everything, making a mockery of a system that was itself a bad joke, a circus.

But we began to think there might be more, that there was this power in us and this possibility that we hadn't yet imagined. Everything had already started by the time we found out what we could be. We didn't know it beforehand. Because Jón was a stand-up comic he has this incredible ability to read a room, to sense what can and cannot be said, to intuit the mood of a room. I think our mandate changed out of this reading of rooms and this real sense of hunger for change amongst the population. There was pain and need in these people, even in their laughter. We had many ideas, but we relied on Jón's stand-up comedian sense of timing and experimentation to work through what we should and shouldn't do.

We started out very flamboyantly; he was promising goats for farmers and everything that he could think of. Our press conference was announced as happening in a place it wasn't. This was to capture people's attention and to get them talking. Then we slowly managed to add to what we were doing. Our first electoral lists were really just his friends. We phoned up all his friends and guilted them and tormented them into running [*laughing*]. When I first got to the party it was just a couple of his friends. So we needed to branch outwards and find people who could actually contribute politically. We started broadening our horizons. I phoned my friends. They talked to theirs. And before long we suddenly realized that we had something, that we were more than the sum of our intentions, that something political and necessary was being created. We were a set of values, not merely a joke or a punch line or a few flashy headlines. This was a remarkable feeling.

When we won, we were struggling just to maintain our energy and unity. Everyone was watching us, waiting for us to make mistakes. We had no idea how to run a municipal government. We had to learn, so to speak, on the run. Our opponents know how to play the game, they know the rules of the game — that political game that goes on behind the scenes to manipulate events in one's favor. We not only lacked technical knowledge about the system, but this secondary knowledge of the game. The temptation to play this game by their rules is immense. So we set up some rules for ourselves, some basic principles. We didn't want "them," and by this I mean this logic of the game and its players, to overtake and defeat us. We wanted to preserve a distance: to keep our heads and hearts intact. This is extremely difficult, to protect one's difference from the system. If you begin making choices on the basis of what you think the other political players are doing, suddenly all of your time vanishes and,

along with it, even one's correct intentions. Time gets lost in strategies.

Instead, we tried to ask ourselves again and again, without thinking about the consequences, what the best way to do something was. Are we remaining faithful to our values and focusing on the immediate task (rather than re-election)? If you let their rules shape what you do, they win, the system wins. It may seem obvious, but this is a big part of contemporary political culture. Everybody will tell you that you are doing something wrong, that things aren't done that way. Staying your course in such a context is incredibly difficult. So we built a cocoon around what we were doing. We joked to each other that everybody was happy and everybody was talking about how successful we were.

This mental separation is what has saved us to date. It is a principle of distance and it is a little psychotic. It is a question of playing, but not believing in the game or maybe making new rules while one's playing it. We have been able to focus on our project, to keep its spirit, which is something one can do only through work. It is an everyday work, keeping faith with this positive energy. We have never publicly insulted our opponents. We don't allow ourselves to get sucked into pettiness and hatred. People were so hungry for this positive approach, a politics without spite and pettiness. You may laugh at such an idea, but our smiles are different and have a different power than those of the politicians. Certain smiles have a power and a possibility that others don't: even something so tiny as a smile is political. So maintaining this positive energy is a project that most parties would entirely overlook. What has saved us is our sense of humor, our joy. Without it, I think, a politics is blind. Perhaps, we are practicing a politics of joy and comedy rather than one of irony.

**So in some ways it was a network, a shared space and way of life, before it was a set of explicit political commitments?**

Exactly. Yes. These were all people who had some kind of pre-existing connection to each other. We shared spaces or interests or jobs or friends. Our worlds were connected and intact. And we just started meeting up and talking. We just shifted our focus and energy a little. And from there the seriousness of the joke deepened. We were joking, but seriously. We recognized that so many people were feeling the same way, experiencing the same sense of dissatisfaction with Iceland's political system. Many of us had no prior connection to or interest in politics. But we were able to run a list which included musicians, artists, carpenters, teachers, as well as a prominent architect. These were people from a genuine range of sectors who had never been active before politically. This is really what allowed us to break through that first impression of unseriousness.

Once people got a sense for the characters of the people who were on the list it simply wasn't possible to continue believing it was a joke; it was clear that they could not do half as bad a job as the people already in power. They were not professional politicians; their character, some quality, became visible to people and made it possible

to trust them. Maybe it was the fact that they were just good, regular people. They lacked the stiffness of the politician. They were imperfect. Nobody, however, believed they could do worse. The whole environment politically was like that of a circus. In the last four years we had had four mayors in Reykjavik. Everything was up in the air, people were stabbing each other in the back. One mayor ended up in an insane asylum; his mental soundness was in question. It was a circus. Politics had lost every last trace of dignity and authority.

Of course, we had to build the trust of the voters, but the context and the nature of our experiment made it much easier to do this than it might in other circumstances. The bar was set very low [*laughing*]. Jón portrayed himself in the beginning as this exaggerated, surreal character, and some of what he did left you wondering if he was joking or not. But what one could not doubt was his sincerity. These things, even today, matter; maybe they matter more than ever. Maybe sincerity isn't old-fashioned at all. In his ambiguity, one never lost sight of the fact that he loves the city and that he loves what he does. This too is rare today: he loves what he does. How many politicians love what they do? And when they do, one almost gets worried, because what is it about what they are doing that they love? The money? The prestige? For Jón, this love of his life and work made it easier for people to trust him. He wasn't just another politician.

One of the decisive moments in the campaign, one which changed the way many perceived us, came when one of the leading newspapers in Reykjavik carried articles written by each of the campaigning leaders describing their platforms and viewpoints. Most candidates simply stayed within the domain of the normal dry, political material. They promised things. They addressed the city's "problems." Jón's article, however, was just incredibly beautiful. I actually wept when I read it. It was just him telling the story of what it meant for him to grow up in Reykjavik, and how he loved the city and its people. He wrote about what it meant to experience a first heartbreak in the city or how it felt to be a lonely teenager in Iceland in the 1980s. There was a humanity to the words he wrote.

It is really important to emphasize that we would have very likely given up the whole thing had we sensed that the other parties were willing to learn from what we were doing or gave some indication that they were listening. But these articles showed very clearly that they were still promising all of the old banalities. Growth, jobs, blah, blah, blah. They'd learned nothing from the crisis! And they had not even noticed that an old way of doing politics was dying, that they were already dead. The strange thing about the whole experience is how easy it was. We had nothing. We had no money. No experience. We ran no ads in the paper and no ads on the television. We ran a couple of radio ads. We did buy a few personal ads in which we ironically promised readers "brighter futures." I think our ad budget was around one hundred dollars. We also used social media extensively. Perhaps our most successful promotion was the video we produced. It went viral and we were suddenly getting calls from the *New York Times*.

What mattered, then, was that there was something immediately believable about Jón. He's known to Icelanders, not only through his art and comedy, but personally, literally, on the level of friends and acquaintances. He has a huge network of acquaintances and this itself can't be underestimated.

If we had to reduce our objectives to four master concepts I would say: culture, nature, humanity, and peace — that is what we have set as our four pillars. But that in itself is not very descriptive of what it is that we stand for. We are a group of people who came together to do what we can to make things a little brighter, in every sense of the word. So I would say that humor is one of the key elements that keeps us together and focused. That being said, most of the people who make up the party are artists, so our focus on cultural issues and the importance of cultural aspects in society is very important to us, as well as bringing a more human, no-bullshit attitude towards solving problems that are at hand.

**Can you speak a little about some of the challenges that you have encountered after winning the mayoralty in Reykjavik?**

The main challenge has simply been to ensure we actually continue to exist. The pressures were so intense and the expectations so high that we had to be sure that people didn't simply give up and leave the party. We knew that there would be a moment when expectation became reality, when we would need to begin to deliver on our promises. This was a difficult moment, that moment after the momentum of campaigning when you are expected to simply govern. Suddenly, we had to tackle real issues, very present, very necessary issues.

For example, we have a geothermal power plant in Reykjavik that the city owns. It's run by a board of directors. For many years, the board had been selected wholly on political criteria, which meant that the directors had absolutely no idea how to run a power plant. It was on the verge of insolvency; all of this technology and technological know-how were there, but were not being maximized. So we advocated to replace this politically selected board with people who were technologically and professionally competent. We refinanced its loans as well. One of the conditions for refinancing this loan was that changes would be made to the hiring practices of the plant. And so we had to let go some of the employees who worked at the plant — including my father! Let's just say I wasn't very popular that Christmas [*laughing*].

But this is a real problem for Iceland. We are a tiny nation and nepotism is everywhere. People put their fathers and uncles in positions all over the place. It is nepotism and malpractice to death. I could probably have saved my father's job. But I wanted to create a different kind of political culture. Needless staffing public services won't get us anywhere. One can't just ignore these issues and rest content in the fact that one's own political sensibility opposes downscaling.

In another example, we were forced to downscale the school system and make cuts to it. In any given neighborhood one might have a kindergarten, a primary

school, a high school, and an afterschool program, and each had a separate overhead. Keep in mind that the crisis had really erased our budget (one big outcome of the financial crisis for civic governments: a huge decline in available tax revenue. In this respect, Reykjavik was no different from other cities on the planet). What were we to do? So we tried to combine these different services creatively in the same space. But suggesting this was like moving a mountain. We were given no help from the inside. The school system was wholly opposed to these changes. The power plant was something people could see as a technical issue. But this was different: it hit a social nerve, one very close to home. Not our schools! People would scream at us: “But what about the children! We must think about the children!” [laughing]. But there was no erasing the crash. The crash was an event, something real, something effective in a real, personal way. It changed our circumstances. So we tried to make choices which were intelligent without giving into the resignation of austerity. Just giving money to schools will not create better outcomes, even if it might make us feel good to do so. Sometimes reducing overhead is thinking about the children. Sometimes a new, creative arrangement must be imagined that doesn’t obey the old conversations.

Everyone today, it seems to me, “thinks outside the box.” No one is either merely left or right, but claims a middle ground that is ostensibly more sophisticated, measured, and yet at the same time more radical and inventive than the existing poles. Corporations and banks frame their activities as little more than gestures of nonconformity, innovation, and research. Politicians invoke a “third way” somewhere between socialism and unmitigated free-market policies, not less or more government, but “smart government.” Individuals increasingly frame themselves politically as “independents.” John McCain was “the maverick”; Sarah Palin, “the rogue.” The impression one gets is of a great profusion of knowledge and critique. Yet these are really clichés, their claims to newness often little more than a predictable return to what are essentially Victorian economic policies. In other words, what passes for a position beyond the political spectrum almost always finds itself very predictably tethered to and by it: what passes for an end to politics merely perpetuates it.

How does the Besti Flokkurinn fit into this picture? Does it articulate itself according to this common centrist or third-way ideology or does it make an attempt to clearly demarcate its policies as leftist/social democratic/anarchist/etc.? What do left politics look like in a country like Iceland in a global context in which capital controls, regulated finance, management of the business cycle, mixed economies, even the welfare state itself appear handcuffed by neoliberal globalization? Is the objective of the Best Party to invent a politics able to survive this period or one built to actually transcend these conditions? Is this latter option even possible?

We have never wanted anyone to box us in such a way, but Jón describes himself as

a liberal socialist, and we have described the party, as mentioned above, as anarcho-surrealist. We genuinely believe that the left and right struggle is a politics of the past — at least in Iceland anyways — with this being due mostly to the fact that class struggles don't apply here to the same extent that they used to. The debate over the welfare state, as well, is not very lively — it is more or less accepted that there should at least be a minimal social net but that gets us to the point I made earlier about a certain culture of taking. Have we gone too far? Has the political elite transformed us into takers that want easy answers and infinite, easy growth? I believe it is very important to start tackling these issues. We need to turn the political debate around so that we make people more responsible for their society and their own future.

### **So where is the Party going from here, Heiða?**

We're working towards next year's national election. We've formed a party called "The Brighter Future." We would often say: "Do you want a Brighter Future or do you want to destroy Reykjavik?" We offered this ironic choice between perfection and destruction. At this point, the Best Party is less a political party than it is a state of mind. I am the only full-time employee. So we needed to invent a formal infrastructure for a party that could exist on a national level. We don't want to formalize it to the point where this spirit is lost, but just enough to make our work on a national level possible. We don't want to sacrifice the sense that we all have that this is an adventure. To function on a national level, however, we will need a clear platform and a specific stance on a whole set of global issues. You can skip them on the municipal level. You don't really need an opinion on the European Union. We'll be running in the parliamentary election in April 2013 — an election that could come even earlier. And we hope to win.





## **Finance Depends on Resistance, Finance is Resistance, and Anyway, Resistance is Futile**

**Max Haiven**

Occupy Wall Street and the dawning of worldwide anti-austerity movements have occasioned a consideration of the economic and political power of financial speculation and raised the question of how it might be resisted. This essay argues that the ideas of both "finance" and "resistance," while convenient, demand deeper reflection. Specifically, we cannot afford to address finance merely as a form of economic discipline and power exercised "from above" and limit our understanding of financial agency to the hijinks of insufferably smug banking executives. Instead, I suggest we need to recognize financial power as intimately stitched into everyday life and embracing the entire globe. Finance relies on a highly demotic mode of agency that demands that individuals become highly competent (or, perhaps more accurately, usefully incompetent) financial actors. In understanding finance's dynamism in this way we can deepen our understanding of finance as a distinct social force and as an essential, if crisis-prone, aspect of capitalist accumulation. All the better to overcome it and reclaim the future from the terror of endless "speculation."

First I suggest that finance intimately depends on resistance (predominantly as mediated by the state) in order to put critical limits on this aspect of accumulation, for its own good. Second, I argue that we can understand non-financiers' engagements with finance (through mortgages, debt and other modes) as flawed forms of resistance to the material conditions of life under neoliberalism. Finally, I question the term "resistance," arguing both that, today, finance is a critical element of a form of capital that works by anticipating and co-opting resistance, and that the time for "resistance" as such is long past — we need to create more radical material and discursive openings toward a world beyond capitalism if we are to challenge finance — and the system of which it is a part — in any meaningful way.

### **Finance Depends on Resistance**

Since the 2008 financial "meltdown," finance as a distinct economic force has received

a great deal of attention, most of it negative. Emblematized by Wall Street and its villainous and arrogant inhabitants, finance, though nebulous and ill-defined, looms large in the popular imagination. The scandalous government bailouts bestowed upon financial firms drew the ire of nearly everyone (including many financial insiders), leading to a broad castigation of financiers' "greed" and corruption. And while there is a great deal of merit and importance to understandings of the crisis that focus on the actions of a shadowy financial oligarchy who write (then break) their own rules and toy with the fates of millions of people through increasingly transcendental financial acrobatics, such approaches risk missing the broader picture and satisfying themselves with tepid regulatory solutions which, even in the unlikely event they were effectively implemented, would fail to arrest the broader system of capitalist exploitation, of which finance is just one (albeit necessary) component.

Finance is an amorphous entity. It is often defined by the so-called "FIRE" industries — finance (as in stock markets, banking, and investments), insurance, and real-estate — it is likely better described today as a set of tendencies or processes within multiple levels of capitalist organization, active on the level of production (in terms of the influence of shareholders and "markets" over manufacturing corporations and labor process), consumption (in terms of access to consumer credit, etc.) and reproduction (in terms of mortgages, student loans, and international debt). Over the past 40 years, finance has seeped well beyond the borders of a distinct field of accumulation and today saturates (and enables) a form of globalizing hyper-capitalism and resonates in its cultural and social registers. While personal, institutional, corporate and national levels of debt may have, at certain times and certain places, been as profound as they are today, never before have they been so networked and integrated. While cycles of financial speculation have, periodically, overshadowed whole economies, never before have speculative imperatives been so pervasive. While financial speculation has, at various times, attracted amateurs and laypeople, today it embraces those fortunate enough to have invested retirement savings or who see their houses as a store of wealth. For others, a marketized lifeline of debt and credit enfold even the poor within a financialized matrix, as was so vividly dramatized in the sub-prime loan debacle. And while finance has always been a complicated and almost necromantic set of specialized practices, today those practices are enabled, accelerated, and driven into new heights of abstraction by a combination of advanced mathematics, new computing and networking technologies, and a global financial infrastructure where the sun never sets on the world's intertwined stock markets (let alone the innumerable digitized financial operations that occur outside of these theatres of speculation). "Financialization," then, refers not only to the growing power of speculative capital within the global economy, but to the more profound and troubling creep of financial "logics," rhetorics, and imperatives into multiple fields of social and economic life.

For all the chaos it causes, all the massive abnormalities and volatilities it induces in the global economy, finance is an essential ingredient of capitalist accumulation,

but it is only one ingredient. Financial speculation (insufficiently) addresses a key contradiction in capitalism: the ruling class must both compete and cooperate for the system to work.<sup>1</sup> Accumulation is driven, ultimately, by capitalist actors: competitive individuals and firms seeking to maximize profit. This is what stimulates the pathological “innovation” of new forms of exploitation and drives the system’s socially destructive urge for the ever greater extraction of surplus value. But as a social force based on the expropriation of value from a much larger underclass, capital must develop internal mechanisms by which capitalists can pool their resources and work together for the common good of their class and of the economic system of which they are the agents and beneficiaries. Often this cooperation takes the forms of cartels, conspiracies and other such skullduggery, but these forms of capitalist cooperation often undermine the competitive necessities of their class and, if left unchecked, can lead to a breakdown in the system as an oligarchy simply crushes or gobbles up any market innovations, rendering the system fatally static.<sup>2</sup> Another, more complex but effective means of inter-capitalist cooperation is the state (or at least one aspect of the state, as we shall see in a moment) which can, through taxation, incentives, and laws encourage capitalists to invest in collective projects and mitigate the risk of monopolies and cartelization.<sup>3</sup> Of course the state is a complex social mechanism: it is an inexact form of social power, it is expensive, and it is susceptible to control by other forces (like workers). Another mechanism for cooperation is the complex sphere of finance, including the joint-stock limited liability corporation, stock markets and bourses, insurance firms, banking houses, central banks, and the like.

These financial mechanisms allow for a few things. First, they allow many capitalists to pool vast quantities of resources for risky or long-term ventures that no single capitalist would or could go at alone. For instance, the first corporations were formed to exploit maritime colonialism, sharing the risk of dangerous exploratory sea voyages, slave-taking, and settlement among hundreds or sometimes thousands of individual investors. Another example might be the construction of railways, canals, telecommunications lines or other huge acts of “civil” infrastructure essential to the expansion of capitalist interests, or similarly the establishment of banks and insurance houses which require a great deal of capital. These ventures are essential to the expansion of capital in the sense that they extend capitalist accumulation both spatially and temporally and render it more efficient. Finance, as a sphere, allows capitalists to cooperate on the basis of their individual profit motive, thus avoiding the immediate necessity of more obvious forms of collusion, cartelization, or government intervention that might diminish the competitive idiom that the system relies upon for dynamism. It also provides (when it works) a reliable rate of profitability that is both high enough to encourage capitalists to invest and low enough to ensure that some capitalists still keep up with the business of the exploitation of labor.

Second, finance allows for long-term profiteering by offering capitalists credit or what we now call “venture capital” to pursue projects that may take years to

come to profitable fruition. For instance, while ultimately extremely profitable, the construction of a mine or the development of new communication or industrial technologies take time and do not afford returns quickly enough to entice most capitalist investors. Finance allows the capitalist class as a whole to advance money to individual capitalists whose ventures will, eventually, benefit the system as a whole and commodify another aspect of the world or of social relations (in terms of new resource “inputs” derived from the mine, or new technologies of exploitation). Through the magic of interest, lending institutions and individual investors can afford to provide many more capitalists with funds than will ever succeed: the interest (at least theoretically) covers the costs of the failure of some enterprises and provides incentive for investment. Hence finance allows for a much more dynamic capitalist economy and encourages the expansion of capitalist accumulation into new spheres of social life as “entrepreneurs” seek to commodify more aspects of human existence. For instance, the frantic (and ultimately successful) rush to commodify the Internet was facilitated by the rise of the so-called dot-com bubble which saw financial markets make speculative investments in a multitude of tiny, fly-by-night firms with “good ideas.” While most of these ideas would never come to fruition, the sphere of finance afforded the possibility for capital to attempt tens of thousands of strategies of commodification, knowing full well that only a handful (Amazon, Yahoo, etc.) would succeed, but that this success would make up for the capital invested in the legions of failures. Of course, this strategy backfired in the form of the “irrational exuberance” that characterized the “bubble” and eventually saw it burst in 2001 but more on that in a moment.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, finance allows for the spatialization and internationalization of capital. The system of currency exchanges, credit notes, central banks, and other financial institutions allows for various forms of foreign investment, as well as the mobility of capital’s power, for instance, to move manufacturing plants to China, or to outsource call centers to India, or to ship toxic waste to Ghana. Most of the European colonization of the globe was a public-private partnership and ran on the transnational exchange of state-issued credit notes and through government-chartered joint-stock corporations (like the Hudson’s Bay Company, or the East India Company).<sup>5</sup> David Harvey, for one, has lucidly explicated the spatial dimension of financial circulation in his singular *Limits to Capital*.<sup>6</sup> Finance allows capital to play nation-states and their populations against one another, shifting production between zones and keeping wages, regulations, and working conditions “business-friendly.”<sup>7</sup> Finance also affords capital an incredibly powerful lever of power over indebted states who depend on the sale of government bonds for economic vitality and who, today, are at the mercy of transnational currency markets and stock indexes as never before (ironically, the same markets that states had to “bail out” after the 2008 crisis).<sup>8</sup>

These are three of the key systemic roles finance capital plays in capitalist accumulation, but another important function, it must be added, is its propensity for

crisis. Because finance is based on the “commodification of the future” — the selling of future risk as a present-day commodity — it is fundamentally volatile. This is not merely because the future is, by definition, uncertain. It is because, inevitably, the profitability of financial speculation comes to outpace the (immediate) profitability of the old-fashioned forms of capitalist exploitation on which the financial sector speculates. Speculative bubbles grow and grow and, while finance essentially exists to help capitalists cooperate, capitalists increasingly compete to invest their ill-begotten wealth in ever more lucrative, if dubious concerns.<sup>9</sup> Small capitalists and even wealthy workers start plugging their money into financial speculation, and banks and financial houses become vastly inflated and eagerly spin out new financial “products” to sell. The results are well known, from tulip bulbs to dot-coms to sub-prime-based credit-default swaps. Financial wealth is always a claim on future productivity, but when the credibility of that claim comes into question the financial sector grinds to a halt and securities shed value, causing panic. Investors stop buying, or, en masse, seek to trade their speculative certificates for more seemingly “real” stores of value (eg. gold, agricultural commodities, cash). The markets come to a sickening halt, and many are ruined as they realize their paper investments are worthless for lack of demand.

But we should not deceive ourselves; the inevitable (cyclical) financial crisis is no accident. It has happened time and again, with much the same outcome: it allows for a partial restructuring of capitalist social relations. It is a “reset” button as it were that (ideally) sweeps away the accumulated contradictions since the previous crisis and allows capital, for instance, to demand massive changes to state economic policy and both to break up large integrated firms and to allow smaller firms to be gobbled up by larger.<sup>10</sup> And, as we have seen in the current crisis, it allows capital to reclaim wealth fought for and won by the working class: the foreclosure of homes, the pulverization of the welfare state, the attack on wages, the assault on workers rights.<sup>11</sup> This sort of “corrective” restructuring has been the aftermath of financial crises time and again.<sup>12</sup> Because capitalism is fundamentally based on contradictions, financial crises, in a way, regulate the inherent systemic crisis by limiting its effects to the particular sphere of finance. In the aftermath of such crises, capital has the opportunity to reregulate itself. The Keynesian solution to the Great Depression, or the disastrous austerity solution to our own “Great Recession,” are means by which the lines of policy and practice can be redrawn to afford the perpetuation of capital accumulation, at least until the contradictions once again accumulate to such an extent that crisis is inevitable.

Now the important thing for our purposes is that this cycle of financial accumulation depends, fundamentally, on “resistance.”

First, finance exists in response to resistance. The financial sphere emerges as capitalists seek to share risk collectively and to collaborate as a class, and they do so because they feel under threat. The most recent cycle of financialization, which dates roughly to the 1970s, was a direct capitalist response to the gains of labor in the global



North in the postwar period. Finance facilitated the globalization of manufacturing, foreign direct investment, the building of industrial and intensive agricultural infrastructure in the Third World, and the transportation of secondary and tertiary production to off-shore factories and sweatshops in order to undermine the collective power of Northern workers and avoid state regulation. Concomitantly, this expansion of finance was a response to anticolonial struggles that had largely destroyed the older, more formal colonial relations in the wake of the Second World War. Neocolonialism was, of course, leveraged largely through foreign direct investment and the politics of debt, with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as key brokers, and “globalization” emerged as a capitalist response to the Keynesian mediation of Northern workers’ struggles. So finance is, in effect, a means by which capital responds to people’s “resistance” by rendering capital more fluid and mobile, thus circumventing local forms of solidarity and struggle, or transforming these into rivalry and competition with other communities, societies, and nations.

It should be noted that this form of mobility fundamentally depends on the state. Finance operates as a global force by playing nation-states, as economic units, against one another, forcing them to compete for investment (or not to lose investment) by repressing workers’ and social struggles, lowering trade tariffs, eviscerating labor and environmental regulations, cutting taxes, privatizing state services, and proving to “the market” that they are “open for business,” their populations be damned.<sup>13</sup> But finance also relies, fundamentally, on other state mechanisms. For one, it often demands that states either invest in, rent, or take the risk for large infrastructure projects like dams, pipelines, railways, canals and the like. Finance cannot operate without the state as, at once (ironically) both (a) the single largest and (b) the most powerless partner in many ventures. Indeed, the tax breaks and rebates offered to lure global companies to local markets must also be seen as state “investments,” in the sense they advance monetary wealth in return for prospective future returns (in terms of Neoclassical models of “economic development”: jobs, future tax and royalty revenues, etc.). Finance also relies on states to develop and maintain firm currencies (supported by foreign reserves) and strong if ultimately pliable central banks, and to gyroscopically regulate local and global financial markets through monetary policy and oversight of the banking system.<sup>14</sup> And, fundamentally (libertarian fantasies aside), finance utterly depends on governments to regulate financial behavior: that is, finance cannot operate reliably (at least not on any scale) except where a state provides securities commissions, legal mechanisms to make sure people pay their debts, and forms of government intervention that mitigate utter monopolies, insider trading, cartelization, and financial bubbles.<sup>15</sup> So finance relies fundamentally on state-mediated form of resistance to its own power.

Now what is key here is that the state is not merely the creation of capital; it is also a site of political and class struggle, and this is why it can fulfill its particular role.<sup>16</sup> It is resistance to capitalist accumulation that compels state governments to develop

the regulatory frameworks that are, ironically, essential to finance's perpetuation. Postcolonial governments did not take out massive loans to build hydroelectric dams merely because international markets told them to do so. They did so in part to meet the demands of their populations for autonomy, prosperity, self-directed modernization and national self-determination. Electrification was supposed to facilitate popular projects of industrialization and economic diversification and hence national autonomy and empowerment. Similarly, successive United States governments established that country's central regulatory framework for finance not merely because they thought it was a good idea, but because they were worried that the perverse and incestuous world of finance would, left to its own devices, render society so unequal and unstable that it would fan the flames of discontent into a popular anti-capitalist revolt.<sup>17</sup> The complicated system of state-backed mortgage companies and laws regulating real-estate financing in many developed countries can likewise be read as a mediated form of resistance to the commodification of the basic need of shelter. They are the residue of struggles against homelessness and rampant profiteering in the first half of the 20th century that, if left unmet, would have threatened a systemic crisis. These examples illustrate that finance relies on the state to transform people's "resistance" to exploitation into forms of regulation and investment that are essential to finance's (and capitalism's) perpetuation.

The relationship between state, finance and resistance is a deeply complex and fraught one, constantly changing and always unique to place and time. But it is a fundamental relation of capitalism, and it hinges on the mediation of "resistance." Left to its own devices without any regulation or resistance, finance would do one of two things. Either it would collapse, succumbing to the drive to compete as capitalists lie, cheat, steal, and otherwise abuse one another's trust, or it would succeed and destroy the social world. In the first case, it is important to note that finance depends on trust and credit between capitalist actors.<sup>18</sup> It is a system based on "promissory notes": agreements to pay in the future. But if capitalists do not pay their debts, or issue notes that vastly exceed their ability to repay, or sell multiple copies of the same note, or otherwise cheat or lie, the system of trust falls apart (in actuality, these are all functional aspects of the financial system, in moderation). State regulation, the formalization of national currencies and central-bank notes, and the establishment of a regulated banking system are all essential to make sure finance's motive force (inter-capitalist competition) doesn't run too far away with itself.

In the second case, even in the purely hypothetical situation that finance could actually regulate itself without a state, it would do so at the expense of the social world on which it, fundamentally, depends. Financial capital would simply buy up everything and render it speculative, aggravating the already salient contradiction in capitalism between actual value and market price. Finance would value (and, hence, organize) social production and social goods based on their speculative returns, rather than social need. This is happening, to a certain extent, in today's global food

markets where the vast majority of basic cereals are bought and sold long before the seeds are in the ground, thanks to the trade in commodities futures and derivatives.<sup>19</sup> The result has been a massive spike in global food prices as financial capital flees more “abstract” securities (like speculative information technology, credit-default swaps, etc.) and seeks to shore up portfolios in more “material” investments (food, gold, energy, etc.). In response to resistance, states have considered stepping in and regulating (or have at least complained about) global food prices for fear of riots and mass starvation.<sup>20</sup> So far, however, responses to the crisis have tended to gravitate towards subsidies, foreign aid and biotech research (at the public expense), rather than meaningful regulation.<sup>21</sup>

All of this is to say that we should not hold up “resistance” as the antithesis of finance. Finance is an essential element of capitalist accumulation that exists part and parcel of “resistance” to the system. By investigating the dialectical relationship between resistance and finance we can shed more light on this perplexing aspect of accumulation. It should be remembered that Keynesianism was, for all intents and purposes, a means by which the state translated the class antagonisms of “resistance” to finance capital of the 1920s and 1930s into the stability of the postwar “compromise” of the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the best that can be said about the measures being formulated today to regulate finance by the G20 countries, is that they represent efforts to “resist” finance “for its own good.” Tepid and meager regulatory strategies such as the nominal “Tobin Tax” on transnational financial transactions or new controls on derivatives (shot through with loopholes) will do practically nothing to alter the global capitalist dynamic of exploitation of which finance is an important component and manifestation. Tragically, the vast majority of the Left has chosen to go along with this agenda and delight in recommending novel ways state governments should save capitalism from itself, rather than mobilizing to capsize the system at among its most structurally unbalanced moments.

### **Finance is Resistance**

The other problem with posing finance and resistance as opposites is that it cedes agency to finance. “Resistance” implies that the active and initial force in the relationship belongs to capital. In so doing, we risk rehearsing a disastrous tendency in Marxist criticism that ascribes agency to (and indeed infatuates itself with) the machinations of the capitalist economy, rather than the ingenuity, creativity and constituent power of those whose energies capital seeks to subsume.<sup>23</sup> Capital is, as Autonomist critics and others do not tire of pointing out, always already a *response* to the power of its “other” (the working class, the multitude, or whatever we want to call it).<sup>24</sup> Keeping this in mind focuses our attention, as critics, on how people make meaning and social life as active subjects, rather than passive slaves to the system of which they are a part. Unfortunately, the recent financial crisis has been an opportunity for bad theoretical habits in Marxist criticism to resurface.

My suggestion here is that we take up the most recent round of finance as based, in part, in the resistance of working people to capital. It's not a very promising form of resistance, at least in terms of contributing to a brighter future. Since the Second World War, people and constituencies have embraced finance in multiple ways as a means to gain a tragic and ironic agency over the material conditions of their lives, as imposed by capital.<sup>25</sup>

For instance, let us return to the above example of postcolonial governments taking out IMF-/WB-brokered loans to build dams and other forms of civil infrastructure. In hindsight, many would agree this was a misstep, and the historical record proves that, very often, these projects were not "freely" chosen but coerced in various nefarious ways.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, we should not dismiss the hope and excitement these projects evoked as icons of independent national agency and non-Western modernization. As Bret Benjamin illustrates, revolutionary figures of the Third World resistance engaged with transnational finance as a form of resistance to formal colonialism, as a strategy towards autonomous national agency.<sup>27</sup> While this might have been a tragic and ironic miscalculation, we should not discount this defining moment of postwar global political economy: finance here appeared as a means to break free of colonial relations, or at least renegotiate them on different terms — at least in the absence of duly deserved reparations from colonizing countries, and in the absence of indigenous forms of modernized manufacturing, scientific and technological infrastructure and expertise.

Similarly, in the global North, since the early 1980s the working class embraced everyday "financialization" as a form of resistance to neoliberalism and capitalist culture. In the postwar period, home ownership became the key means to social mobility in "the good society." The embrace of mortgages in North America and Western Europe was a significant departure from a pre-war wariness of debt and credit.<sup>28</sup> While Keynesianism offered higher wages and a welfare state, it depended on the patriarchal home (emblemized by the mortgaged suburban domicile) as its basic unit of social and economic life.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the owned patriarchal home was held up as a shared signpost, a "dream image" or myth within Western national imaginaries.<sup>30</sup> A bank mortgage and other forms of "good debt" became seen less as a form of emasculating dependency and more as the marker of full adult masculinized agency and subjectivity. Indeed, even in a pre-neoliberal world the home was understood to be the family's future, a reserve of ever-increasing value that one could pass on to one's children and whose value could be borrowed against in the case of emergencies.<sup>31</sup> This was, of course, part and parcel of the destruction of spatial forms of working class solidarity based in dense urban communities or the shared experience of tenancy. As Ursula Huws has noted, home ownership became one of the key means of encouraging workers to tether their hopes and dreams to the capitalist marketplace and to define economic and social gender norms in the postwar period.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, we should never tire of pointing out that even in the supposed “Golden Age,” the middle class was largely aspirational and a completely rigged game. Individualized consumer lifestyles depended on the neocolonial exploitation of the “third world,” huge racialized underclasses (with virtually no access to debt or credit), and the systematic exploitation of women’s reproductive labor in the home and the market. It also depended on a deep cultural conservatism enforced by homophobic terrorism and what we now understand to be completely unsustainable ecological practices, including the mass exploitation of fossil fuels, the proliferation of toxic chemicals and plastics, and the mass production of commodities and their subsequent waste. While capital may have been able to buy off a section of the working class (particularly those whom it valued in white-collar, managerial, and professional positions), there was (and is) no way to extend this “prosperity” to more than a fraction of the world’s population, though this promise was (and is) among the key justifications for capitalism.<sup>33</sup> As seemingly senile (former) New Left critics clamor about for a return to this “Golden Age,” let’s recall that it did not provide enough of a sense of social security, equality, or sustainability to entice even the first generation of middle class youth. It was this generation, born to relative prosperity, who, in the late 60s and early 70s, developed whole new repertoires of resistance to demand a world beyond the turgid and unjust global condition of their ostensibly gilded epoch.<sup>34</sup>

By the mid-70s neoliberalism had taken hold and finance entered everyday life as never before. The global restructuring of manufacturing and the erosion of the welfare state and state regulation of capital was the harbinger of a decline in real wages that has continued unabated since that time.<sup>35</sup> Houses as a store of value and a privatized means of personal economic security have become ever more important, especially as the costs of health, education and other formerly socialized services have skyrocketed. Student debt, the proliferation of credit cards, the privatization of insurance, and the transition from state pensions to private equity have all marked the transition to a “financialized age” where the financial sector is integrated into everyday life in insidious new ways.<sup>36</sup> A sustained effort to privatize old-age security has led to the investment of pension funds in higher-yielding investments, ironically driving the financial urge to globalization, outsourcing and the “externalization” of corporate (social and environmental) costs.<sup>37</sup> And the reckless pursuit of militarized consumer capitalism has so depleted global energy supplies that rising oil prices threaten to cause massive inflation in a world where almost all products (including necessities like food) are shipped tremendous distances to take advantage of geopolitical differentials in labor and environmental regulation. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the stake of people in their houses as a source of future stability and wealth has contributed to the escalation of housing prices, forcing deeper and deeper mortgages for new home buyers (and skyrocketing profits for banks and other mortgage-issuers). But it is critical to note that, though they had few other options, working people embraced finance as a form of *resistance* to the economic



realities of neoliberal restructuring. For those denied their due under the postwar compromise, borrowing became a highly individualized means of valorization. While many might have preferred to see people rise up in rebellion against the system, personal debt became the means by which people claimed their share of social wealth as capital clawed back the gains people had made in the postwar period.

Let's take, for example, the fateful "sub-prime" loan crisis.<sup>38</sup> The neoliberal assault on government regulations led to loopholes in the byzantine mortgage financing system in the United States which allowed banks and independent mortgage brokers to offer home loans to "dubious" borrowers. Sensationally, these borrowers have been termed "NINJAs" (no income, no job or assets), but in reality the "sub-prime" market was made up of a wide variety of borrowers including those who did have jobs and assets but who, for one reason or another, needed to draw new loans on their homes (to pay, for instance, for costly medical procedures or college tuition fees). The banks, brokers, regulators and borrowers all believed (whether out of cynicism, economic "illiteracy," or willful ignorance) that the trend towards rising house prices would continue indefinitely and offset the massive costs of interest on these highly volatile loans. The loans were, in turn, bundled and sold to banks, based on the seemingly reasonable claim that, regardless of how dubious the borrower, the collateral of the mortgaged house in question would mitigate the risk of the loan. The possibility of systemic failure — that a great many "NINJAs" might fail to meet their payments precipitating a wave of foreclosures and, subsequently, plummeting home prices (due to banks or other mortgage holders competing to sell off the assets they foreclosed) — was occluded from sight by a combination of factors. For one, in response to "resistance" to capitalist social devastation leading up to the Great Depression, and in an effort to encourage home-ownership as a privatized means to social stability, the US government had developed semi-independent financial corporations (Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac) and a series of regulatory frameworks to "guarantee" mortgages. These had the effect of mitigating the risks to private banks without totally "socializing" the housing market (i.e. putting it in government hands, which would ostensibly kill competition and attenuate the ever-escalating value of homes on which the US economy was increasingly dependent). While everyone knew that, theoretically, this "financial safety net" would not be able to sustain a wholesale collapse in the housing sector, few brokers or banks feared such a situation would occur. They were hubristic (and correct) in their assumption that the US mortgage market would be maintained at all costs by the US government for fear of the social devastation mass evictions and foreclosures would cause, and for fear that plummeting housing prices would demolish Americans' individualized stores of wealth, leaving them reliant on the state for social services (something the state could ill afford after years of neoliberal cuts). Second, the systemic risk inherent to providing dubious mortgages to America's urban poor disappeared into the ether of financial speculation as these mortgages were split up, rebundled with others, and sold to banks, pension funds and other investors as



complex but seemingly reliable new financial securities. These, in turn, became split up and rebundled into portfolios, bank holdings, and became collateral for yet more loans, insurance agreements and derivative contracts.<sup>39</sup> Like the tiny globules of crude oil churning about in the Gulf Coast even now, these “toxic” mortgage assets became lost in and inseparable from the tempest of the global market.

For our purposes, it should be noted that the entire sub-prime market was based on offering “NINJA” borrowers a chance for privatized upward class mobility through the lure of home ownership. One way of reading this situation is to suggest that low-income workers accepted the loans as a form of resistance to their material conditions. Indeed, many did so because, even if their homes were foreclosed, things could not get much worse: they already, after all, had virtually no assets to lose. Sub-prime loans depended to a large extent on the myth of the universality of the middle class and the idea of financialized independence where sub-prime mortgages offered borrowers what seemed to be a key to economic security, health, education and a fair share of social wealth. This, especially for the largely racialized urban populations that were the prime target of this form of extortion, might be read as a form of resistance to a neoliberal culture of utter abandonment and the vaporization of social security and public space.<sup>40</sup> It also relied on the tragic optimism of the American Dream that informed borrowers that brighter days were always on the horizon for those who work hard and take individualistic control of their lives. It was within this individualistic frame that taking out an extortionary mortgage with a rapidly escalating interest rate could be justified as a form of resistance for the economically marginalized (that is, when the terms of the mortgage were even disclosed by the mortgage sales representative, which was routinely not the case). We are obliged to recognize the savvy motivations that animated people’s engagement with sub-prime finance and not fall prey to the right-wing castigation of our “financial illiteracy” or the canard that people “used their houses as ATMs” for the purchase of “big-screen TVs.”

Obviously, the strategies of “resistance” through finance outlined here, and to which we can today add micro-finance schemes as well, were and are pyrrhic, if not utterly disastrous. And they stretch the definition of “resistance” almost to the breaking point, given that IMF/WB loans, sub-prime mortgages, consumer credit and the like were actively advertised and encouraged by the powers that be. But as a number of authors have recently pointed out, we do a disservice to people’s agency and intelligence when we imagine neoliberalism is merely imposed from above.<sup>41</sup> It is, in fact, activated from “below,” enacted and “performed” by social actors as they contend with and respond to material conditions.

This should not actually come as a surprise or an offense to Marxist theorists. Marx himself was keenly attentive to the ways capitalism worked, as a system, by shaping people’s sense of agency and possibility.<sup>42</sup> Commodity fetishism, the elemental social relation of capital, occurs when people imagine and express their social and collective agency through the exchange of money and commodities. That people do so

because they feel they must does not diminish from their agency in the matter. This is why Marx was (and we should be) so insistent that the “answer” to the problem is the revolutionary overthrow of capital, not merely developing “better” forms of “resistance” or “agency” within the system (hence his criticism of reformers like Robert Owen and his impatience for those forces that would crystallize into social democratic imaginaries).

Be that as it may, we also can't afford to fail to recognize that something has changed. Neoliberalism, as a cultural and economic force, has created conditions that embrace “resistance” as never before. No longer finding a unified and singular mass culture profitable, capital today offers numerous fragmented cultural commodities that promise “resistance” and agency. From the hypermasculinized bad-boy ethos of Ultimate Fighting Championship to the “edgy” vampiric conformity of *Twilight* to the “commodity feminism” of Dove's “Campaign for Real Beauty,” today's cultural landscape is rife with forms of commodified resistance. Every car advertisement suggests that driving a new vehicle will set you apart from the crowd and allow you to express your (presumably suppressed) individuality. Images and aesthetics of protest are now common fare. Resistance is the cultural idiom of neoliberal financialization.<sup>43</sup>

This is not merely because “resistance” is sexy and sells cars. It is part and parcel of the neoliberal individualization of social life, the systematic destruction of any liberatory or hopeful notion of collectivity, commons, or public participation.<sup>44</sup> But this, in turn, is intimately tied to the forms of agency both that financialization creates, and on which it depends. Today, the financial sector is no longer content to be a realm for capitalists to work together. In an age of neoliberal austerity, it increasingly embraces multiple aspects of social life. From sub-prime loans to micro-credit, from student debt to credit cards, from life insurance to computerized weekend stock trading, from state debts and deficits to global food and fuel prices, finance's reach today is both more expansively global and more intensively local than ever before.<sup>45</sup> Financialization, as a force, transforms social agency at the same time as it further enmeshes subjects in a system of biopolitical regulation, seduction, and activation that not only binds us to present institutions and norms but constrains how we are able to imagine the future.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, finance is no longer merely a discrete moment of capitalist accumulation, the territory of a specialized ruling-class faction, but is increasingly invested in and predicated on the everyday life of debt, credit and financial tragedy.

### **Resistance Is Futile**

The integration of capitalist accumulation into everyday life and lived cultural experience is both cause and consequence of financialization. This means that “resistance” is no longer an effective or sufficient means of reclaiming value from capital. Where in previous moments carving out spaces of autonomy and alterity might have been appealing, today the stakes are far greater. For one, capital's

fundamental “miscalculations” of value have meant that the generation of profit is at risk of exhausting or severely depleting the human life support systems of the planet.<sup>47</sup> “Climate change” is only the thin edge of an integrated problem of ecological collapse. One cannot “resist” an ecological collapse. Similarly, as we enter a new phase of militarized austerity, corporate and state power have spared no time or expense developing new technologies of repression and surveillance that make any substantial revolutionary effort much more difficult. In this situation “resistance” is far from a threat to the system. In fact, resistance may quickly become the keyword of a new, even more dystopian form of “repressive desublimation” where we are all encouraged to “resist” precisely because it poses no real threat to the system as a whole.<sup>48</sup> While capitalism is based in the cooptation of people’s individual and collective subjectivities, bodies, and agencies, the forms of “resistance” through acts of desire, communities of difference, and unmappable identities are not sufficient to save us from ourselves.

You may well accuse me of a largely semantic argument, given that “resistance” is used in a wide range of ways. But no one should doubt that language has power and we must choose our words carefully. The word “resistance” also helps us trace the ways capitalism has changed and evolved over the past sixty years into a system far more adept at learning from, incorporating, tolerating or preempting criticism and resistance than ever before. And finance and financialization are key elements of this transformation.

The problem is that financialization is both a weapon and an index of social *liquification*. It should be remembered that all financial crises are, elementally, crises of liquidity: the fluid convertibility of one form of capital into another.<sup>49</sup> In the most recent crisis, derivatives and other securities based on the sub-prime market ceased overnight to be convertible into ready cash or other assets because no one would buy them: they were no longer credible claims to real-world value. Indeed, fearing they would cause a crash if they revealed the scope of the problem, commentators and pundits insisted on calling it a “liquidity crisis” until the wholesale economic crisis became unavoidable.

But we need to think of liquidity more broadly: liquidity names the success of capital in converting social values into economic value, the pliability of social life to the dictates of capitalist accumulation.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, liquidity is the coefficient of “resistance” within the system: low resistance means high liquidity. For instance, a sweatshop in an export-processing zone is a highly “liquid” social institution because it maximizes exploitation and minimizes resistance. Money invested in production can enjoy easy convertibility into a t-shirt thanks to lax laws, violence, surveillance and the ever-present threat of capital relocation — resistance is held to a minimum.<sup>51</sup> It is also easily liquidated: a corporation can choose to employ a different sub-contractor and shift production elsewhere without losing a great deal of invested capital. Similarly, the highly regulated and surveilled space of a shopping mall is a

highly liquid space for capital: the t-shirt commodity is almost certain to transform back into capital (money) with very little impedance, thanks to the grooming of the shopping atmosphere, private security and surveillance, and consumer cultural norms. This somewhat reductionist example serves to demonstrate that “liquidity” is more than just the celerity of financial transactions: it indexes the saturation of capital into social life and the relations of production, and measures (the absence of) resistance. It refers to the ease with which the fundamental capitalist formula of accumulation, M-C-M<sub>1</sub>, can advance — in this formula, “resistance” is the viscosity of the hyphens.

In this sense, liquidity speaks to Zygmunt Bauman’s theories of “liquid modernity,” “liquid life” and so on. He uses the liquid metaphor to identify the unmooring of social identity and agency from any meaningful collective power in an age of neoliberal globalization.<sup>52</sup> For Bauman, liquid social relations are ones where we’re all adrift from social obligations and at the mercy of rapacious and uncaring economic forces. We might say that this is, in part, the sociological result of the financial liquidation of the world. It is a pervasive *indifference* created when all social values are subordinate to the unified quantitative measure of capital, namely money.<sup>53</sup>

But this approach to liquidity also highlights the role of “resistance.” One of the key strengths of the present order of neoliberal financialization is that it anticipates and incorporates resistance. Resistance is ultimately factored into financial flows in advance as “risk”: the present calculus of future probabilities. In addition to networked computers that allow global trades at super-human speeds, finance today enjoys new mathematical and cognitive apparatuses for manipulating risk: the cutting apart and rebundling of securities to diversify risk across holdings and portfolios, the automated trading of securities through complex risk-informed algorithms, and practically sublime “investment vehicles” and derivatives for “hedging”, betting both for and against the market.<sup>54</sup> With this hyper-commodification of risk, finance has become a vast, interconnected, pulsating organ fed by billions of local readings of “liquidity” and “resistance” which are constantly coursing through the system, being decomposed and rebundled in patterns which no one truly understands.<sup>55</sup> The final result is this: finance as we now have it, as a system that “reads” the world by calculating the “risk” of “resistance” to “liquidity” and allocating resources accordingly, already incorporates “resistance” into its “systemic imagination.”<sup>56</sup>

A brief example might illuminate this rather complex argument. The cost of shares in American and other auto companies depends to a large extent on the resistance of workers. Where potential investors in, say, Ford, assume that workers have a good chance of resisting management’s imposition of measures to increase productivity (or demand a greater share of that productivity) it is reflected in share prices.<sup>57</sup> These prices measure (inversely), in effect, the level of resistance to liquidity: the degree to which the circuit of capital’s flow (M-C-M<sub>1</sub>) is impeded. This, in turn, has an influence on the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which, in turn, influences faith in

American banks, bonds, and the dollar, which in turn affects almost every country in the world in a post-gold-standard global economy. The resistance of Ford workers is only a tiny part of that system. It is also made up of the “resistance” of workers, citizens and people the world over: the risk of a revolution and the reappropriation of the oil industry in Venezuela was already factored into the price of global crude futures long before it was a twinkle in Hugo Chavez’s eye. And the risks of climate change to human life and social stability, while it may be denied by the captains of industry and their political puppets, is well known to the major insurance houses, and is reflected in their efforts and prices today.<sup>58</sup> This is not to say resistance and struggle are unimportant, only that finance is an organ by which capital attempts to anticipate or “imagines” these (and a billion other) possibilities before they occur and incorporates those risks into its internal equilibrium.<sup>59</sup> But it’s also important to note that capital also usually “reads” the signs incorrectly, or individual investors, driven less by cool-headed rationale and more by a frantic short-sighted desire to “beat the market” may misread or willfully ignore these signals.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, partly because of the elemental and continuing fact that capital is built on inter-capitalist competition, it is far from a perfect machine.

Two things, however, are qualitatively new at this point, having come to fruition over the last thirty years. First, as we have seen, finance has reached incredibly deep into everyday life in new ways, making our daily choices and forms of resistance legible to and part of the global market.<sup>61</sup> Today, our own resistance to capitalist social order is borne out in our credit-card debt, our student loans, our mortgages and our savings (if we’re lucky enough to have any of those), which have themselves become the source of financial speculation and derivative dealing. Second, the financial market today is more integrated, faster, more complex and more uncontrollable than ever before. Indeed, the vast majority of exchanges are conducted by automated computers, decomposing, rebundling, and flipping securities in ways that exceed the pace and capacity of human cognition.<sup>62</sup>

In one sense, capital has become too good at its own game. Finance, a sphere of accumulation designed to allow competitive capitalist subjects to cooperate, is now effectively uncontrollable. The bailouts that followed the crisis did not occur merely because a shadowy group of bankers colluded with the state. They happened because no one can admit the truth: that they can’t turn the machine off or realistically slow it down without crashing the global economy and imperiling the capitalist system as a whole.

The flip side is this: in addition to “reading” and “indexing” resistance through financial speculation, finance is also a powerful weapon against resistance. Donald MacKenzie and others have recently mobilized the notion of performativity to describe the way financial instruments both measure and create financial realities, helping bring into being the futures on which they speculate.<sup>63</sup> Randy Martin has noted the way a logic of derivative speculation has possessed numerous areas of capital and



empire.<sup>64</sup> Notably, he charts the way a logic of “risk management” has introduced a new paradigm of neoliberal biopolitics which separates populations into the lauded “risk-takers” who “leverage” their subject position into wealth and prestige, and the abject “at risk” destined for minimalist and often punitive state intervention, lest they threaten the broader economic field of possibility. Beyond this more abstract transformation, finance disciplines social actors more directly. For instance, should a government chose to buck the neoliberal trend and consider instituting greater protection for workers, communities, and environments, or should they dare breathe a hint about nationalization, financial markets interpret this possibility and respond by devaluing currency and bond prices, or divesting themselves of shares in “risky” local ventures.<sup>65</sup> This “resistance” need not even come to pass for markets to preemptively respond with financial discipline. Similarly, firms are increasingly pressured to increase exploitation and surveillance of workers, and attack union and workers rights, in order to improve their credit rating and share price. And local, regional and national governments are, in an age of austerity, compelled to destroy public power (invested in public space, welfare programs, civil services, public employment, and collective projects) in response to financial pressures and massive deficits (caused, in effect, by decades of corporate tax cuts and the massive transfer of public wealth into private hands).<sup>66</sup>

Finally, on the level of everyday life, resistance to capital, both large and small, is mitigated by people’s growing individual debt. Student loans are a good example: under their tutelage, universities have largely gone from being zones of autonomy, protest and experimentation to intellectual workhouses for a generation of students unable or unwilling to take risks for fear of their economic future.<sup>67</sup> Graduating with debt-loads in the tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars, students rely on a university education less to broaden their minds and more to provide them with workplace-ready skills to pay back their loans (although recent student-led movements such as those in Québec are very promising). Similarly, the mortgaged insomnia of consumer debt, home loans, and the obligation to invest in old-age security, health, and education funds have led many working people to fear workplace resistance for fear of losing their job, or fear that the success of their resistance will cause their employer to close up shop and move elsewhere. Levels of personal debt have also meant that many people must work more, or work multiple jobs to make ends meet — over and above their loan repayments. This has left many with little time or energy to engage in forms of resistance- or community-building and has contributed to the success of the Right in castigating taxes and state welfare programs as yet another “hand in the pocket” of working people.

In this context, the turn to “resistance” and the investment of our hopes in this nebulous term need to be reexamined. It is important to note the genealogy of the term. “Resistance” as a celebrated (if vague) way of talking about political practice really only comes to the fore in the wake of (laudable) “postmodern” attempts to



broaden the scope of radical political agency and complicate our understandings of social power relations. Resistance, as a key term in cultural studies and cognate fields, emerges through the Anglophone reception of Foucault and others who posited social power relations beyond brute force, economic authority and their subsidiary forms of “hegemony.” Instead, these critics rightly insisted that power relations, even capitalist power relations, were never static and unidirectional but always exercised at multiple overlapping points throughout society. This approach was in many ways an academic domestication and theoretical appropriation of anti-racist, feminist, and queer radicalisms that insist that structural and systemic exploitation and oppression operate at the everyday level and are exercised and enforced by everyone, not just those with money and political power. If power is everywhere and operates through everyone, then so is and does resistance.

But the problem emerges when “resistance” becomes a normative, rather than analytic supposition. While cultural studies and other fields have produced phenomenal work that highlights the complex and sophisticated ways all sorts of people “resist” the power relations of their lives through novel tactics of performativity, collectivity, or cultural expression, it has also led to an often hasty or uncritical celebration of “resistance” for its own sake. There is, unfortunately, such a thing as “bad” resistance: the Tea Party in the US, or the British National Party, or any variety of fundamentalisms are all good examples. We may want to note how these tendencies are not, in fact, “resisting” anything and instead reinforce (indeed, intensify) existing capitalist, patriarchal, racist, and homophobic power relations. But their participants acutely feel that they are resisting. And by the internal logic of the value-free celebration of “resistance” we, as critics, find ourselves with little authority to pass judgment. If we accept all “resistance” as a normative good, it becomes hard to sort out “good” resistance from the “bad.”

You may suggest I make too fine a point here and construct a straw person, but one need only peruse the tables of contents of the leading cultural studies journals to observe a great many papers and presentations in which critics take up a cultural commodity or practice we almost all would condemn (say, *Twilight*) and “reveal” how, in fact, we were all wrong and the text is, in fact, a source of agency and resistance to cultural norms. Putting aside the accusation that such a writing strategy is merely academic opportunism and accepting, for a moment, that these claims to “resistance” are valid, it is clear that if this is resistance it is not enough. It is resistance that does not make a significant intervention into the system and that is often already anticipated by capital, patriarchy, or other systems of power.

Nor is cultural studies alone guilty, although its tryst with “resistance” is perhaps the most melodramatic. Political economy, sociology, and other fields of inquiry have equally developed a rhetoric of resistance to describe the micro or everyday ways in which people challenge power relations, although critics who do so in these fields often feel themselves to be a small minority. I do not wish to condemn this huge and

diverse body of work, and this line of critique is far from new. But I do want to add to the voices seeking to “call the question” on resistance: is it enough? Are we at risk of celebrating resistance uncritically? And can we not deepen our understanding of resistance to assess better or worse forms? Finally, and most uncomfortably: is the lure of resistance that it makes for the liquid production of academic capital? After all, it is relatively easy to spin out endless papers on how that-which-we-thought-was-hegemonic is, in fact, resistant. And these papers have material consequences in terms of hiring, promotion, tenure, funding, and prestige.

What this all means is that resistance is no longer a sufficient strategy. It already assumes a defeat we can no longer afford. The fate of future generations depends on revolutionary change.

### Notes

1. David Harvey, *Limits to Capital*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006) 247-54.
2. See Michael Perelman, *Marx's Crisis Theory: Scarcity, Labour and Finance* (New York: Praeger, 1987) 191-95.
3. Harvey, *Limits* 254-257.
4. See Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy* (New York: Semiotext[e], 2008); Doug Henwood, *After the New Economy* (New York: New Press, 2003).
5. For an interesting reading of this dynamic see Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005) 80-112.
6. Harvey, *Limits* 373-442.
7. Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2007) 115-130.
8. Gregory Albo, Sam Ginden, and Leo Panich, *In and Out of Crisis: The Global Financial Meltdown and Left Alternatives* (Oakland: PM Press, 2010) 60-74.
9. Perelman, *Marx's Crisis Theory* 207-217.
10. Harvey, *Limits* 324-329.
11. See David McNally, *Global Slump: The Economics and Politics of Crisis and Resistance* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011).
12. On the history of financial crises and their aftermaths from the seventeenth to mid-twentieth centuries, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).
13. Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee, *Financial Derivatives and the Globalization of Risk* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004) 141-189; Bello, Walden, Nicola Bullard, and Kamal Malhotra, eds. *Global Finance: New Thinking on Regulating Speculative Capital Markets*. (London: Zed, 2000).
14. Harvey, *Limits to Capital* 247-51.
15. Doug Henwood, *Wall Street: How it Works and for Whom* (London: Verso, 1998) 90-99.
16. See Harry Cleaver, "Work, Value and Domination: On the Continuing Relevance of the Marxian Labor Theory of Value in the Crisis of the Keynesian Planner State," *The Commoner* 10 (2005).
17. On the history of crisis and regulation, see Charles R. Geisst, *Wall Street: A History* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997); Robert Sobel, *Panic on Wall Street: A History of America's Financial Disasters* (Washington, DC: Beard, 1999).
18. See Marazzi, *Capital and Language* 29-36.
19. See Walden Bello, *The Food Wars* (London and New York: Verso, 2009); Diana B. Henriques, "Food is gold, so billions invested in farming," *New York Times*, June 5, 2008.
20. Bill Curry, "The G20's next project: solve global crisis of unstable food prices," *The Globe and Mail*, January 21, 2011; Nina Koepfen, "ECB warns on food supply," *Wall Street Journal online*, January 20, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704881304576093421341811398.html>.
21. See Fred Magdoff, "Food as a Commodity" *Monthly Review* 63.8 (2012). <http://monthlyreview.org/2012/01/01/food-as-a-commodity>.
22. Cleaver, "Work, value and domination."
23. See Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000).
24. See De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*; Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle*

- in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: U Illinois P, 1999); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000); C. L. R James, *The C.L.R. James Reader*, ed. Anna Grimshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
25. On the tremendous infiltration of finance into everyday life over the past forty years see Rob Aitken, *Performing Capital: Toward a Cultural Economy of Popular and Global Finance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Paul Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance: Saving and Borrowing in Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002); Randy Martin, *An Empire of Indifference: American War and the Financial Logic of Risk Management* (Durham: Duke UP, 2007).
  26. See, for instance, Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2008); John Perkins, *Confessions of an Economic Hitman*. (New York: Berret-Koehler, 2004).
  27. Bret Benjamin, *Invested Interests: Capital, Culture and the World Bank* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2007) 55-88; Sanjeev Khagram, *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004.
  28. See Langley, *The Everyday Life of Global Finance* 43-63.
  29. See Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall, 1979).
  30. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000) 190-207.
  31. For an interesting analysis of this in the British context, see The Escalate Collective. *Salt*, (2012), <<http://www.escalatecollective.net>>
  32. Ursula Huws, *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003).
  33. See Benjamin, *Invested Interests* 99-110.
  34. See George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1987).
  35. See Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2010).
  36. See the works listed in note 25.
  37. Robin Blackburn, "Finance and the Fourth Dimension," *New Left Review* 39 (2006).
  38. See John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff, *The Great Financial Crisis: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009).
  39. See Matt Taibi, *Griktopia: Bubble Machines, Vampire Squids, and the Long Con That Is Breaking America*. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010); McNally, *Global Slump* 113-145.
  40. Henry A Giroux, *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism: Politics beyond the age of greed* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008).
  41. See Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006).
  42. For more on this approach see Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* and De Angelis, *The Beginning of History*.
  43. See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Elliot, Gregory (London: Verso, 2005).

44. See Giroux, *Against the Terror*.
45. See Martin, *Empire of Indifference* 17-63.
46. Martin, *Empire of Indifference* 3-4.
47. John Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).
48. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (New York: Beacon, 1969) 36-48.
49. Harvey, *Limits* 385-87; LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives* 21-23.
50. Max Haiven, "Finance as Capital's Imagination?: Reimagining Value and Culture in an Age of Fictitious Capital and Crisis," *Social Text* 108 (2011): 93-124.
51. Of course, there are many inspiring examples of resistance within Maquiladoras and other EPZs, but the ultimate consequences of this are well known: capital flight.
52. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life* (London: Polity, 2005); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (London: Polity, 2006).
53. Martin, *Empire* 124; See Haiven, "Finance as Capital's Imagination?"
54. See LiPuma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives* 33-64.
55. Li Puma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives* 107-140.
56. Haiven, "Finance as Capital's Imagination?"
57. Harvey, *Limits* 270-271; Marazzi, *Capital and Language* 49-55.
58. See Matthew Paterson, "Risky Business: Insurance Companies in Global Warming Politics," *Global Environmental Politics* 1:4 (2001): 18-42; Celine Herweijer, Nicola Ranger and Robert E T Ward "Adaptation to Climate Change: Threats and Opportunities for the Insurance Industry." *The Geneva Papers on Risk and Insurance Issues and Practice* 34:3 (July 2009): 360 - 380.
59. I have elsewhere attempted to clarify this argument, as well as the risks of anthropomorphizing capital in Haiven "Finance as Capital's Imagination."
60. Marazzi, *Capital and Language* 129-131.
61. Martin, *Financialization* 1-9; Langley 88-111.
62. See Donald MacKenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006); Brian Holmes, "Is It Written in the Stars? Global Finance, Precarious Destinies," *Ephemera* 10:3 (2010): 222 - 233.
63. MacKenzie, *An Engine*; Michael Callon, Yuval Millo, and Fabian Muniesa, *Market Devices* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007).
64. Martin, *Empire of Indifference*.
65. Li Puma and Lee, *Financial Derivatives* 151-156.
66. See McNally, *Global Slump*.
67. Jeffrey Williams, "The Pedagogy of Debt," in *Towards a Global Autonomous University*, ed. The Edu-factory Collective (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2009) 89-96.

## Antisocial Psychology

Sarah Brouillette

This essay considers how postwar social scientists who studied creativity, and used writers and other artists as inspiration and as research subjects, came to frame the social as a form of constraint — in particular, as a form of constraint unnecessary to the superior personality types said to be best suited to the new economy of mental labor.

A formative moment of psychologists' interest in defining creativity was J. P. Guilford's presidential address to the 1949 Convention of the American Psychological Association, in which he discussed his own research program, supported by the U.S. Office of Naval Research, on the "aptitudes of high-level personnel." Guilford argued that psychologists were falling behind business leaders and government in acknowledging the importance of creativity to America's future. To him, creative thinking entailed a certain capacity for new and inventive ideas, and in order to properly study it psychologists would need to abandon their conviction that it is part of general intelligence, fostered by mass education and measurable by standardized IQ tests.<sup>1</sup>

Guilford's address coincided with the founding of the Institute for Personality Assessment and Research (IPAR) at Berkeley, which was supported by the Carnegie Corporation and run by D. W. MacKinnon, who during World War II had helped identify effective candidates for special military operations.<sup>2</sup> The focus at IPAR soon became the relationship between a person's "effectiveness" and creativity.<sup>3</sup> Test subjects and psychologists were housed together for days at a time, sharing informal activities like meals and casual conversation in addition to the usual combination of observation and testing. Because MacKinnon preferred subjects who "had already demonstrated a high level of creative work," he chose to study creative writers, architects, and mathematicians, as well as people engaged in industrial research, the physical sciences, and engineering.<sup>4</sup>

Frank Barron joined IPAR as a graduate student in its early days, and went on to become one of its most influential scholars. Study of artists and creative writers, as



well as observation of subjects' verbal aptitudes and reactions to art images, were all integral to his research conclusions. For example, in the Painting Preference test, Barron and his team sorted people into groups based on their reactions to postcard reproductions of paintings. The test identified a relatively non-creative group that preferred "themes involving religion, authority, aristocracy, and tradition" and its members tended to describe themselves as "moderate, modest, responsible, [and] conscientious." In contrast, the creative group preferred complex and irregular forms, and experimental, esoteric, sensational, and primitive themes; these people tended to describe themselves as pessimistic, bitter, dissatisfied, emotional, unstable, demanding, anxious, and temperamental.<sup>5</sup>

Barron soon chose a test group of professional and aspiring creative writers, their names largely obtained through consultation with faculty in English and in Drama at the University of California. On them he used all the tests in his arsenal, but also a new one which had been inspired by Cecil Day Lewis's 1946 Clark Lectures on "The Poetic Image." Dubbed the Symbolic Equivalence Test, it asked subjects to think of metaphors for a set of stimulus images. They were scored for their number of "admissible" and "original" responses; admissible responses were scored for aptness on a scale of 1 to 3; original responses were scored for their degree of originality on a scale of 1 to 5. For example, given the stimulus image of "Sitting alone in a dark room," respondents would provide what were deemed "symbolic equivalents" like "lying awake at night," which scored a 1; "an unborn child" was worth a 2; "a stone under water" earned a 3; "a king lying in a coffin," 4; "Milton" scored the highest, a 5. Barron explains that the "highly original," highly rated response "grabs you [...] gives you a chill as a great line of poetry can do."<sup>6</sup>

Barron claimed high scores on this test correlated with high scores on other tests devised to measure independence of judgment and complexity of outlook.<sup>7</sup> They also correlated to low scores on tests to measure socialization, indicating a significant "resistance to acculturation," or to a socialization process which they perceived as "demand for the sacrifice of [...] individuality," which, Barron judges, "it often is."<sup>8</sup> High scores on the Symbolic Equivalence Test were also correlated to low scores on tests measuring adherence to "economic values."<sup>9</sup> Writers' scores put them at the apex of those who were not "playing" for financial "stakes."<sup>10</sup> Indeed the writers included in Barron's studies "topped all groups" in scoring across the range of tests, becoming models for the kind of iconoclastic self-articulation Barron valorized as integral to the "Complex Person."<sup>11</sup> That Barron's research was slowly elaborating a model healthy self is quite apparent. He claimed that complexity of outlook allows the superior person to experience contradictory states of being with no real difficulty: she "regress[es] with confidence," because she can return to her mature self with ease;<sup>12</sup> she is free to imagine because she can "discern reality accurately";<sup>13</sup> because the distinction between self and object is most secure, it can be allowed "to disappear temporarily."<sup>14</sup> It is writers who best model this idealized Complex Person for Barron;

he states that they are “more independent, flexible, and original than most people,” more comfortable with ambiguity and contradiction.<sup>15</sup>

Barron’s studies were of course a version of what they aimed to assess. They reacted against the limitations of traditional psychology — against, for instance, its faith in IQ testing, which connected genius-level intellect to repetition of “existing public knowledge.”<sup>16</sup> Guilford had claimed success on standardized tests was evidence of “convergent” thinking, whereas original thinking was “divergent.” Barron agreed, arguing that a desire for predictability and for “compulsive discharging of duties” was anathema to successful creative people.<sup>17</sup> Barron belonged informally to the human potential movement, whose premier theorist was Abraham Maslow. Unlike Barron, in the 1960s Maslow actively turned his own conclusions about creative thinking into corporate management principles. Maslow’s work in turn informed the ostensible transformation of organizational culture from an authoritarian to a democratic one designed to respect employees’ individual needs for self-fulfillment.

Maslow’s academic star had been rising steadily since he put forward his 1943 theory of the “hierarchy of human needs,” an account of the dynamic evolution of human motivations. This theory claimed that until certain basic physiological and safety needs are met, there is no room for worry about whether or not one is respected by others or a member of a functional family; until one has achieved respect and familial contentment one cannot pursue the highest need, the need for “self-actualization,” whose pursuit involves an array of “higher” values Maslow worked to specify: truth, beauty, newness, uniqueness, goodness, elegance, cleanliness, order, justice, and completion are among them. Maslow’s description of the self-actualizing person motivated by the higher values eventually dovetailed with his conception of the creative person. In 1962 he wrote that “it is as if” creativity “were almost synonymous with [or] a defining characteristic of, essential humanness.”<sup>18</sup> In 1963 he wrote that “the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing [...] person [...] may perhaps turn out to be the same thing.”<sup>19</sup>

Around the same time he began to conduct his studies from within corporations. In 1962 he spent a summer at Non-Linear Systems Inc., a factory in Del Mar, California, invited by its president, Andrew Kay. Kay had been using books by two management theorists, Douglas MacGregor and Peter Drucker, as guides to how to structure the company, and he was impressed by the overlap with Maslow’s research. Maslow, too, noticed that, though working as a consultant, Drucker had reached conclusions about human nature that were similar to his own, insisting that employees thrived when they perceived themselves to be respected by their bosses — or in Maslow’s terms, when their higher desire to be respected had been met.

For its part, Douglas MacGregor’s 1960 study, *The Human Side of Enterprise*, derived much from Maslow’s theories, as MacGregor wrote against what he labeled “Theory X Management,” the authoritarian approach found in most workplaces, which assumes that the average human being “must be coerced, controlled [...] even threatened

by punishment in order to get the job done.”<sup>20</sup> MacGregor proposed “Theory Y Management” instead, arguing that a person will “exercise self-direction [...] in the service of objectives to which he is committed.”<sup>21</sup> The organization’s objectives should be attuned to workers’ own needs, such as the need for self-respect or for “satisfaction of ego.”<sup>22</sup>

Maslow’s own work at Non-Linear built upon MacGregor’s and Drucker’s respective approaches, attempting to imagine the integration of the worker’s subjectivity and organizational directives. He called the book that resulted from his time there *Eupsychian Management*, incorporating his own neologism for a utopian community called “Eupsychia,” defined as “the culture that would be generated by 1,000 self-actualizing people on some sheltered island where they would not be interfered with.”<sup>23</sup> His overarching point in *Eupsychian Management* is that managers interested in more democratic workplaces should support more intensive study of “the psychodynamics of creativeness,” since it is within the creative personality that one will locate human desire and the ability to transcend authoritarian structures of all kinds.<sup>24</sup> He argues that ideal work is “psychotherapeutic, psychogogic (making well people grow toward self-actualization),” and that self-actualizing or “highly evolved” people “assimilate their work into the identity, into the self,” so that “work actually becomes part of the self.” Thus “proper management of the work lives of human beings, of the way in which they earn their living, can improve them and improve the world and in this sense be a utopian or revolutionary technique.”<sup>25</sup>

He was concerned to emphasize that the pursuit of self-fulfillment was not purely selfish. Rather, the self-actualizing person would achieve a kind of selflessness. The dichotomy between selfishness and unselfishness would be resolved in a new synergy between inner and outer motivations, as one’s work is “introjected,” made a part of the self.<sup>26</sup> An ideal society would be arranged in such a way that producing one’s individual ends would not be opposed to “helping other people”;<sup>27</sup> this conventional dichotomy would rather be “resolved and transcended and formed into a new higher unity.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Maslow notes elsewhere a general tendency toward “resolution of dichotomies” in self-actualizing people: their selfishness is ultimately unselfish; their duty is their pleasure; their work is play; they are childlike and mature; they regress without being neurotic; they are strong egos but also self-transcending.<sup>29</sup> In them opposites are resolved and integrated. They are, in a word, whole.

As in Barron’s work, in Maslow’s conception the self-actualizing person is also able to perceive things “as they are,” which means transcending petty motivations like material gain. Having what Maslow called “peak-experiences” means seeing a thing, an event, a situation in and for itself, “detached from relations, usefulness, expediency.”<sup>30</sup> To clarify, this is true during the primary phase of creativeness, which is distinct from the secondary “working out” phase.<sup>31</sup> The primary phase involves “the process itself” and is unconcerned about the products of one’s work or “the climax in obvious triumph and success.”<sup>32</sup> Subjects tend to describe it as a “loss of

self or of ego,” as transcendence, as integration of self with non-self.<sup>33</sup> It is a kind of “nakedness” in the situation, or innocence before a task; it operates without *a priori* “expectations [...] fashions, fads, dogmas, habits.”<sup>34</sup> In its pursuit we become free of concern for other people and external judgment; we become “much more ourselves, our Real Selves,” “our authentic selves, our real identity.” Alienation from these real selves is the product of “neurotic involvement with other people.” Their realization requires that we forget any audience, so “we cease to be actors”<sup>35</sup> and become, for the moment, un-neurotic, unanxious, “not sick.”<sup>36</sup> He finds a parallel for this attitude in the “artist’s respect for his materials” and attention to the “matter-in-hand.” The artist is said to treat her work as “an end, something *per se*, with its own right to be, rather than as a means to some end other than itself.”<sup>37</sup> Thus her behavior is a model to the extent that it is “noninstrumental,” suggesting a “lack of willful ‘trying’, a lack of effortful striving or straining, a lack of interference with the flow of the impulses and the free ‘radiating’ expression of the deep person.”<sup>38</sup>

Maslow acknowledged that secondary processes are necessary. Healthy individuals should be capable of being both “poet and engineer.”<sup>39</sup> Their initial work is more akin to the improvisation of jazz than to the “product” of the great work of art made by talent, but “succeeding upon the spontaneous is the deliberate [...] succeeding upon intuition comes rigorous thought.”<sup>40</sup> The willing “regression into our depths” ends; in place of the “passivity and receptivity of inspiration” come “activity, control, and hard work.”<sup>41</sup> Instead of being subject to an experience, we make a product *our* subject.<sup>42</sup> But primary processes are nevertheless where the deepest human values are realized. It is through them that the healthy self expresses itself, and it is through them that what the self requires can coincide with what the world requires. For example, though secondary processes are needed for one to receive financial compensation for one’s work, increasing one’s wealth cannot be the goal of a self-actualizing person. Instead, “B-work” or “work at the level of being” — which is only possible once one’s basic needs are met — is its own intrinsic reward; the paycheck is a “byproduct, an epiphenomenon.”<sup>43</sup> Ideal, self-actualizing work is one’s intrinsic values incarnate; it is pursuit of these values, and not work *per se*, that the healthy person loves.<sup>44</sup>

Maslow’s take on the primary phase of creativity, the phase which is clearly key to self-actualization, thus consistently lionizes insecurity. He argues that “creativity is correlated with the ability to withstand the lack of structure, the lack of future, lack of predictability, of control, the tolerance for ambiguity, for planlessness”; it is akin for him to the ability to “loaf,” to float for a time in a purposeless void without a distinct future.<sup>45</sup> Neurotic people are uncreative because they have no self-confidence. Creative people, self-actualizing people, thrive precisely when conditions seem most threatening; “attracted to mystery, to novelty, change, flux,” they feel able to “manage” the world, and think of themselves as “a prime mover, as the responsible one.”<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, anticipating later sociological applications of his work, Maslow argues that any thriving society would need to commit itself to producing precisely this kind

of person — a person able “to live in a world which changes perpetually, which doesn’t stand still”; a person “comfortable with change, who enjoys change, who is able to improvise, who is able to face with the confidence, strength, and courage a situation of which he has absolutely no forewarning.”<sup>47</sup> Unhealthy selves need to “staticize” the world, to “freeze it and make it stable”; they need, pathetically, to “do what their daddies did.” Healthy, self-actualizing, creative people are instead “able confidently to face tomorrow not knowing what’s going to come,” and it is only societies that produce such people that will survive.<sup>48</sup>

For Maslow, as a result, cold war policymakers should commit themselves to cultivation of “a race of improvisers.”<sup>49</sup> His articulation of the qualities of this “better type of human being” became more and more stark and disturbing as the Vietnam War raged on, as he became concerned with correcting countercultural applications of his ideas. He insisted, for instance, that “no society can function very successfully — especially not in a world of separate, sovereign nation-states — unless there is a built-in arrangement whereby the aggridants [biologically superior members of a species], innovators, geniuses, and trailblazers [are] admired and valued and are not torn apart by those seething with Nietzschean resentment, impotent envy, and weakling *counter-valuing*.”<sup>50</sup>

Though they appear to lack his political bite, organizational psychology and management theory have absorbed wholesale Maslow’s arguments about what motivates the ideal worker. Harvard Business School Professor Teresa Amabile’s influential recommendations to business organizations about how to nurture creativity are a good example. She notes that a number of concrete traits of creative people have already been “revealed” in repeated research. These include self-discipline, an ability to delay gratification, perseverance in the face of frustration, independence of judgment, tolerance for ambiguity, a high degree of autonomy, an internal locus of control, a rejection of conventional norms, and a propensity for risk-taking and self-initiated striving for excellence.<sup>51</sup> Amabile’s stated interest is the influence of social factors on creativity; these social factors include concern with evaluation; desire for external recognition; focus on competition and external reward; reaction against time pressures; rejection of society’s demands; and preference for internal control and intrinsic motivation.<sup>52</sup> Hence “social factors” are for her primarily negative barriers to the natural inclination of the creative person to desire freedom from the social. What matters to Amabile’s conclusions are the various ways the contextual factors she identifies are rejected by creative people, such that creativity is once again overwhelmingly presented as a reaction against any social determinants that might influence one’s natural internal directedness.

Taking up Barron’s and Maslow’s mantles, Amabile also supplements her lab research with case studies of writers’ biographies, in this case deriving psychological truths from her reading about the lives of Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Thomas Wolfe, among others. She argues, for example, that Sexton struggled with extrinsic



motivations, and was self-conscious about her own concern with making money and achieving external recognition for her work.<sup>53</sup> However, because she worked against these tendencies in herself and learned to function instead as “her own worst critic,” she was able, despite herself, to achieve the higher state of intrinsic motivation, finding in her work a positive outlet for her introspective worrying.<sup>54</sup> Plath fares less well, as Amabile reads her “excessive concern with recognition” and her tendency to compare her own success with that of other writers as a crippling encumbrance.<sup>55</sup> Wolfe is said to have suffered a related paralysis, due in particular to the phenomenal success of his first novel; the external expectations that were put upon him were too much for him to handle.<sup>56</sup>

These studies of writers, coupled with her more conventional lab findings, lead her to conclude that extrinsic motivation is detrimental to creativity — a claim she later revised to acknowledge the possibility of some productive synergy between internal and external drives, but which has nonetheless continued to be cited in encyclopedias, handbooks, and surveys of the field as a major finding for the study of organizational behavior.<sup>57</sup> Her intrinsic motivation hypothesis resonates profoundly with Maslow’s work: it holds that creativity involves an “absence of conformity in thinking and dependence on social approval,”<sup>58</sup> an ability to engage in an activity for its own sake,<sup>59</sup> and “any motivation that arises from the individual’s positive reaction to qualities of the task itself.”<sup>60</sup>

Amabile’s research has been a signal contribution to academic organizational psychology, which has shaped how contemporary capitalist discourse and practice construct work. A more popular expression of the influence of postwar psychology’s celebration of self-actualizing creativity is the work of management guru Tom Peters, a highly sought-after speaker and consultant since the early 1980s. Peters echoed Maslovian psychology when he claimed in 1987 that “the times demand that flexibility and love of change replace our longstanding penchant for mass production and mass markets, based as it is upon a relatively predictable environment now vanished,”<sup>61</sup> and that the “winners of tomorrow will deal *proactively* with chaos, will look at the chaos per se as the source of market advantage, not as a problem to be got around.”<sup>62</sup> His 1992 study *Liberation Management* is a working-through of this emphasis on the wonders of chaos. It is nothing if not a celebration of Maslow’s “aggridants,” as he encourages companies to retain only those employees who view work as the fulfillment of their own “creative ambition.”<sup>63</sup>

Peters links the transformations he observes in “progressive” companies to wide-scale changes in society to which all workers must adapt. Most tellingly, he connects his recommendations about “deconstructing the corporation”<sup>64</sup> to postmodernism and its movement “beyond hierarchy” and its emphasis on “flexibility, choice, and personal responsibility.”<sup>65</sup> The successful employee now has to embrace postmodern complexity and accept all its paradoxes: liberation means a lot of sleepless nights and the abandonment of certain comforts; the new kind of organization is disorganization;<sup>66</sup>



meanwhile market necessities, indistinguishable from psychological necessities, mean that passionate pursuit of one's goals must lead to the equally passionate destruction of whatever one has already created.<sup>67</sup>

By the late 1990s Peters had shifted his main work to motivational speaking and writing for employees wishing to perceive themselves as self-managers and, ultimately, as brands. It is in this more recent work that artist figures have taken on particular importance, though Peters had claimed before that he would, for instance, look to see "who's reading Chekhov" when he gets on a plane, and then "bet on his or her stock," since reading Chekhov is a sure sign of one's comfort with complexity.<sup>68</sup> By 1999, though, he would claim that after seeing Placido Domingo perform in *Simon Boccanegra* at the Metropolitan Opera he wondered why "a day-at-work-in-the-Purchasing Dept." couldn't be "more like Placido's evening-at-the-Met?"<sup>69</sup> He concludes that it can be, if one is willing to embrace the right attitude and pursue the right work. All work should be like the artist's work: it is a performance rather than a job; it is an act of unbridled passion rather than "puttin' in time"; far from being "Faceless," it is the "epitome of character"; far from being predictable, it is a "plunge into the unknown"; rather than treating the customer as an afterthought, it "Alters the users' universe; it is a growth experience rather than just another day that will never be retrieved."<sup>70</sup>

Peters continually places faceless, predictable, unartful "jobs" in an older age that emphasized security, in which "a big so-called safety net [...] suck[ed] the initiative, drive, and moxie out of millions of white collar workers."<sup>71</sup> In this light, pursuing "Brand You" is more than pragmatic: it is equal parts self-reliant "liberation" and "self-definition."<sup>72</sup> Claiming to have been drawn "more and more to reading and reportage about artists of all sorts," he affirms that performance art is what all successful employees are engaged in. "Accounting" is a "Performing Art" when "It is Your B-e-i-n-g, the Presentation of You, that is under discussion."<sup>73</sup> "B-e-i-n-g" here — one's very selfhood — is inseparable from the performance of one's brand distinction. Peters thus collapses the process of discovering and achieving one's highest values into market rationality: "I am urging you to think — long and hard — about your I-D-E-N-T-I-T-Y. In BMW-ian terms."<sup>74</sup> We are all "Rapidly Depreciating Assets," and must counter the rapid decline of our human capital with "Aggressive Investment."<sup>75</sup> Uncovering our most deeply held values is thus quite simply a matter of marketing.

Peters's work is worth highlighting because of its particularly bold articulation of mainstream thinking about contemporary labor: its use of artist-figures as models; its neglect of any ethical appraisal of the content of work, or its suggestion that self-realization is itself an ethics; its presentation of the economy as a reflection of human nature, while at the same time, contradictorily, market realities are necessities to which we must accommodate ourselves; its stigmatization of collective politics and workers' interdependence; its lionization of an elite cadre of creative innovators and sidelining or outright omission of industrial, service, and manual labor; and its

insistence that the individual worker shoulder the burden of establishing a secure future.

Similar remarks could be made about Richard Florida's celebration of the "low drag," high-commitment, flexible "creative class."<sup>76</sup> These and other boosters of this fantasized labor profile embrace Maslovian thinking to encourage employees to see their work as a matter of self-development and personal meaning. The character of the self-reflexive, expressive, and exploratory self is taken almost entirely for granted, and understood to be both economically useful and morally correct. Those who would prefer more stability simply lack a healthy desire to embrace the art of life, born to long for the nanny state or the paternalistic daddy corporation instead. Public figures like Peters and Florida appear to have little interest in the history of the conceptions of the self they put forward, and acknowledge any social frame only to reject it. Nor are they troubled by increased rates of anxiety and depression, or decreased rates of political participation amongst the elite they imagine and typically address, or by evidence that people forced to move from job to job, or from fashion to fashion in their self-presentations, struggle with and against a pressing lack of permanence and coherence, and find self-referencing introspection to be insufficient grounds for the establishment of a lasting sense of life's value. One would need to go back much farther than I have here to find the origins of the ideology they draw upon and perpetuate — the ideology that imagines creativity as a liberation from the social through dedicated involvement in the "task itself." Beginning to trace the history of this ideology is one way of countering its own celebration of the self without history, without context, without society, with nothing but itself.

## Notes

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## The Death and Life of the Avant-Garde: Or, Modernism and Biopolitics

Evan Mauro

When Peter Bürger declared it “historical” a generation ago, the avant-garde’s potential as anything more than a periodizing term was thrown into question. Subsequent criticism has tended to prove Bürger right: the trajectory suggested in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has been largely accepted, and the story of the twentieth-century avant-gardes is invariably a story of decline, from revolutionary movements to simulacra, from *épater le bourgeois* to advertising technique, from torching museums to being featured exhibitions in them. Consensus has settled on an interpretation that has the avant-garde crashing on the reef of postmodernism sometime around 1972.<sup>1</sup> Outside of historicist modernism studies, the avant-garde’s treatment has been even less kind. In social and political writing since at least the Situationists in France, its fraternal twin “vanguardism” has become a leftist code word for an outdated strategy, no longer the necessary ideological and intellectual preparation for social transformation, but rather an anti-democratic elitism and crypto-totalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> To bring the story right up to date, today any putatively transgressive artistic practice falls flat against, in no particular order, intellectual relativism, a culture of permissiveness, and state-supported, market-segmented cultural difference — the avant-garde’s ancient target of a stable bourgeois moral order long since displaced by the universal imperative to “Enjoy!”<sup>3</sup>

Any discussion of avant-gardes today is immediately marked as belated, gesturing back to a period when the term named a viable desire to move beyond the limits of liberal capitalism.<sup>4</sup> What I want to suggest below is an alternate genealogy of avant-gardism in the twentieth century that might avoid that nostalgia. Alain Badiou has recently argued that the avant-garde has a double life today: “More or less the whole of twentieth-century art has laid claim to an avant-garde function. Yet today the term is viewed as obsolete, even derogatory. This suggests we are in the presence of a major symptom.”<sup>5</sup> The critical narrative reconstructed above, then, can’t be the final word if avant-gardist discourses and objects have been proliferating, yet critical discourses



continue to disavow them. If the avant-garde is indeed a failed political concept, what does it say that many of its forms, rhetorics, and basic gestures survive beyond its expiry date, especially in today's anti-capitalist and alter-globalization movements? Relatedly, if one principal reason that the avant-garde has passed out of favor is a postcolonial critique that sees, with good reason, eurocentrism and false universalism at the heart of the concept, then what can contemporary critical art take from that critique? This strikes me as especially important today, in the context of a new series of transversal social movements, from Cairo to Madrid to New York and beyond, which ground themselves in direct democratic principles that eschew past vanguardisms on the left, or really any organization of political struggle around the categories of nation and party. At the same time, these movements retain central avant-gardist notions of collective authorship, the struggle of the commons against property, and the desire to build new forms of life and social reproduction outside of capitalism's governmental and institutional order. The first conjunction I want to analyze carefully, then, is the avant-garde's link to vanguardism and political centralization: necessary, or historical?

The genealogy I sketch below understands the tie between avant-gardes and political vanguardism as historical and contingent, which makes the history of critical art in the twentieth century, and the history of its criticism, more difficult to square with Bürger's thesis. By eliminating the distance between art and life, avant-gardes wanted to revolutionize both. Bürger's *Theory* insists that this narrative ends with the triumph of a culture industry that effectively accomplishes the avant-gardist "art into life" program, but within a capitalist framework and as a constantly proliferating source of economic value. By reinterpreting the historical avant-gardes' initial concept of "life," I want to reconsider this trajectory. I have in mind Jacques Rancière's remarks on the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes' pursuit of new "forms of life" with their anti-representational strategies. Rancière's point applies to a broader history of aesthetic regimes, but he points out that modernist avant-gardes have the virtue of foregrounding the closures of the existing "distribution of the sensible," and so they point not to an inevitable descent into commodification and totalitarianism but "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come."<sup>6</sup> In Italian Futurism, I argue, we can see a specific instance of the tension between vanguardism and the invention of new sensible forms: their politicization of life was designed as an alternative criterion of value to liberal capitalism's regime of accumulation. It was short-lived, however, and so I want to retrace the itinerary of avant-gardism past the Futurists and through the later twentieth century. I ask how the avant-gardes' eventual appropriation by capital was not the negation or perversion of a state-revolutionary project, but a contingent and labile value struggle that wanted to find new modes of aesthetic valuation, and became attached to larger revolutionary projects at specific conjunctures. From this perspective, the concept of the avant-garde indicates a political struggle over life and reproduction that is very

much still with us.

### **Avant-Garde, Value, and the Politics of Life**

Bürger's basic point, which I want to pause over for a moment, is that the historical avant-gardes threw into question how bourgeois society values art. This is important to recall if we want to broaden our conception of how a critique of aesthetic autonomy, which meant to undermine aesthetic taste and the institutions that supported it, became allied to other, larger political projects. Even in a movement like Italian Futurism, which has long been a boundary case in discussions of twentieth-century avant-gardes (for reasons I will discuss below), the first target was the question of aesthetic value.<sup>7</sup>

Well before the avant-garde's apparent death, in the middle of its first full manifestation of the twentieth century, Futurists Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settemelli offer a new vision of what art can be, requiring a different measure of the value of artworks. In their 1914 manifesto "Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius," the authors argue firmly against art's autonomy from other spheres of productive activity:

The artist of genius has been and is still today a social outcast. Now genius has a social, economic and financial value. [...] The Artist will finally find his place in life, along with the butcher and the tyre-manufacturer, the grave-digger and the speculator, the engineer and the farmer. This is the basis of a new universal financial organization through which a whole series of activities, formidable in their development, completeness and importance, which have remained up to the present time in the grip of barbarism, will be fitted into modern civilization.<sup>8</sup>

In order to integrate artists more fully into the process of production, the manifesto's authors invent a metric for the calculation of aesthetic value. A new appraiser, or "measurer," will evaluate a work's "genius" by essentially calculating its eccentricity. Outlandish analogies and juxtapositions are evidence of the amount of neurological energy, or genius, that went into a piece's production, as well as how much energy it will effect in its readers: "The quantity of cerebral energy necessary to produce a work is directly proportional to the resistance which separates the elements before its action is felt and to the cohesion which unites them afterwards."<sup>9</sup> This criterion is quite obviously self-serving, as it favors precisely the kinds of wild recombinations of media and objects that Futurism had made central to its style. No small irony, then, in their claim that this was a defense against arbitrariness and charlatanism in art markets: "We therefore ask the state to create a body of law for the purpose of guarding and regulating the sale of genius. One is astonished to see that in the field of intellectual activity fraud is still perfectly legal."<sup>10</sup>

Underlying the fairly transparent self-promotion in this manifesto is the notion that “the work of art is nothing but an accumulator of cerebral energy,” and that artworks, too, can stimulate social activity.<sup>11</sup> Implied in this new basis for evaluating art, however, is a thoroughgoing rejection of the very basis of the capitalist system out of which the sphere of aesthetics developed: in arguing for their new “energy” metric, they were dispensing with all those market-based valuations of aesthetic objects, and all the attendant values of cultural capital, that could be accumulated by the collector. Theirs was a measure of the social utility of the artwork that simultaneously rejected the whole premise of art as surplus activity and surplus value, along with all those works that had accrued such value in Italy. Just as Marx had shown that the science of political economy was based on a price fundamentalism that effaced all traces of productive processes and social relations from the commodity’s surface, these Futurist writers wanted to question the reified value of artworks by reinstating the productive process and the social effect these artworks could have. Their alternative criteria for aesthetic value was, it has to be acknowledged, based on mystifications like the social “energy” artworks put into circulation, the scarcity of “genius” on which art markets depended, and, most importantly, the “life” artworks fostered, but the fundamental point was a struggle over how art was, and should be, valued. They rejected an entire critical apparatus that turned art into cultural capital, a mode of “disinterested” objectification and speculation that, as Pierre Bourdieu’s research has shown, reinforces class domination by indirect means.<sup>12</sup> Instead, the Futurists wanted a full accounting of art’s productive processes and social effects. This was the core of the avant-gardist slogan “art into life”: art would no longer be a separate sphere into which surplus value was invested. By foregrounding not only their artistic process, but art’s ability to constitute and transform social relations, the Futurists contested the institutional frame in which art was valued under market capitalism.

The alternative criterion of value in this manifesto derives from Futurism’s naïve privileging of scientific and biological tropes of formless life. Previously calling itself *Elettricismo* and *Dinimismo*, Futurism coalesced in 1909 around a concept of “living art,” wanting to “sweep the whole field of art clean of all themes and subjects which have been used in the past” in its initial, iconoclastic phase, and then to reconstitute an aesthetic that would “breathe in the tangible miracles of contemporary life,” devising new forms of representation “splendidly transformed by victorious Science,” to capture “the frenetic life of our great cities.”<sup>13</sup> Futurism borrowed extensively from Bergsonian vitalism and turn-of-the-century life sciences, two discourses that contributed to a modernist concept of life that Georg Simmel in 1913 called the “dominant in the philosophical interpretation of the world” of that moment, “represent[ing] the ‘secret being’ of the epoch.”<sup>14</sup>

When Corradini and Settimelli highlight the problem of how art is valued in a capitalist society, the authors thematize, but only partially realize, the central problem that avant-gardes all through the century have attempted to address. The narrative of

the death of the avant-garde in the twentieth century, notably in Bürger's *Theory*, is about the end of any kind of autonomy for art, and the ultimate failure of avant-gardes to define some sphere of life outside of the commodity world to which they were eventually assimilated. But what I want to propose is that in some sense the reverse is true: avant-gardes have been defined by their ability to repeatedly generate new autonomous spaces of critique, however temporary and liminal. What I suggest below is that avant-garde practices are today and have always been less an example of art's diminishing autonomy from the political and economic spheres, and closer to what Massimo de Angelis has called a "value struggle."<sup>15</sup> For de Angelis, the closing down of autonomous spaces of critique is not a one-way street, in which all of capital's outsides are eventually colonized, infiltrated, and reified; rather, even under advanced, global capitalism, outsides are continuously generated any time there is a struggle over the means of social reproduction, or over the capacity for groups and collectivities to engage in non-capitalist forms of social exchange and relationality. The struggle over how social relations would be reproduced, or reconstituted from scratch, was decisive for the historical avant-gardes, and shaped the utopian horizon of the first decade of Futurist manifestos. Value struggles meanwhile remain central to current-day political opposition to processes of primitive accumulation and enclosure of various commons at work in today's globalized accumulation strategies. De Angelis argues convincingly that the everyday social field is made up of non-capitalist value practices and reproductive processes, too, and so any model of a totalizing capitalism that rearticulates all forms of social cooperation as market-based exchanges misses a key part of the picture and, worse, limits our ability to theorize and practice real alternatives.<sup>16</sup> If avant-gardes are, following de Angelis, constantly generating new "outsides" to capitalist production and reproduction, then the avant-garde problematic has been prematurely laid to rest.

The difference between the turn of the twentieth century and the turn of the twenty-first, then, is the relative importance of the state as a mediator of social reproduction. Futurists were part of a modernist political epistemology for which the state was the horizon of social reproduction, and so their struggle against liberal capitalism's value regime was conjoined to a national revolutionary politics. To illustrate this historical difference, consider that Settimelli and Corradini's call for a centralized administrative body for the valuation of art works, a "measurer," doesn't sound all that outlandish now, after the postwar establishment of arts funding and granting agencies in many advanced capitalist countries. Clearly some reversal has taken place in the strategies of value struggles.

### **The Avant-Garde Is History, but Which One?**

One of the reasons for the conceptual exhaustion of the avant-garde is, following Bürger, that aesthetic autonomy presents art with a paradox. As we've seen, the Futurists are ready to obliterate autonomy entirely, merging art with life and situating

the artist “along with the butcher and the tyre-manufacturer, the grave-digger and the speculator, the engineer and the farmer.” Bürger and de Angelis, despite many differences, agree that some distance from productive spheres is a necessary condition of critique; it is the disappearance of that distance that motivated Bürger to announce the death of the avant-garde in the first place. And so a recent twist in the narrative of the avant-garde should be a cause for concern.

In *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski point out that avant-gardism has filtered its way into management seminars: its anti-establishment shock techniques are now functionalized as organizational strategy. Surveying a large sample of American and French management texts from the 1990s, Chiapello and Boltanski observe that the once-opposed logics of managerialism and the avant-garde have begun to overlap significantly.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, artistic work is increasingly a managed enterprise: as Hal Foster decries in *Design and Crime*, “a nexus of curators and collectors, dealers and clients” has taken over the functions previously assigned to artists and critics, compromising the autonomy, or nominal autonomy, of both art and criticism. This phenomenon is confirmed by George Yúdice’s *The Expediency of Culture*, which documents the development of a new, globalized regime of arts administration and international exhibitions.<sup>18</sup> But on the other hand, and reciprocally, business management itself has been transformed. In its shift from the hierarchical models of Taylorist planning in favor of postmodern, flexible networks of improvisation, entrepreneurialism, and self-management, the management of enterprise has, Chiapello observes, deployed avant-garde rhetorics and techniques to transform itself. Organized anarchy, workplace insurrection, business revolution: the shift is more than terminological, and goes well beyond the longstanding corporate predilection for military metaphors (including vogueish references to Sun Tzu and Clausewitz as sources of business wisdom).<sup>19</sup> If the purpose of avant-garde intervention has always been the destruction of outdated hierarchies — of representational form, of cultural capital — then management has been on board since the post-Fordist turn, in which, as one *Harvard Business Review* writer put it, “greater speed and flexibility undermines hierarchy.”<sup>20</sup>

It would be easy to interpret the avant-garde’s migration to management training as just the latest chapter in Bürger’s narrative of the avant-garde’s assimilation to capital. The endurance of his critique lies in the basic antinomy that he attributes to the historical avant-garde. If Surrealism, Expressionism, and Dada all gestured toward a radical transformation of society by shrinking the distance between art and life, by reconciling elitist “institution art” to an everyday “life-praxis,” this synthesis could only come at the expense of the very space of cultural autonomy that made their critique possible in the first place.<sup>21</sup> Having developed out of the bourgeois separation of the cultural sphere from politics and economy, the historical avant-garde marks the moment of culture’s self-criticism; but in the end the avant-garde was unable to overcome its own merely-cultural status, an internal contradiction



that has manifested itself in over the course of the twentieth century in the eventual synonymy of “avant-garde” and elitist formal experimentation. Bluntly, the historical avant-garde was undone by its faith in aesthetic self-critique as a sufficient condition for social transformation. So Bürger’s *Theory* doesn’t only announce the collapse of the historical avant-garde under the accumulated weight of its misplaced ambition, but warns against the possibility of trying to revive it. He argues that the real successor to the avant-garde’s attempted negation of aesthetic autonomy is not the 1960s neo-avant-gardes who would revisit pastiche and minimalism, Dada and Constructivism, Duchamp’s readymades and Rodchenko’s monochromes, in an implied critique of the museumization of high modernism, but rather the “false sublation” of the commodity form, or mass culture’s union of art and commerce.<sup>22</sup> The recent reorganization of business along avant-gardist principles, then, is an intensification of Bürger’s logic, or proof of his original complaint that reducing art to life under capitalism could only result in further encroachments on autonomous spaces of critique.

Boltanski and Chiapello’s argument suggests a different periodization. The central historical argument of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* is that the long-term effect of France’s 1968 uprisings has been a transformation in capitalism’s mode of self-justification, a “recuperation” of 1960s-era anti-capitalist and anti-state critiques, after which such critiques are not only structurally impossible but deployed as part of capitalism’s very logic of expansion.<sup>23</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello show how the central premises of the 1960s critique of capitalism — a demand for liberation (from administered lives, state and normalizing apparatuses) and rejection of inauthenticity (of consumer conformity and spectacle) — are, on the one hand, a continuation of an “artistic critique” of alienation under capitalism that was inaugurated by the avant-gardes of the late nineteenth century, and on the other hand ultimately neutralized by the shift from rational-bureaucratic to post-Fordist and neoliberal models of labor organization.<sup>24</sup> Personal fulfillment and liberation have been recuperated by capitalism and located within the organization of production, itself reoriented in the direction of labor flexibility, self-management, and project-based adhocracy. Management’s guiding principle has shifted from Fordist discipline to neoliberal “workforce participation.”<sup>25</sup> All of which means that Boltanski and Chiapello give sociological substance to a familiar point. What has elsewhere been termed the “real subsumption” of labor to capital, or the realization of a world capitalist system and the turn to intensive, as opposed to extensive, forms of accumulation, is felt here in Boltanski and Chiapello’s picture of the contemporary regime of business management. One key consequence of real subsumption, according to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, is the rise of immaterial labor, or the transformation of previously semi-autonomous spheres like intellectual and cultural work, as well as the very production of subjectivities, into a new source of the production and accumulation of value.<sup>26</sup> Put differently, demands for personal or collective autonomy can no longer be positioned as critiques of an impersonal and alienating wage-labor system, but



are instead requirements of the system itself. From the proliferation of personalized goods and service economies, to the demand to view one's own employment as the never-ending expansion of human capital and transferable capacities under flexible employment regimes, capitalism's absorption of the oppositional politics of avant-gardes has been nothing less than total: the familiar surrealist critique of instrumental rationality, "take your desires for reality," was only too easily reconverted into a post-behaviorist principle of "employee empowerment" and *Liberation Management*, to borrow the title of one business bestseller.<sup>27</sup>

What Boltanski and Chiapello's recuperation thesis makes possible is a finer-grained genealogy of avant-garde practice. Bürger's thesis, in all its finality and despair at the avant-garde's "false sublation," has to be understood in its historical moment, at the conjuncture where the real subsumption of the social begins to impose itself in earnest; as Fredric Jameson has argued, the end of the 1960s saw those last few untouched spaces of social reality, or standpoints of potential resistance "from the outside" — the third world and the unconscious — succumb to the all-encompassing logic of the commodity.<sup>28</sup> Bürger's thesis on the intractable contradictions of the avant-garde, its negation of its own autonomy, is unmistakably a document of this critical closure. The aspects of Bürger's critique that speak the clearest today are the many nods towards May 1968, when, as he notes in a postscript, "the hopes of those who, like myself, believed in the possibility of 'more democracy' in all spheres of social life went unfulfilled."<sup>29</sup> Bürger's intervention stands as a sort of summary judgment on two decades of artistic and theoretical engagement with the avant-garde concept, from echoes of Dada and Constructivism in postmodern visual artists like Rauschenberg, Warhol, and Johns, with all their implied and overt contestation of high modernism's ascendance in galleries and art criticism; to Situationism's direct lineage from Surrealism, and its intensification and re-politicization of the Surrealist critique of instrumental rationality and the dead forms of capitalist reification with the irrationalism of the dream image and the motility of desire; to, in criticism, the real emergence and codification of the avant-garde as an intelligible critical category, and no longer only a performative self-description by artists, in the work of critics like Renato Poggioli, Hans-Magnus Enzensburger, Leslie Fiedler, and others.<sup>30</sup> Bürger's thesis, it seems to me, is significant primarily as a document that recognizes the real subsumption of the social at the moment it was set in motion.

But this raises the question of what the concept of the avant-garde had to offer to a critique of capitalism in the 1960s, or why it became necessary to evaluate social and artistic movements of that decade in terms of a prior cultural formation. Here the picture gets complicated, but in broad outline, the failure of the historical avant-garde was only partial: its critique of a moribund liberalism in politics and economy, of a philistine and classicist national bourgeois culture, formed the very basis of the planned economies of the mid-twentieth century. In a word, its critique of bourgeois liberalism paved the way for the midcentury "managerial revolution."<sup>31</sup>

In its various, and widely disparate, forms — fascist corporatism, the Soviet five-year plan, the Keynesian economic *dirigisme* — planning formed an ideological consensus that displaced classical liberalism's axiom of free competition and, for the problematic raised by the avant-garde, produced new avenues for integrating culture and industry and a whole new conception of culture *as work*, cast in the image of the designer — as well as new resistances to integration. In the analysis of the architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri, “the ideology of the plan” was nothing less than capitalism's midcentury recuperation of the avant-garde, a transformation of the negative critique of the cultural apparatus articulated by Futurism and Dada into more production-friendly schools of design modernism like De Stijl and Bauhaus.<sup>32</sup> These latter rapidly became the hegemonic form of modernism, which cut across political divides: “Organization and planning,” argues Tafuri, “are thus the passwords of both democratic socialism and democratic capitalism.”<sup>33</sup> We would have to add to Tafuri's bipolar map of the twentieth century the uses of planning in developmental policies enacted primarily in African and Latin American countries — and indeed the idea of a modernizing “third world” itself has to be considered a key symptom of the near-global acceptance of the ideology of the plan.<sup>34</sup> For Tafuri, utopian design modernisms were the dialectical realization of the first, negative moment of the historical avant-garde, whose critique of the residues of classicism cleared the way for the ambitious planning projects of Le Corbusier or El Lissitzky, and the transformation of everyday life by industrial design in Walter Gropius. That these were a partial version of the transformation of life by art envisioned by the historical avant-garde, or in other words capitalism's homeopathic defense against more radical systemic change, is precisely how we should understand the mechanics of recuperation to work.

All of which is to say that the 1960s rediscovery of the avant-garde was, in a sense, directed against its own false realization. But here it becomes necessary to make a distinction between specific historical avant-gardes. The particular movements Bürger takes as paradigmatic of the historical avant-garde period are Surrealism and Dada especially, with some space dedicated to the Frankfurt School's uptake of Expressionism. All of them contest the very forms of instrumental rationality that would manifest themselves in the Fordist rationalization of production and the managerialist basis of the postwar Keynesian state. As some critics have noticed, Bürger neglects the Futurist movement almost entirely.<sup>35</sup> On one hand this omission is confusing, because Futurism appears to meet his minimum requirements, as a movement that made the destruction of the cultural sphere and the integration of art and life its most basic tenet, and did this nearly a decade before the movements he chooses to investigate. The easy explanation for Bürger's avoidance of Futurism is its eventual accommodation to Fascism, which is a much more complicated issue than it appears, but has been an insurmountable barrier for leftist critics both before Bürger and since. The more likely reason that Futurism is overlooked in Bürger's *Theory* is because its totalizing ambitions looked too much like the expanded state-

form of the postwar period, from which Dada and Surrealism offered a potential, but ultimately contradictory, liberation — what Roland Barthes once dismissively called a “life style” avant-gardism.<sup>36</sup> By contrast, Futurism’s scope was all-encompassing. It sought to rehabilitate much more than just a stagnant art world: the range of targets in its manifestos includes the institutions of parliament, industry, church, and schools, but also the disciplines of city planning, architecture, fashion, cuisine, and far beyond: witness Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero’s 1915 manifesto called “The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe.”<sup>37</sup> From their agenda-setting critique, it was only a few steps to realize midcentury planning ideology, or “a utopia serving the objectives of the reorganization of production,” in Tafuri’s words.<sup>38</sup> And so if the avant-garde re-emerged as a critical category during the ’60s, it was partly as a discourse of complicity: this is the other side of Bürger’s antinomy, where the false sublation of art’s autonomy meant its ability to envision, and then find a place within, the institutional and administrative expansion of the midcentury state.

As for Bürger’s own false sublation of the avant-garde, the commodification of everyday life, it too stands to be folded into this periodization. One of the more historically and ideologically remote aspects of the early avant-gardes is their unproblematic enthusiasm for industry and mass production. But this enthusiasm needs to be considered in the contexts of a widespread productivism that threads its way through even the most radical writers of the period — recall Gramsci’s enthusiasm for Fordism, his question of how it would restructure social conditions far beyond the factory floor.<sup>39</sup> But it must be remembered that mass commodity production — all those midcentury labor-saving consumer durables, along with Keynesian full-employment policies and the expansion of the welfare state — offered an unparalleled mobility and freedom from the constraints imposed by a more family- and location-based bourgeois capitalism. It was in this way that planning and industrial design were positioned as market-based solutions to the demands for liberation posed by historical avant-garde. As Peter Wollen’s *Raiding the Icebox* argues, modernism itself can be understood as a kind of “cultural Fordism,” negotiating the impact of an emergent Fordist-Keynesianism in phenomena as varied as film (Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique*), Surrealist automatic painting, architecture (New York’s 1920s skyscraper boom), fashion (Coco Chanel’s unadorned “little black dress”), criticism (Clement Greenberg’s radically abstracted formalism), and academic disciplines (Vienna Circle linguistics, with its anti-metaphysical approach to language, indeed, to reality itself, as segmented parts open to rational analysis). For Wollen, mass production had worn out its welcome by the 1960s, when it was met with the parodies of standardization in Pop Art (Warhol’s “factory”) as well as the *détournements* of the Situationists. By the time of Bürger’s critique, mass consumption itself had so saturated the social world that another liberation was needed: Dada and Surrealism’s anti-rationalization critiques, then, were revived for a time in order to contest the “bureaucratic capitalism” that Guy Debord’s *Society of the*

*Spectacle* called “the concentrated form of the spectacle,” an anti-technocracy, anti-rationalization stance adopted from the *Socialisme ou barbarie* group.<sup>40</sup> Important here is that consumption, too, was determined by the logic of Taylorized production and centralized management, and required a kind of Copernican revolution in consumer orientation to absorb the anti-establishment zeitgeist of the 1960s: as Thomas Frank argues in *The Conquest of Cool*, the conformity of mass consumption was transformed on Madison Avenue into individualized appeals to self-realization that make up what he calls a “countercultural style,” which has only since continued to develop in the direction of personalized niche products and experience economies.<sup>41</sup>

So it becomes necessary to recognize two distinct moments of avant-garde recuperation by a resilient and adaptable capitalism. First, the historical avant-garde set itself against bourgeois liberalism, whose expanding industrial organization was at odds with its residually classicist culture, and provided the aesthetic and ideological critique necessary for an ascendant managerialism. Second, in the '60s, the avant-garde was again appealed to, this time as a discourse of liberation from the hegemonic state forms of managerialism that were derived, ironically, from the historical avant-garde itself. Our present-day unease with the avant-garde concept follows in the wake of this second recuperation. It may not be necessary to add that capitalism's recuperation of these avant-garde critiques ignored the more radical claims for social change to which they were, in their historical moments, linked, from the anarchism and syndicalism of Dada and Futurism, to the council communism that underpinned Situationism's notion of self-management.<sup>42</sup> Instead, the recuperation of these critiques essentially assimilated their aesthetic forms, their critiques of hierarchy and alienation, and turned them into new models for the accumulation of value.

Like any survey, this one is cursory. But one advantage of starting from an analysis of recuperation — or how cultural and political formations move against and then within a dominant order or rationality — is how it explains a certain definitional confusion around modernism's politics: why certain modern movements can seem to be both revolutionary and reactionary, or rather why they look radical from one vantage point and conformist from another. But that problem dissolves if we adopt a thoroughly historical understanding of these movements, one that refers itself to broad changes in the organization of production, as well as the different justifications used to perpetuate them. For example, the problem I opened with — avant-gardism as management doctrine, and as part of a new labor regime based on flexible networks — seems a scandal precisely because our conceptual tools for the avant-garde are outdated. The fact that Bürger's *Theory* remains the standard reading of the avant-garde today should tip us off that our concept remains locked within the constellation of terms that emerged in the anti-commodification critique of the 1960s.

### Contemporary Disavowals

Today, the dynamics of the avant-garde have changed: after the real subsumption

of cultural work, or in other words at a point where culture's ubiquity and non-autonomy are the condition of possibility of cultural work at all, any purportedly resistant cultural or artistic practice has been forced to redefine its aims and terms. Typically these redefinitions are accompanied by an almost ritualized, anxious disavowal of the avant-garde, but with decidedly mixed results. One strategy can be found in the 2005 book *Collectivism After Modernism*, whose editors situate their idea of the kinds of artistic resistance that have been on the rise since the eclipse of modernism in a collectivist "general intellect," following Italian *autonomia*, where the legacy of the avant-garde is reclaimed for political radicalism, though in spectral, almost spiritual, terms:

This new collectivism carries with it the spectral power of collectivisms past just as it is realized fully within the hegemonic power of global capitalism. Its creativity stands in relationship to the modernist image and the postmodernist counterimage much in the same way that the multitude of Sunday painters and other amateurs does to the handful of art stars: as a type of dark matter encircling the reified surfaces of the spectacle of everyday life. Vastly more extensive and difficult to pinpoint, this new collectivist fetish inhabits the everywhere and nowhere of social life. In so doing it gives its own interpretation of the old avant-garde banner — "art into life!" — that it proudly carries forth from its predecessors: that the ancient dream of the glorious, all-encompassing body of the collective — of Christ or God or Allah or King or Leviathan or Nation or State or Public — the dream of redemption, of experiencing the imagined community as an end to alienation and as a promise of eternal life, realize itself not as an image or as flight from images but instead as a form of social building that brings itself into being wherever and whenever it can.<sup>43</sup>

This model of a resistant art, claiming some distance from the avant-garde, though retaining its sense of collective authorship, is drawn from Hardt and Negri's concept of the constituent power of the multitude, and is compatible with approaches to critical art taken elsewhere. Nicholas Bourriaud's grouping of a series of 1990s art exhibitions as a "relational aesthetic," where the gallery space is a sort of laboratory in the exploration of new social forms and the constitution of communities, is one version of this post-avant-garde collectivism.<sup>44</sup> Many of the exhibitions cited by Bourriaud and Claire Bishop that fall under this category take as their subject matter figures and bodies of the multitude — service workers, undocumented immigrants<sup>45</sup> — and use the gallery space as the site of a suspension or *détournement* of marginalizing discourses or forms of labor in an attempt to "fill the cracks in the social bond"<sup>46</sup>; from Rirkrit Tiravanija's interactive installations, in which the artist takes up the



position of a service worker by, in one example, cooking for gallery patrons and creating a convivial, reparative space for open-ended sociability, to Santiago Sierra's more confrontational "ethnographic realism," which foregrounds an exploitative and exclusionary economic and legal order by, in the case of his exhibition at the 2001 Venice biennale, paying undocumented immigrants who work as the city's street vendors to dye their hair blond and then inviting those who typically surround the biennale into his exhibition to sell their goods.<sup>47</sup> However, Bourriaud's rejection of the world-historical ambitions of the avant-garde and his accompanying restriction of relational aesthetics to the "laboratory" of the gallery space — a complaint that has been raised from several quarters — are signs that the avant-garde's most fundamental problematic, the autonomy of the aesthetic from the economic and the political, returns here in all too familiar form: to its credit, Bourriaud's relational aesthetic has thematized that divide, but how it might be surpassed remains, in his writings, unclear.<sup>48</sup>

Another post-avant-garde development, vastly different in tone and scope, is *The Coming Insurrection* (2009) by the Invisible Committee. It resuscitates the avant-garde's signature genre, the manifesto, in a blistering anarcho-autonomist critique of the contemporary global order. The text's call to action tries to dissolve any residual twentieth-century vanguardism in the very act of negating the category of authorship, with its "invisibility" metaphor and the accompanying claim that the manifesto's ideas are drawn directly from the multitudes themselves: "This book is signed in the name of an imaginary collective. Its editors are not its authors. They were content merely to introduce a little order into the common-places of our time, collecting some of the murmurings around barroom tables and behind closed bedroom doors."<sup>49</sup> More than mere conceits, these gestures towards authorial self-dissolution are part of a larger strategy of struggle, or perhaps more properly an anti-strategy, aiming to "Turn anonymity into an offensive position" — the point being that identifiable and visible groups open themselves to police repression or market appropriation, and meanwhile exploitation has reached a such a point of saturation that resistance could conceivably begin anywhere, or everywhere at once. It remains to be seen whether this anti-organizational politics, based as much on Deleuzian lines of flight as coalitions of anti-globalization activist groups in recent years, can overcome its very formlessness, or what Ernesto Laclau has called the lack, in the figure of the resistant multitude, of a theory of articulation.<sup>50</sup> For my purposes here, the issue raised by *The Coming Insurrection* is the tension between its imagination of a creative, adaptable, distributed resistance and the apparently still-necessary act of writing a manifesto, which is perhaps better stated as a contradiction between content and form, or ends and means; in this text's case, a disavowed vanguardism seems to by necessity reappear at another level, in the performative contradiction of an anti-vanguardist manifesto.

Still, if the political horizon of these movements is a genuinely globalized capital,



then how does the concept of the avant-garde resonate outside the West? This raises a theoretical legacy that routinely excludes non-Western avant-gardes, both historical and contemporary. To fully appreciate the challenge to the concept of the avant-garde from the non-Western world, I want to draw from George Yúdice's "The Avant-Garde from the Periphery" (1999). Yúdice argues that if an essential element of avant-gardes is the imaginative proximity of social revolution, in Perry Anderson's phrase, then this insight needs to be tempered by a global perspective that de-emphasizes the 1917 Bolshevik revolution as the *sine qua non* of a strictly Western avant-gardism. Anti-colonial revolutions and uprisings swept across the non-Western world in the early twentieth century, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean, and each adapted avant-gardist techniques to its specific circumstances. Focusing particularly on Nicaragua and Brazil in the 1930s, Yúdice shows how avant-gardism was often combined with indigenous and ethnic traditions in order to create national cultures that would contest the deterritorializing forces of imperialism. In many cases, peripheral avant-gardes were enthusiastic about the forces of modernization and development which in those contexts contested the rule of an older oligarchy. That legacy has made the contemporary reception of "global" avant-gardes problematic: the tendency is for Western art institutions to delegitimize them by a double strategy of ghettoization — metropolitan exhibitions themed on "third-world" avant-gardes — and ideological misinterpretation, reading many of them as examples of colonial mimicry of Western forms, with any subversive or revolutionary potential in these non-Western avant-gardes negated by the nationalisms and postcolonial statisms with which they are often imbricated.<sup>51</sup> At base this is a formalist reading of global avant-gardism that forgets the critical and social dimension that constitutes avant-gardist practice as such, and the importance of historically specific understandings of the various social forces — revolutionary nationalism, imperialism, decolonization, modernization, community, ethnic identity — that compose the political field in which these avant-gardes respond. It is worth noting, meanwhile, that the revolutionary nationalisms of peripheral avant-gardes is a mirror image of the pro-modernization, revolutionary nationalist projects of some key Western avant-gardes, like the Futurists, whose exclusion from Bürger's and others' selective histories of the avant-garde begins to make more sense. In this case, action at the periphery reveals the truth of the centre, as statism and modernization were, at the time Bürger took up the avant-garde concept, impossible to reconcile with a leftist position.

Yúdice argues for a "conjunctural" sense of avant-gardism, which would include all of the different social forces just mentioned: "It is possible, by a postmodern turn, to rethink the avant-gardes as not constituting a particular moment in the history of modernity but, rather, a transformative power that is generated whenever the conjunctural circumstances allow for it."<sup>52</sup> Yúdice's conjunctural reading immediately complicates Bürger's historicism, which relies on a Hegelian "unfolding" of the aesthetic sphere as such, to the point of its terminal, avant-gardist moment of crisis

— a complaint against Bürger that has been raised by several critics.<sup>53</sup> On Yúdice's reading of Latin American avant-gardism, "The struggle for local autonomy proceeded according to a distinct logic of its own: the logic of community building. This logic included the creation of coherent meanings, cultural identities, and social solidarities — or organizing the relations of gender, class, and ethnicity. That is, we must be careful not to assume that the forces of [capitalist] integration [of a world market] were, themselves, the driving forces of twentieth-century global development. That would only reduce world history to the history of western domination."<sup>54</sup> I would like to suggest that Yúdice's concept of peripheral avant-gardes can stand as exemplary sites of value struggles: not struggles over value in the narrow sense of beliefs or ethics, but the conjunctural struggles over the ways in which labour and reproduction are organized and valued within a capitalist system. From Yúdice's perspective it becomes clearer why the avant-garde form was tied to statist articulations in the early century and in decolonizing zones, and then to anti-state, anti-institutional critique in the West after 1968: each of these conjunctures has its own reigning value regime, which avant-gardes, in some sense by definition, contest.

Meanwhile, the historical dimension of de Angelis's concept is important here, too: by tying the question of value to non-capitalist spheres, modeled on a notion of the commons that fights capitalist enclosure and the imposition of private property, the avant-garde concept connects to a series of struggles that precede its apparent start date, somewhere around 1900, and survive past its demise after May 1968. Further, it may well be that Bürger's apparent "self realization" of the avant-garde is some sense a genre effect, a consequence of their resuscitation and extensive use of the manifesto form, from the Futurists forward. As Janet Lyon argues, the manifesto can be traced back to the Diggers' and Levellers' responses to the enclosures of the commons in seventeenth-century England, and the exclusion of the poor from the newly formed Parliament; these manifestos themselves have to be understood as a paradigmatic case of a "value struggle," in which a social form of commoning was forcibly displaced by a new regime of property and rent, and the manifesto was critical to the articulation of non-capitalist values.<sup>55</sup> Finally, those contemporary manifestations of post-avant-gardism, which want to create a para-political, relational space out of the current institutional framework of art, and alternately to heal, oppose, or travesty the usual market relations and forms of gallery spectatorship, are all directly foregrounding this question of the struggle over value and social reproduction. The Futurists' call to re-value art's social effects and its capacity to produce new life and new social relations, though refined, has not yet been surpassed.

In his subsequent book *The Expediency of Culture*, Yúdice uses an ethnographic methodology to spell out how value struggles operate in the era of the real subsumption of cultural work. In that text, Yúdice's few remarks on the avant-garde raise two related problems with it in the context of present-day art practice: its all-or-nothing criteria of social change, where art's effectivity is judged solely by its transformative

social power and not by its more micropolitical effects in raising the visibility of oppressions or helping communities constitute localized responses to global capitalism; and the inevitable avant-garde gesture towards a “real” social life outside of political representation or artistic institutionalization, a space whose political effectivity, let alone its ontological status, Yúdice rightly questions.<sup>56</sup> His analysis of Latin American activist art and popular culture — maquiladora documentaries, baile funk, AIDS activism, and other complicated responses to the globalization of economy and culture — all take for granted that these practices can only take place with the assistance of supranational bodies like UNESCO, international biennales, and NGO-sponsored events like inSITE. For Yúdice, the question of these cultural forms’ social effectivity is not overdetermined by their institutional involvement, but is a complex site of negotiation between funding agencies, artists, communities, and international audiences — and Yúdice’s methodology here is exemplary, tracing out the “meaning” of specific art exhibitions from the conflicting testimonies by artists, granting agencies, community responses, and so on. That said, the very integration of culture into the production of a global order raises the issue most central to his book, where culture is now treated as a “resource” within global circuits of production and exchange (9-10). Yúdice doesn’t mean by this to extend and globalize the indispensable but well-worn Frankfurt School thesis on culture’s commodification, but rather that culture is, like any other key “natural” resource, now put to use in the management of life itself. For example, in a logic that connects border art exhibitions in Mexico to urban galleries in America, art is increasingly used as an indicator of “social health” in depressed economic zones, and exhibitions used as proof for a community’s ability to attract capital investment. This plays out as urban “revitalization” and “renewal” strategies — what Manuel Castells calls the ability of art infrastructure to “give life” to urban zones<sup>57</sup> — and the identification of “creative capitalism” as a motor of development in de-industrialized and “dead” city cores.<sup>58</sup> The use of life and death metaphors in gentrification discourses is hardly incidental, as this functionalization of art for development purposes has arisen precisely during the period of a prolonged attack on welfare state provisions of social assistance, which brought with them their own idea of how life and populations were to be managed. What Yúdice’s book offers, beyond its own remarkable analysis of Latin American art and activism, is a framework to connect artistic practice to the dominant modes of biopolitical governance that are key to understanding our own historical moment and our own organization of production, in which immaterial labour is increasingly the hegemonic form of value creation in post-Fordist economies.

All of this points back to the Futurists’ alternative criteria for aesthetic value, or the concept of life that, for them, acted as an outside to liberal capitalism. It raises important questions about how aesthetics resides at the center of a political desire for new forms of life, though these can no longer be, as they were for the Futurists, considered external to capitalist accumulation, nor can they be tied to

state-revolutionary ideologies. Two conclusions follow — one necessary, and one speculative. The first is that a reconsideration of avant-gardes as value struggles aligns them, today, with a different model of resistance: value struggles of different scales contest global capitalism's extraction of surplus value and its organization of social reproduction, from occupations, anti-austerity and anti-privatization strikes, struggles against intellectual property regimes, right down to local phenomena like urban agriculture initiatives and community support networks. These register a continuous process of struggle against capitalist enclosure, or what de Angelis calls "an ongoing tension in the social body."<sup>59</sup> Any practice that stakes out a temporary "outside" to recuperation by capital and the state is now, by virtue of its capacity to imagine of a new form of life and organize social reproduction differently, aligned with how the avant-garde has historically challenged capitalist value regimes. A reciprocal point is that today's social struggles have an important prehistory in the itinerary and transformations of the avant-garde over the course of the twentieth century, and this history is worth reclaiming.

The second conclusion follows from Yudice's suggestion that culture is now a resource, and therefore seen as part of a larger strategy of the biopolitical management of life and populations. If, as I've argued, the struggle over life and reproduction has been an object of the avant-gardes over the past century, some questions need to be asked: wasn't the avant-garde interested in the politicization of life all along? That is, doesn't the avant-garde's interest in merging art and life put it on the same trajectory as biopolitics, in which, as Foucault conceived of it, a "whole political network became interwoven with the fabric of everyday life"?<sup>60</sup> However counterintuitive the connection, there is at least a starting point in their overlapping histories: Foucault's genealogy of biopolitics is notably concentrated in the modernist period, from the deployment of political technologies of population management over the course of the nineteenth century (mortality rates, pensions, hygienics, and so on) to their transformation into the biological state racisms that were suspended, or displaced, at the end of World War II. Is the avant-garde's wished-for transformation of "life-praxis" part of this biopolitical genealogy — part of this diffusion and internalization of power, which has arguably become the dominant mode of power in a present-day society of control?<sup>61</sup> Following the periodization I outlined above, the historical avant-garde comes onto the scene during a first, nation-based articulation of biopolitics, where the nation-state's institutional expansion is posited as the solution to a growing number of deficiencies in the prior mode of social reproduction, bourgeois liberalism, whose very remoteness from "life" was precisely the complaint of the historical avant-gardes. After the midcentury realization of biopolitical state forms, but before the subsequent institutional critiques of the Keynesian regulation of social life, and the ways these critiques were repurposed by a resurgent neoliberalism to scale back the institutional security of "life" under the midcentury nation-state in favor of greater flexibility, precarity, and self-management — these, and not only the logic

of commodification, make up the “politics” against which the avant-garde needs to be defined.

### Notes

1. The date is Peter Wollen’s, who cites the breakup of the Situationists as having “brought to an end an epoch that began in Paris with the Futurist Manifesto of 1909” (124); see his *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993). Other prominent critical works that agree in substance with this view of the avant-garde’s demise include Perry Anderson’s *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), Matei Călinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1987), and Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986).
2. For example, in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000), which rests on the premise that a distributed, nomadic general intellect is the present moment’s model of political resistance, replacing vanguards looking to seize state power.
3. On the postmodern imperative to enjoy, see Slavoj Žižek’s *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991).
4. A recent issue of *New Literary History* indicates that the question of the avant-garde is due for critical re-evaluation. My essay here aims to contribute to that project. The issue’s editors describe the following starting point, today: “Looking beyond a restricted vocabulary of innovation and exhaustion, resistance and commodification, a number of the following essays assess diverse forms of avant-garde activity in terms of what they make possible, rather than rushing to quantify their ultimate success or failure. Even those essays wary of retaining the term “avant-garde” as a synonym for experimental aesthetic or political activity remain interested in exploring how various forms of such activity persist under contemporary conditions. In either case, this shift in focus requires dislodging certain beliefs about the nature of social institutions and the dynamics of historical change.” Quoted in Rita Felski and Jonathan P. Eburne’s “Introduction,” *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): viii.
5. Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) 132.
6. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004) 29. Rancière’s interest is in disarticulating the avant-gardes from their historical connection and setting them back into an expanded mapping of how aesthetic forms precede and determine political visibilities and constitution: “In short, there is the idea [of avant-gardes] that links political subjectivity to a certain form: the party, an advanced detachment that derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history. On the other hand, there is another idea of the avant-garde that, in accordance with Schiller’s model, is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future” (29). In that second capacity, avant-gardes typify the “aesthetic regime” of modernity, in which Bürger’s central antinomy — the self-destruction of aesthetic autonomy — is recast as the beginning point of modern art, for which a demand for autonomy — or complete freedom from political determination — and a demand for heteronomy — or the ability to effect political change — determine the contradictory poles between which twentieth-century aesthetics is constituted. In this sense, Bürger’s antinomy becomes Rancière’s basic condition of art in the twentieth century, and so not the sign of a failed political project. See also Rancière’s “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and



Heteronomy,” *New Left Review* 14 (2002): 133-51.

7. For Futurism’s affiliation with anarchist and syndicalist groups, see Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn, 1996) and Giovanni Lista, “Marinetti et les Anarcho-Syndicalistes,” *Présence de F. T. Marinetti: actes du colloque international*, ed. Jean-Claude Marcadé (Lausanne: Editions L’Age D’homme, 1982); for Futurism as essentially protofascist, see Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1986) and Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Much of the controversy over Futurism’s politics has to do with the movement’s internal dynamics. It was far from a univocal movement, despite F. T. Marinetti’s imposing presence, but even when it appeared to be speaking in a single voice, Marinetti’s simultaneous political affiliations with the Italian Nationalist Association on the right and anarcho-syndicalist groups on the left is an insurmountable barrier to critical attempts to reduce Futurism to a single political camp. More recent appraisals have avoided politically reductionist conclusions by stressing the movement’s own self-difference over time and between geographically distinct Futurist groups: see Walter Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993). For my part, instead of the impossible project of taking the aggregate of these statements and calculating some kind of median political position, or deciding on the truth or falsity of various Futurist positions, I want to understand Futurism in terms of the political statements it made possible: that is, in terms of how it imagined politics otherwise, and specifically how it imagined undermining hegemonic liberalism by displacing politics onto the terrain of life.
8. Bruno Corradini and Emilio Settimelli, “Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius — Futurist Manifesto 1914,” *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking, 1973) 135-149.
9. Corradini and Settimelli, “Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius” 145.
10. Corradini and Settimelli, “Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius” 146.
11. Corradini and Settimelli, “Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius” 149.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.” *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. E. Richardson, trans. Richard Nice. (Westport: Greenwood, 1986) 250.
13. On Futurism’s early years (and prior names), see Günter Berghaus, Introduction to *Critical Writings* by F. T. Marinetti (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2006) xviii. All quotes on Futurism as a living art are from Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters 1910,” in *Futurist Manifestos*.
14. Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture, and Other Essays* (New York: Teachers College P, 1968) 13.
15. Massimo de Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto, 2007).
16. Value struggles encompass any struggle for the commons in de Angelis’s writing, from anti-austerity protests to daily reproductive activities. He writes, “capital’s value practices [are] in perpetual struggle with other value practices. [Capitalism] is also preservative of the rules generated by enclosures, because through repetition subjects tend to become normalized to them. Yet this is a normalisation that does not abolish conflict among value practices, but that turns this conflict into the driving engine of the evolution of the organisational form of capitalism while basic processes of homeostasis keep social forces and conflicting value practices coupled together. In other words, *in the daily reproduction of our livelihoods we are involved, knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, in a form of civil war cutting*



across the social body.” De Angelis, *The Beginning of History* 81.

17. “Mais il faut aussi souligner tous les signes de rapprochement des deux logiques de l’art et du management qui s’accumulent espécialement depuis les années 80. [...] Le manager est ainsi en passé de devenir le meilleur allié de l’artiste après avoir été considéré comme son bourreau.” Eve Chiapello, *Artistes versus managers: le management culturel face à la critique artiste* (Paris: Métailié, 1998) 205, 211. [“But it is also necessary to underline all the signs of a reconciliation of the two logics of the art and management which have accumulated, particularly since the Eighties. [...] The manager is thus in the process of becoming the best ally of the artist after being regarded as his antagonist.”]
18. Hal Foster, *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (London: Verso, 2002) 121; George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003). Yúdice writes, “the evolution of arts administration since the 1960s has increasingly encouraged artists to become better service providers. This refunctionalization is not limited to the United States but is a characteristic of the role of artists as catalysts for cultural citizenship in the new cultural policies throughout Latin America and many other regions” (319).
19. See Matthew Jesse Jackson’s “Managing the Avant-Garde,” *New Left Review* 32 (2005): 105-16, for a brief survey of recent “revolutionary” business tracts, which, he argues, are the latest development in “the last century’s contest between ‘artists and managers’ — one that has been increasingly resolved by a tendency to merge, or even trade places, as the arts become more commercialized while business recuperates their discarded mythology of creative individualism” (107).
20. Rosabeth Moss Canter, “The New Managerial Work.” *Harvard Business Review* (1989) 89.
21. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1984). Bürger writes: “it can be seen that the avant-gardistes’ attempt to reintegrate art into the life process is itself a profoundly contradictory endeavor. For the (relative) freedom of art vis-a-vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance” (50).
22. The passage quoted in the previous note continues: “During the time of the historical avant-garde movements, the attempt to do away with the distance between art and life still had all the pathos of historical progressiveness on its side. But in the meantime, the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life, and this also allows one to recognize the contradictoriness of the avant-gardiste undertaking.” Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 50.
23. On the dynamics of recuperation, Boltanski and Chiapello write: “Capitalism attracts actors, who realize that they have hitherto been oppressed, by offering them a certain form of liberation that masks new types of oppression. It may then be said that capitalism ‘recuperates’ the autonomy it extends, by implementing new modes of control. However, these new forms of oppression are gradually unmasked and become the target of critique, to the point where capitalism is led to transform its *modus operandi* to offer a liberation that is redefined under the influence of critique. But, in its turn, the ‘liberation’ thus obtained harbours new oppressive mechanisms that allow control over the process of accumulation to be restored in a capitalist framework. Cycles of recuperation thus lead to a succession of periods of liberation by capitalism and periods of liberation *from* capitalism.” Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005) 425.
24. Boltanski and Chiapello: “Hence it can be said, without exaggeration or paradox, that if capitalism

attempted to recuperate the demand for authenticity underlying the critique of the consumer society (by commodifying it, as we have seen), in another respect — and relatively independently — it has, with the metaphor of the network, assimilated the critique of this demand for autonomy, whose formulation paved the way for the deployment of reticular and rhizomorphic paradigms. This contradictory double incorporation tends both to acknowledge the demand for authenticity as valid and to create a world where this question is no longer to be posed. And this, as we shall see, underlies the existential tensions — inextricably psychological and ethical — felt by people engaged in the process of accumulation.” Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* 452.

25. Chiapello writes, “Ces deux dernières décennies, qui ont vu la mode de la culture d’entreprise dans les années 80 et celle du réseau et de la confiance dans les années 90, doivent être vue comme une période de profond bouleversement du management et de ses préceptes puisque ont été célébrés des formes difficiles à maîtriser, faisant appel à l’affectivité des personnes et à leur histoire sociale, qui sont autant d’aspects que le management scientifique des débuts aurait bien voulu ignorer. Il faut encore montrer que ces nouvelles formes ne sont pas de simples ajouts à une liste de pratiques managériales, traditionnellement très éloignées des fonctionnements des mondes de l’art. Elles accompagnent en fait une évolution en profondeur de la définition centrale du management.” Eve Chiapello, *Artistes versus managers* 215. [These last two decades, which have witnessed the culture of the enterprise of the ’80s and that of the network and trust in the ’90s, must be seen as the period of a profound overturning of management and its tenets, since what has been celebrated are difficult forms of control that appeal to people’s emotions and their social history, which are aspects that, from its beginnings, scientific management would have preferred to exclude. It remains to be shown that these new forms are not simple additions to a list of managerial practices, traditionally very distant from the workings of the worlds of art. They actually accompany a profound evolution of the core definition of management.]
26. Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 269-76.
27. From Tom Peters, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1992): “Finally, get turned on. Or follow your bliss, or whatever. Vacuous advice? Perhaps. But the practical implication is this: In a knowledge-based economy, you must — to survive — add some special value, be distinctively good at something. And the truth is, we only get good at stuff we like. [...] Ain’t nobody going to take care of you on the job in a big company anymore: It’s not dog-eat-dog out there anymore, it’s skill-eat-skill. If you’re not skilled/motivated/passionate about something, you’re in trouble!” (757-58). Other instant classics of the business-self-help genre: Tom Peters, *Thriving on Chaos: Handbook for a Management Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1987); Richard Tanner Pascale, *Managing on the Edge: How the Smartest Companies Use Conflict to Stay Ahead* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990); Robert H. Waterman, Jr., *The Renewal Factor: How the Best Get and Keep the Competitive Edge* (Toronto: Bantam, 1987). The crisis in finance capital of 2007, however, has had its effects on management too: some have called for a walkback from the edge of neoliberal crisis-theory to an older form of structured management and vectors of real productivity. See Jack Buffington, *The Death of Management: Restoring Value to the U.S. Economy* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).
28. Jameson writes, “late capitalism in general (and the ’60s in particular) constitute a process in

which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism — the last vestiges of a noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world — are not ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the Third World and the unconscious. The '60s will then have been the momentous transformational period when this systemic restructuring takes place on a global scale." "Periodizing the '60s," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1988) 207.

29. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* 90.
30. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1968); Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, "The Aporias of the Avant-Garde" in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, trans. Michael Roloff (New York: Seabury, 1974) 16-41; Leslie Fiedler, "The Death of Avant-Garde Literature," *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 2 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971) 454-61. The standard surveys of criticism from the definitional moment of the avant-garde in the 1960s are Andreas Huyssen's chapter "The Search for Tradition" in *After the Great Divide* 160-78, and Matei Călinescu's "The Crisis of the Avant-Garde's Concept" in *Five Faces of Modernity* 120-25.
31. Classical sources for this shift include Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1977) and James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What Is Happening in the World* (New York: John Day, 1941). For a critical history, see David Harvey's "Fordism" chapter in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 125-140.
32. Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge: MIT P, 1976). Tafuri singles out Breton as one artist-intellectual who resisted the functionalization of culture by industry. In his second Surrealist manifesto (1924), Breton marks out the very tension that would later be the basis of Bürger's antinomy of the avant-garde: thought "cannot do other than oscillate between the awareness of its perfect autonomy and that of its strict dependence" (qtd. in Tafuri 64). Breton ultimately pushed for art's critical autonomy, as opposed to, for example, Russian Constructivism, for whom art as propaganda posed no great worry. See Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 63-68.
33. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 69.
34. World systems theorists recognized in the 1970s that the export of "development" was part of a global accumulation strategy, consistent with older imperialisms. See, for example, Samir Amin's *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review, 1976), and "Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model." *Review of African Political Economy* 1.1 (1974): 9-26.
35. Notably Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993) 6.
36. Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1992) 67.
37. In Apollonio (ed.), *Futurist Manifestos 197-200*.
38. Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* 98.
39. Gramsci, "Americanism and Fordism," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971) 279-318.

40. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1995) 41.
41. Frank writes: “The countercultural style has become a permanent fixture on the American scene, impervious to the angriest assaults of cultural and political conservatives, because it so conveniently and efficiently transforms the myriad petty tyrannies of economic life — all the complaints about conformity, oppression, bureaucracy, meaninglessness, and the disappearance of individualism that became virtually a national obsession in the 1950s — into rationales for consuming.” Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1997) 31.
42. On Situationism and council communism, see Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox* 120-57.
43. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette, “Introduction: Periodizing Collectivism,” *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Stimson and Sholette (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2007) 13.
44. For Bourriaud, “present-day art is roundly taking on and taking up the legacy of the 20th century avant-gardes, while at the same time challenging their dogmatism and their teleological doctrines. [...] It was based on conflict, whereas the imaginary of our day and age is concerned with negotiations, bonds, and co-existences.” Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Presses Du Réel, 2002) 36.
45. Bishop writes: “relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy” (54). Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.” *October* 110 (2004) 54.
46. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* 36.
47. On Tiravanija, see Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* 25, 30. On Sierra, see Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 73.
48. Bishop’s observation of the audiences of these exhibitions forces her to conclude that despite its ambitions, relational aesthetics essentially “permits networking among a group of art dealers and like-minded art lovers.” Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” 54.
49. Invisible Committee, “The Coming Insurrection,” *Support the Tarnac 10* (accessed 9 March 2010) n.p. <<http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/texts/the-coming-insurrection/>>.
50. Ernesto Laclau, “Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?” in *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, ed. Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean (New York: Routledge, 2004) 21-30. A similar critique of the non-strategic character of the multitude can be found in Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, “Gems and Baubles in *Empire*.” In *Debating Empire*, ed. Gopal Balakrishnan (London: Verso, 2003) 52-60.
51. For critiques of this tendency, see Elizabeth Harney, “Postcolonial Agitations: Avant-Gardism in Dakar and London” *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010): 731-51, and Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000).
52. George Yúdice, “Rethinking the Theory of the Avant-Garde from the Periphery” in *Modernism and Its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* ed. Anthony L. Geist and Jose Monleon (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1999) 74.
53. Yúdice’s conception here bears some similarities to Hal Foster’s better-known critique of Bürger, which also argues, although from an internalist and Western art-historical perspective, for a more flexible historiography to the concept of the avant-garde. But this temporal flexibility comes with a cost; Foster’s critique wants to redeem neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and ‘60s and open

the possibility of future ones, but to do this he draws from psychoanalytic concepts of return, deferred action, and compulsive repetition to frame the avant-garde as a traumatic hole in the signifying order that is periodically reiterated by subsequent avant-gardes. The cost here is any sense of the “conjunctural circumstances” Yúdice refers to above; historical analysis recedes behind a poststructural, traumatic model of a more or less involuntary mechanism of repetition. Contrast this to Yúdice, who is careful to temper his historical and geographical expansion of the concept of the avant-garde with the material circumstances of decolonization in which they occur. See Hal Foster, “What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?” *October* 70 (1994): 5-32.

54. Yúdice, “Rethinking the Theory of the Avant-Garde from the Periphery” 56.
55. Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 16-23.
56. Yúdice explores the limitations of Bürger’s *Theory* for contemporary activist art throughout the book by implication, but explicitly in a discussion of inSITE “border art” exhibitions in the 1990s. See Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture* 316-24.
57. Quoted in Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture* 19.
58. Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture* 16.
59. De Angelis, *The Beginning of History* 28.
60. Foucault, “Lives of Infamous Men,” *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al., Vol. 3 (New York: New Press, 2000) 159.
61. Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3-7.

## The Importance of Being Autonomous: Toward a Marxist Defense of Art for Art's Sake

Jackson Petsche

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno once wrote, "*l'art pour l'art* is...in need of a defense."<sup>1</sup> This strange and somewhat cryptic remark is interesting coming from a Marxist critic who made several criticisms of "*l'art pour l'art*" or art for art's sake. What did Adorno mean by a defense, and what kind of defense could he have had in mind? Art for art's sake, with its insistence on art's autonomy and its disavowal of art's social function or role, would seem to be patently and indelibly at odds with a Marxist aesthetic. For the Marxist aesthetic follows Marx's claim that art is a mode of production within social relations.<sup>2</sup> However, a defense is not an endorsement. Adorno was suggesting an alternative, or a challenge, to the reaction against autonomous art in favor of committed art. Adorno realized that such a simplistic binary was a fallacy. The defense, then, of art for art's sake consists of the realization of the dialectic of art's unavoidable autonomous status with art's position within social relations and modes of production.

A realization of the dialectical position of the work of art is especially relevant in the cultural climate of late capitalism wherein both subjects and objects appear to have lost their autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic. Adorno's comment regarding *l'art pour l'art* remains intriguing precisely because it underscores the importance of the autonomy of art, and it is to the autonomous status of art that one needs to return in contemplating the postmodern, and the commodification of the aesthetic inherent in late capitalism. Fredric Jameson argues that what he views as a "return of the aesthetic" in the postmodern has coincided with "the end of the political," and Jameson explains this dialectically as being the result of "the end of artistic autonomy, of the work of art and its frame."<sup>3</sup> More recently, Nicholas Brown has asserted that "what differentiates Adorno's culture industry from the self-representation of our own contemporary moment is that the art-commodity now has no other."<sup>4</sup> As Brown notes, "[f]or Adorno, the art-commodity had a plausible other or negative horizon, namely modernism."<sup>5</sup> Brown is right — the notion of art as a "plausible other" has disappeared in our current climate of capitalism. And this disappearance of a "plausible other or negative horizon" can be linked with Jameson's notion of "the end of the political" in that subjects — the spectators of art, the readers of literary texts — no longer appear to expect, or look for, such a "plausible other."

Thus, I would argue that the end of art's autonomy in postmodernism has resulted



in the end of the individual subject's ability to differentiate the form of art from the commodity form. The notion of the end of art's autonomy is interconnected with the postmodern notion of the "death of the subject." Jameson astutely recognizes that the postmodern discourse regarding the "death of the subject," wherein the centered subject or unique, autonomous individual is recognized to have been a fiction, posits "an aesthetic dilemma."<sup>6</sup> For, as Jameson suggests, "if the experience and ideology of the unique self...is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing."<sup>7</sup> Jameson is right to point to the ambiguity regarding individual artistic expression, but what seems just as important is what would seem to be the loss of individual subjective appreciation in the postmodern aesthetic.

Leon Trotsky realized that the subject does not merely appreciate the form of art, that the experience of art — while the result of specific modes of production — is not the same as the experience of the commodity form. In *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky points out, "The form of art is to a certain and very large degree independent, but the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it."<sup>8</sup> What Trotsky helps to illustrate is that art's autonomy is interdependent with social relations and conditions; for art to have its autonomy, its independence, it must be dependent upon subjects of society who both create and participate with its form. With the end of art's autonomy in postmodernism, a reduction of the subject (both as creator and appreciator) to an "empty machine" seems, indeed, to have taken place.

If Jameson is correct that the postmodern has seen a "return of the aesthetic," then it is important to consider Jameson's claim that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally."<sup>9</sup> In a culture that is bombarded and inundated with images, "aesthetic experience is now," Jameson states, "everywhere and saturates social and daily life in general."<sup>10</sup> The "return of the aesthetic" in the postmodern thus represents the antithesis of the notions of art for art's sake which sought, with what can be seen as elitist claims, to separate art from bourgeois norms and the sordid, ugly, and mundane reality of urban, industrial existence. Paradoxically, this postmodern "return of the aesthetic," for Jameson, represents "in a strict philosophical sense...the end of the aesthetic itself, or of aesthetics in general."<sup>11</sup> With the oversaturation of the aesthetic, and of cultural production in general, wherein everything, in effect, becomes culture, the "'specificity' of the aesthetic (and even of culture as such) is necessarily blurred or lost altogether."<sup>12</sup> It would seem, then, that notions of the uniqueness and the autonomy of the work of art, not to mention its beauty, may be worth revisiting no matter how limiting those notions sound to postmodern ears. For the "'specificity' of the aesthetic" demands an attention to the work of art.

To understand any possible defense of art for art's sake one must understand what art for art's sake truly is. Adorno was discussing in the 1930s a theory of art that began

a hundred years before in France. Théophile Gautier was the first to use the term *l'art pour l'art*, proclaiming that it was antithetical to art's true purpose to serve any moral or social function.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic idea of *l'art pour l'art* gained momentum in England where it was viewed as a way to combat the moral didacticism which permeated Victorian art and literature. In England, the most famous endorsement of art for art's sake, as it was translated into English, was found in the aesthetic criticism of Walter Pater. The term "art for art's sake" was referred to in the concluding sentence of his notorious work *The Renaissance*, written in 1873, wherein Pater claimed art's most important aim was to give pleasure and "to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass."<sup>14</sup> By the 1890s, *The Renaissance* was something of a bible among the Decadent writers of the time.<sup>15</sup> Oscar Wilde once referred to it as his "golden book."<sup>16</sup> The Decadent writers, following Pater's lead, insisted even more emphatically on art's autonomy.

The aesthetic of art for art's sake was from its inception a revolt against bourgeois existence. However, as the Russian Marxist Gyorgii Plekhanov once pointed out in an essay on art for art's sake (published just twelve years after the turn of the century), "Gautier hated the 'bourgeois' but at the same time he denounced the idea that the hour was at hand to eradicate bourgeois social relations."<sup>17</sup> Plekhanov posits an essential criticism of art for art's sake insofar as art for art's sake, while condemning bourgeois morality, was not in actuality condemning bourgeois social relations. The difference is, obviously, of the utmost importance. To advocate for art's autonomy against the limitations of bourgeois morality without recognizing the processes of reification, ideology, and hegemony, which brought such morality into being, is problematic. Such a lack of vision could quickly deteriorate into what Frantz Fanon once called "aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the Decadent writers and artists of the *fin de siècle*, for example, despite all their aesthetic rebellion could in fact be seen to be respecting aspects of the established order due to their avoidance of the reality of social relations.

One possible exception is Oscar Wilde, whose "The Soul of Man under Socialism" represents a lengthy treatise on how art, the artist, and the individual cannot truly thrive under "the institution of private property."<sup>19</sup> In his own unique Wildean fashion, Wilde depicts a socialism that would incorporate the Marxian notion of use-value with the autonomy of art and the artist: "*The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful.*"<sup>20</sup> The commodity does not seem to exist in such a scenario; however, Wilde never explains whether or not this art — these beautiful objects — will be sold or how they will be consumed. Perhaps Wilde's ambiguity can be discerned in the fact that, as Marion Thain has pointed out in her essay on *fin de siècle* poetry, "aestheticism became prominent just as economic and consumerist issues began to impinge on art through the rise of mass culture at the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>21</sup> What Thain refers to as the "aesthetic/economic paradox" of the *fin de siècle* is in fact not a paradox but the dialectic of art's autonomous status within social

relations and modes of production.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it is not a paradox limited to the *fin de siècle* but one that is prominent in the eras of modernism and postmodernism as Jameson has pointed out.

Adorno perhaps came closest to making the defense of *l'art pour l'art* when he claimed in *Aesthetic Theory* that “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art...it criticizes society by merely existing.”<sup>23</sup> Adorno seems to be taking a similar position to that of the art for art's sake movement which opposed society, particularly Victorian society, in its very insistence on art's autonomy. However, Adorno clearly departs from Wilde's notion that “Art never expresses anything but itself.”<sup>24</sup> Adorno emphasizes that art, by virtue of its very autonomy, expresses opposition to the society from which it cannot be separated. It is this notion of art's autonomy that establishes a Marxist defense of art for art's sake, suggesting, as it does, the dialectical nature of such a defense; for art at once both opposes society and exists as a product of society. The question is whether or not art can more specifically oppose social relations while simultaneously being a commodity of social relations. The autonomy of art is thus a lie that art tells itself, which paradoxically contains a truth. Art, according to Adorno, can never be truly autonomous and yet it must take on that status in order to criticize society.

Adorno's claims to the social role of art's autonomy relate to Jameson's observations regarding the “return of the aesthetic” and the “end of the political” in the postmodern being the result of the end of art's autonomy. For the aesthetic, in one sense, in the postmodern no longer contains the subversive realization of the autonomy of art. Art metamorphosed into, as Herbert Marcuse put it, “anti-art,” or the notion of the end of art — all categorical designations claiming an end of the aesthetic.<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically, however, the postmodern has seen, as Jameson has continued to point out, a saturation of the aesthetic in commodity production. Thus advertisements might contain more “beauty” than what Adorno and Marcuse would call “authentic works of art.” Moreover, contemporary works of art have often lost the ability to shock or disturb the status quo. As Jameson states, “even the most offensive forms of this art...are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful unlike the productions of older high modernism.”<sup>26</sup> The most salient feature of Jameson's criticism is the realization of the commercial, and thus financial, success of these newer forms of art in the postmodern; the alienating effects of art have become marketable. Marcuse predicted such an outcome when he observed the acculturation of the art of high modernism into the “one-dimensional society” of the 1950s and early 1960s: “The alien and alienating oeuvres of intellectual culture become familiar goods and services.”<sup>27</sup>

If the oppositional stance to society that is inherent within the autonomous work of art has become neatly packaged and consumed, then how can art still oppose society merely by existing? Is art still capable of being autonomous? It would seem that art would have to be autonomous, whether or not it still can be, in order to return to the political. The dialectic would follow that in order for art to be political, it has to be less

political in its content, as Adorno once argued: “In all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, such an idea perhaps needs to be taken further now; for Adorno was speaking of modernist works of art at a time when the debates about committed art were taking place. Now, it would seem that the notion of committed art remains as antiquated as art for art’s sake in the postmodern. Roberto Schwarz illustrates the commodification of committed art in his discussion of the Brechtian aesthetic:

It is easy to note the use advertising has made of the most sensational discoveries of avant-garde art, among them the resources of the Brechtian actor. The gain in intelligence represented by the estrangement effect, formerly conceived as a means of stimulating criticism and liberating social choice, changes meaning against the new background of consumerism, helping, say, to promote a new brand of cleaning product.<sup>29</sup>

Not only have the alienating effects of avant-garde art become marketable, but even the most overtly political avant-garde aesthetic can be commodified and thus rendered politically obsolete against, what Schwarz rightly refers to as “the new background of consumerism.” Adorno’s famous essay, “Commitment,” offered a critique of the Brechtian aesthetic in favor of the notion of autonomy. But in order to determine the importance of the autonomous work of art in the postmodern one needs to recognize that modernist avant-garde art and committed art alike have been embraced by the market.

The problem in postmodernism is not so much how the work of art was created — whether from the standpoint of committed art or from autonomous art — but rather how the work of art is perceived and received. Thus, the aesthetic problem now, in our contemporary or postmodern society, is a problem of the subject; the problem becomes one of the consumption as much as the production of art. Jameson sees the end of the autonomous work of art resulting in a direction that moves away from true perception of the art object “and returning into subjectivity.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, the particular form of subjectivity which Jameson limns — perhaps a postmodern subjectivity? — is limited in scope; for Jameson posits a subjective aesthetic experience of “a wide ranging sampling of sensations, affectabilities, and irritations of sense data” that at first sounds akin to Pater’s impressionist criticism with its emphasis on “experience itself.”<sup>31</sup> A closer look reveals that contrary to the Paterian aesthetic experience, the “new life of postmodern sensation” is closer to the sensory experience of the contemporary urban environment with its billboards, bright lights, and colorful advertisements.<sup>32</sup> Jameson astutely posits that the postmodern “return of the aesthetic” is based not on “specific aesthetic modalities” but rather upon “accidents in the continuum of postcontemporary life, breaks and gaps in the perceptual system of late capitalism.”<sup>33</sup> In the postmodern, the aesthetic experience is all too often not

based on perception, but on a flow (to borrow a term from Jameson) with the spatial environments of late capitalism. Jameson gives the interesting analogy of walking through a museum in which one does not heed individual works but rather catches glimpses of colors and shades “in passing.”<sup>34</sup>

Pater seemed aware of the danger of sensory overload when he wrote, “At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects.”<sup>35</sup> Pater’s illustrious solution was to “burn always with...[a] hard gem-like flame,” experiencing these impressions to their fullest.<sup>36</sup> Pater’s question — “How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?” — seems a vital force itself to interrogate “the new life of postmodern sensation.”<sup>37</sup> Pater’s insight of being “buried under a flood of external objects” is all the more pertinent now in the commodity culture of late capitalism wherein the objects (and images) which surround us almost always signify the commodity form. To return, then, to Pater’s impressionist criticism, with its emphasis on art for art’s sake, can resuscitate sensory awareness and aesthetic experience in the postmodern from sensations dictated and manipulated by the market. It is not simply a question of the museum, but of the street; Pater’s question needs to be emphasized, and placed against the commodification of the aesthetic (and of culture): how can we be “present always at the focus?”

The “shudder” was Adorno’s solution to what he saw, like Jameson, as the limitations of the subjective experience of art; the “shudder” defied “the conventional idea of experience” because it resulted in a “liquidation of the I, which shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.” For Adorno, the individual experience of art ultimately was an experience that went beyond the individual, that negated the individual as something separate from society and objective reality. However, as Adorno points out, “the I requires not distraction but rather the utmost tension” for this “shudder” to take effect.<sup>38</sup> Such an effect, which seems akin to the notion of the Sublime, would seem almost impossible in the postmodern.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, individuals are not only too distracted by the culture of the image but simultaneously exist in too high a state of tension with their surroundings for anything like Adorno’s “shudder” to function as an aesthetic experience. The postmodern decentered subject is decentered in a world of objects. Terry Eagleton illustrates the nature of this decentering process: “Capitalism continually centres the subject in the sphere of values, only to decentre it in the realm of things.”<sup>40</sup> Late capitalism has particularly decentered the subject within the realm of things of culture as culture itself becomes the commodity. The experience of the city space, or just as easily the suburban shopping mall, is carried over into the museum. There is simply too much to see, which causes distraction, but which, perhaps more importantly, causes tension.

The lack of individual space in the postmodern experience is the locus for this tension: there is a lack of individual space in which to truly experience a subjective impression; it is as if every space, even so-called “private” space, is dominated by the



image. Public spaces — the city streets — while ostensibly public are experienced as private property; the streets are inundated with advertisements, becoming like veins running through the commodity structure. And all “private” spaces become invaded the moment one engages with any form of media.<sup>41</sup> The tension, thus, is one of anxiety. It is not a return of the repressed; on the contrary, this tension ultimately represses what Marcuse calls “aspects of liberation” in “the aesthetic form.”<sup>42</sup> The inundation of images and textual messages which tell one how to look, how to act, and how to be — ultimately how to become a commodity oneself — forces a tightening, an attempt to tighten one’s grip on reality. Staving off the objective reality forces a loss of subjective reality, and any liberating aspects of works of art become lost as well. What I am delineating as “tension,” Jameson describes as “the omnipresent symbiosis in late capitalism between the destructive or negative stimulus and the cultural transformation of it into ‘pleasure’ or ‘thrill.’”<sup>43</sup> The transformation from tension into “pleasure” or “thrill” explicates the reason for the shallow sensory experiences of art, which Jameson finds in postmodern subjectivity. Any “aspects of liberation” that may exist in a work of art can easily become repressed and sublimated into a form of “thrill” amidst the aestheticization of the commodity.

It becomes increasingly difficult, then, to experience Adorno’s “shudder” among the myriad examples of what Benjamin called “the shock experience.”<sup>44</sup> Adorno’s “shock” or “shudder” was caused by the experience of “important works” of art.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, however, was aware of the shock produced by the experience of the modern city space. For Benjamin, “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli.”<sup>46</sup> This sharpening of focus and of consciousness is precisely what is needed and what is so hard to achieve in postmodernity. Indeed, as Jameson suggests, the “omnipresent symbiosis” which he discusses needs to be seen as the outgrowth of Benjamin’s notion of the shock factor.<sup>47</sup>

This tension, furthermore, is a symptom of alienation, a symptom of art’s being estranged from what Marcuse delineates as art’s “*estranging form*.”<sup>48</sup> When advertisements utilize the aesthetic of former modes of artistic production, when mass reproduction of artistic images has deteriorated into the worst commodity fetishism in a way that Benjamin could not have foreseen, then the aesthetic becomes empty, superficial. The subject thus has nothing to grasp. And as Marx understood, the subject is created by production as much as the object: “The object of art — like every other product — creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject but also a subject for the object.”<sup>49</sup>

In juxtaposing Marx’s view of production with Jameson’s notion that the end of art’s autonomy results in a loss of objectivity in favor of a form of subjectivity based on shallow sensation, it becomes clear that the end of art’s autonomy results in the loss of a subject. For the subjectivity which Jameson finds as replacing objectivity is



in fact no subjectivity at all. Such subjectivity is as depthless as the “depthlessness” which Jameson perceives in postmodern art wherein “a new kind of superficiality” replaces the older “aesthetic of expression.”<sup>50</sup> The end of art’s autonomy has created a situation devoid of both object and subject. Both the subject and the object, according to postmodern theory, become cultural signifiers, but in the realm of the aesthetic (and perhaps the political) they become productions of consumption as well as products of production. Art is a product of production, and it is a product for consumption. In this “new life of postmodern sensation” the subject has become a product of consumption; the subject has been created not so much by the production of art but rather by its consumption. Marcuse would claim in *One-Dimensional Man* that “people recognize themselves in their commodities.”<sup>51</sup> Now, in the postmodern, this has been taken further; the individual’s inwardness is defined by the inexorable consumption of culture as a commodity. Artworks, as Jameson suggests, are not experienced as objects but as subjective sensations. And these subjective sensations are culturally determined by the image culture and the commodity form.

Subjectivity and the Beautiful are thus, paradoxically, more important now than when art for art’s sake took subjectivity and the Beautiful as its creed. For Adorno’s “shudder,” with its semblance to the Sublime, can no longer function the way in which it once did. The alienating effects of the Sublime in high modernism have become commodified in late capitalism. Subjectivity, moreover, is dictated by the aesthetic production of late capitalism which has been, as Jameson points out, “integrated with commodity production.”<sup>52</sup> The subject once simply reified by objects — by what Georg Lukács aptly referred to as the “commodity-structure” — is now reified by objects which are, in the postmodern, reified themselves.<sup>53</sup> The art object is reified as an object without its objective status — its autonomy.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse establishes art’s autonomy arguing that the “political potential” of art resides specifically within the very form of art itself.<sup>54</sup> Art does not need to contain an overt political or social message; art’s message exists within the form itself because art by its very nature, its aesthetic form, opposes reality. As Adorno pointed out, art opposes society in its very existence. For Marcuse, every “authentic work of art” is potentially revolutionary because it is “an indictment of the established reality.”<sup>55</sup> And Marcuse juxtaposes this reality with art’s own reality: “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.”<sup>56</sup> Although indebted to Freud, Marcuse makes it clear in this passage — by emphasizing “those who established” reality — that his definition of reality is based as much on social relations as it is upon the Freudian reality principle. Art thus contains the power to cause a change not in social relations directly but a change in consciousness due to its negation of the “established reality.” For Adorno, autonomous art was inherently socially productive because of this ability to change consciousness; any possible praxis

or social change caused by art results not from didacticism or polemics, or, as Adorno puts it, “haranguing,” but from an almost intangible shift in consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

It is this notion of a shift in consciousness in the aesthetic experience which leads Marcuse to claim that art is art for art’s sake: “art is ‘art for art’s sake’ inasmuch as the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation.”<sup>58</sup> Marcuse cites Mallarmé’s poetry as an example of this liberation: “his poems conjure up modes of perception, imagination, gestures — a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle.”<sup>59</sup> The importance of art’s condemnation of the established reality has already been illustrated, but what is most revealing about this passage is Marcuse’s emphasis on “sensuousness.” Mallarmé’s poetry as a “feast of sensuousness” capable of altering our perceptions and consciousness evokes the Paterian emphasis on the sensual, aesthetic impression.

In the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, Pater advises one to “grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses.”<sup>60</sup> In Pater, as well as Marcuse, sensuousness is concatenated with liberation. Pater calls for the grasping of anything that stirs the senses, of any knowledge that might set one free. Marcuse finds the potential for liberation in Mallarmé’s use of the aesthetic form, which evokes a sensual experience that tears asunder everyday experience, the dominant consciousness. Both Pater and Marcuse, then, see the pleasurable experience of art as being an impetus for some form of liberation.

The liberation which Pater suggests is, arguably, apolitical. The illustrious concluding line to Pater’s *The Renaissance* reads: “Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake has most, for art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”<sup>61</sup> While it is not the point of this essay to argue in favor or against any political commitment on Pater’s part, it is clear that his notion of art in this passage begins and ends with the subjective experience. There is no mention of art contributing to a collective liberation. The freedom evoked in his earlier suggestion to seek for any knowledge that would set one free is now revealed to be an individual freedom based primarily on beauty and pleasure, a beauty and pleasure of the “highest quality.” The Paterian aesthetic would, then, seem to be at odds with Marcuse’s notions of political potential.

However, Marcuse does not reject the subjective experience. On the contrary, Marcuse sees the subjective experience as “an antagonistic force in capitalist society.”<sup>62</sup> At the outset of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse opposes what he views as the more orthodox Marxist “interpretation of subjectivity as a ‘bourgeois’ notion,” finding it to be historically “questionable.”<sup>63</sup> Marcuse states:

But even in bourgeois society, insistence on the truth and right of

inwardness is not really a bourgeois value. With the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence. Indeed, this escape from reality led to an experience which could (and did) become a powerful force *invalidating* the actual prevailing bourgeois values, namely by shifting the locus of the individual's realization from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience.<sup>64</sup>

Marcuse places the subjective inner experience within the realm of liberation. He inverts the notion that inwardness is somehow connected with the notion of success and individual achievement within the division of labor. On the contrary, an escape from bourgeois values in the form of the affirmation of one's own subjectivity can actually cause one to discard such values. The type of inwardness which Marcuse describes in this passage — in which the subject can actually step outside of exchange relationships — could help the individual subject to differentiate the aesthetic from the commodity form.

Art in its connection to the subjective both as a mode of experience and a mode of creation is what allows art to transform the established order of reality through a shift in consciousness. Is this not the very nature of the subjectivity which Pater writes of in *The Renaissance* when he discusses the subjective impression of a work of art, asking, "How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence"?<sup>67</sup> Pater recognized art's ability to change consciousness. However, Pater's belief in the verity of the subjective impression — epitomized in his directive "to know one's own impression as it really is" — inevitably raises the question of how this impression, and, moreover, this subjectivity itself is created.<sup>66</sup> Is there such a thing as "one's own impression," or is such an impression the product of ideology? Marcuse's notion of "inwardness," then, similarly needs to be interrogated. If capitalism, and capitalist social relations, constructs the subject, then the notion of "inwardness" itself is always liable to reification. Moreover, can such a state of "inwardness" exist in a culture dominated by the commodity? Such questions are vital to any placement of the individual in cultural analysis; however, Pater's incentive seems more salient now in a society dominated by the image. The attempt to know "one's impression as it really is," in a culture wherein everything becomes culture is, perhaps, an act of praxis in and of itself.

Adorno, much more critical of the individual subjective response to art, goes so far as to claim that the "sensations of Wilde...served as preludes to the culture industry."<sup>67</sup> For Adorno claims, possibly prophesying the postmodern cultural condition, that "the expansion of the sphere of aesthetic stimuli, made these stimuli manipulable; they were able to be produced for the cultural marketplace."<sup>68</sup> Adorno's view of

the manipulation of aesthetic stimuli for the purpose of the ultimate exchange of these stimuli in commodified form is indeed what has taken place in our image and commodity culture. And yet, Adorno's derision for the art for art's sake aesthetic which lauded the individual sensation in both its art and criticism — while on one level apt — is not as relevant to a consideration of postmodern aesthetic production.

Claiming that the “attunement of art to the most fleeting individual reactions was bound up with the reification of these reactions,” Adorno clearly lays the blame on writers like Wilde for seeking to provoke sensual responses in their readers.<sup>69</sup> Such an emphasis upon the subjective in art (and in individual responses to art) distanced the work of art from its own objectivity: “to this extent the watchword of *l'art pour l'art* was the mask of its opposite.”<sup>70</sup> On one level, Adorno's claims seem to support Jameson's notions of the loss of objectivity in favor of a subjectivity imbued with “a random and yet wide-ranging sampling of sensations.”<sup>71</sup> However, as Jameson has pointed out, the loss of objectivity in the postmodern is the result of the end of art's autonomy in the sphere of aesthetic experience and production. Adorno, it must be remembered, despite all his criticisms of *l'art pour l'art*, also suggested a defense of *l'art pour l'art*; Adorno was perhaps the greatest theorist of art's autonomy. Adorno rightly understood that art's autonomy was its objectivity, which is why he suggested that art for art's sake became the “mask of its opposite” when it sought to propitiate the individual sensual experience to such a high degree. The fact that aesthetic stimuli have become manipulated to such a great extent in the way that Adorno describes, creating a shallow subjectivity, while the autonomous work of art has simultaneously received its death blow, appears paradoxical to say the least.

Adorno's criticisms of the “sensations of Wilde,” will not refute the “new life of postmodern sensation,” for the “sensations of Wilde” cannot be compared with the randomness of postmodern sensations. The art object for *fin de siècle* aesthetes was not perceived “in passing” but rather gazed at, studied, appreciated in depth and detail. If anything, art for art's sake fetishized not only the work of art but the sensation of art; and art for art's sake fetishized itself, ignoring its own unavoidable connection to social relations and cultural production. But despite such criticisms, Wilde's and Pater's notions of an art for art's sake aesthetic cannot be said to have the shallow randomness which Jameson finds in the postmodern. Furthermore, the notion of the Beautiful, and the experience of the Beautiful, during the *fin de siècle* was, perhaps, subversive in its own right. Jameson illustrates this when he claims, “The *fin de siècle*, from Morris to Wilde, deployed beauty as a political weapon against a complacent materialist Victorian bourgeois society and dramatized its negative power as what rebukes power and money, and what generates personal and social transformation in the heart of an ugly industrial society.”<sup>72</sup> However, it must be noted, as Plekhanov pointed out, that art for art's sake did not rebuke capitalist social relations no matter how much it might have “rebuked power and money.” Art for art's sake use of the Beautiful may have been subversive, but it could never have been transformative.

And yet, the subversive elements of art for art's sake — no matter how limited — now present a radical possibility, as any such subversion appears to have disappeared from the postmodern aesthetic.

Adorno once claimed, "Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings."<sup>73</sup> In his insistence that art resists "solely through artistic form," Adorno obviously underscores the importance of the autonomy of art to fend off the pistol of the world. However, in the postmodern it would appear that culture is a pistol, among many, that is held to the heads of human beings. When a society is bombarded with culture in the forms of images, advertisements, and objects, the freedom to choose culture, to in effect experience culture, becomes dubious. Therefore, the question becomes one of how much autonomy we, in fact, have over our experience of culture, and of our own sensory perceptions, in the commodity culture.

Moreover, what creates the social and cultural conditions which enable art to resist "solely through artistic form"? For Adorno, the promise of art's resistance was based on works of art that we now recognize as works of high modernism (e.g., Kafka, Proust, etc.). Modernism, for Adorno, contained the conditions for art's ability to resist because of its insistence upon the autonomy of the work of art. As Nicholas Brown suggests, "In the modernist period...the convincing assertion of autonomy produced, as it does now, a peculiar non-market space within the capitalist social field."<sup>74</sup> However, as Marcuse pointed out, before the postmodern cultural moment — as it came to be defined — existed, modernist works of art became subsumed into the culture industry itself; they became "familiar goods and services."<sup>75</sup> Can such works of art in a postmodern context contain the liberatory promise that Adorno once conceived? For, as Brown also rightly asserts, "there is no natural political valence to modernism's distance from the market, since modernism does not make its way under anything like the dominance of market ideology that we experience today."<sup>76</sup> The autonomous work of art, as Adorno understood it, then, needs to be reconsidered specifically in relation to the postmodern capitalist market.

Bill Martin points out that Adorno's vision of the "autonomous artwork" as pointing "toward a better world...becomes 'merely utopian' if it lacks the element of negativity... if it is taken as a utopia in which we can loll around for relief from the ugliness of the existing world."<sup>77</sup> As Martin suggests, it is the notion of "radical negativity" which keeps the autonomous work of art from being "mere escape or catharsis."<sup>78</sup> But, again, I want to ask if such "radical negativity" is still possible because it does not necessarily help the subject to combat the barrage of commodity images nor does it necessarily allow for the subject to differentiate between the form of art and the commodity form.

I want to suggest that Pater's notion of being "present always at the focus" becomes crucial in this regard because it posits a way to delineate the work of art from the various commodity forms and images. Pater's "focus" negates the distraction, the tension, and brings us back to the possibility of an aesthetic experience reminiscent of



Adorno's "shudder" — a subjective experience that can negate the shallow subjectivity constructed by capitalism itself. Pater, of all theorists — the theorist of art for art's sake — can perhaps pave the way for a Marxist aesthetic which has some sense of liberatory and transformative potential in sight.

As I have illustrated, the aestheticism of art for art's sake was not merely concerned with the creation of art but also with the appreciation of art. It valued, and thus calls attention to, the subject's relation to the art object. If it is culture — and with it the very idea of art and the aesthetic — that is now "hold[ing] a pistol to the heads of human beings" in the sheer force of its ubiquity, it will take an incredible amount of work to follow Pater's lead and be "present always at the focus." To do so would mean to establish some sense of autonomy on the part of the subject (and collective subjects) over and against the consortium of images in late capitalism. Thus, whatever Adorno may have had in mind as a defense of art for art sake, it is clear now that such a defense can be predicated on the claim to autonomy; for in the consortium of commodity images (and commodity forms) it becomes increasingly necessary to differentiate the work of art from the commodity if art is to have any promise for the future at all.<sup>79</sup>

### Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1977) 122.
2. In Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Marx-Engels Reader Second Edition*, edited by Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), Marx had already outlined "production and consumption" to be "the movement" of private property (85). And Marx listed "art" among several "particular modes of production" that "fall under its general law" (85). Art therefore is inseparable from the domain of private property, its modes of production, and thus the social relations which exist and result from capitalist modes of production.
3. Fredric Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern: 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) 111.
4. Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital," *nonsite.org*.
5. Brown, "The Work of Art."
6. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) 6.
7. Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" 6-7.
8. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005) 144.
9. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111, and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 4.
10. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 100.
11. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111.
12. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111.
13. Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992) 32-33.
14. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 153.



15. Aside from Wilde, some poets influenced by Pater and Pater's aesthetic criticism were Arthur Symonds, "Michael Field" (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), W.B. Yeats, and Ernest Dowson.
16. Beckson, *London in the 1890s* 41.
17. Gyorgii Plekhanov, "On Art for Art's Sake," in *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, eds. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (New York: Longman, 1972) 91.
18. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963) 38.
19. Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968) 256.
20. Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" 268.
21. Marion Thain, "Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 229.
22. Thain, "Poetry" 229.
23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997) 225-26.
24. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968) 319.
25. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 49.
26. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 19.
27. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964) 61.
28. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 250.
29. Roberto Schwarz, "The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low," trans. Emilio Sauri. *Mediations* 23:1 (2007): 42.
30. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
31. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
32. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
33. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
34. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
35. Pater, *The Renaissance* 151.
36. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152.
37. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152, and Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112. Adorno,
38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 245.
39. It is perhaps important to consider the Kantian notion of the Sublime, and Terry Eagleton gives an apt definition of the Kantian Sublime and its relation to the subject in his *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), which bears great resemblance to Adorno's "shudder": "The sublime...decentres the subject into an awesome awareness of its finitude" (90).
40. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 92.
41. Henri Lefebvre's theorization of space is useful in this regard. Indeed, in his work *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1984, 1991), Lefebvre speaks of "fetishized abstract space" creating "users' who cannot recognize themselves within it" (93), which, I would argue, relates to the subject's inability to differentiate between the commodity form and the art form within the city space itself. If Lefebvre is correct that a "cultured art-lover looking at a painting" experiences

what he/she experiences “on the plane of (pictorial) space,” then the very notion of “space” itself becomes crucial (114). Jameson, of course, famously theorized the postmodern, and historicized the transition from modernism to postmodernism, in terms of “spatialization” (*Postmodernism* 154). Moreover, Jameson refers to the “new space that...involves the suppression of distance...and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places” and cites Lefebvre’s notion of “abstract space” in relation to this “new space” or the “spatial peculiarities of postmodernism” (*Postmodernism* 413).

42. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
43. Fredric Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) 34.
44. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 162.
45. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 244-45. Adorno’s emphasis on “important works” (244) is perhaps another reason why the “shudder” can no longer take effect. For we have rightly come to see that categorizations such as “important” are problematic. However, the attempt at leveling elitist claims to culture has not bypassed the dialectic of Adorno’s “important works” versus the “culture industry.” Indeed, there is a certain tendency to fetishize popular culture within the realm of cultural studies which can become just as problematic. This dialectic perhaps needs to be reevaluated and revisited as well as the dialectic of art’s autonomy.
46. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 163.
47. Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson* 34.
48. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 10.
49. Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 230.
50. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 9, 11.
51. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 9.
52. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 4.
53. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971) 83.
54. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* ix.
55. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* xi.
56. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 9.
57. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 243.
58. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
59. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
60. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152.
61. Pater, *The Renaissance* 153.
62. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 38.
63. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 4.
64. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 4-5.
65. Pater, *The Renaissance* xxix.
66. Pater, *The Renaissance* xxix.

67. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
68. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
69. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239
70. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
71. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
72. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 134.
73. Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1974) 80.
74. Brown, "The Work of Art."
75. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 61.
76. Brown, "The Work of Art."
77. Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008) 373.
78. Martin, *Ethical Marxism* 373.
79. Nicholas Brown makes a similar claim when he states, "Under contemporary conditions, the assertion of aesthetic autonomy is, in itself, a political claim. (A minimal one to be sure)" ("The Work of Art").

## Capitalism's Many Futures: A Brief History of Theorizing Post-Capitalism Technologically

Matthew MacLellan

"The saga of capitalism," writes David Harvey, "is full of paradoxes."<sup>1</sup> One of the more pronounced, yet rarely enunciated, of such paradoxes involves two narratives currently informing capitalism's temporality. Despite their contradictory character, these two narratives circulate rather freely within contemporary discourses on capitalism and its imagined futures and, as I will argue, underscore the degree to which the epistemological fragmentation that largely defined the social field of Western modernity persists in the present day. If one of the preeminent epistemological conditions of late capitalism, as Fredric Jameson influentially argued, is a generalized "dedifferentiation of fields, such that economics has come to overlap with culture [and] culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented," then juxtaposing the two narratives informing capitalism's contradictory temporality works toward more refined investigation of the epistemological and political striae that persist within this generalized process of dedifferentiation Jameson identified over two decades ago.<sup>2</sup>

The first of the two narratives through which capitalism is currently rendered temporally intelligible is an explicitly political discourse whose success in hegemonizing the field of political common sense after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been a constant point of criticism on the left, despite — or perhaps precisely because of — the seeming felicity of its claims. Originally published in the American policy journal *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989, Francis Fukuyama's thesis on what he called "the end of history" attempted to revive an embattled Hegelian understanding of historical evolution by observing a remarkable global consensus concerning the legitimacy of the Janus-faced pairing of liberal democracy and market capitalism as an overall system of governance. "The most profound thinkers of the twentieth century," writes Fukuyama "have relentlessly attacked the idea that history is a coherent or intelligible process."<sup>3</sup> Yet the widespread consensus regarding the legitimacy of liberal capitalism in the post-1989 period indicates, argued Fukuyama, that we may have indeed reached a certain limit or end to the historical process as Hegel might have imagined: an end of history not in the sense that "important events would no longer happen," as Fukuyama put it, but in the sense that "there would be no further progress in the development of underlying [political] principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions have been answered."<sup>4</sup> While

Fukuyama's ostentatious claim continues to evoke widespread criticism, such criticisms (which generally proceed by qualifying Fukuyama's thesis rather than confronting it directly) are always tinged with a certain degree of anxiety or unease, undoubtedly due to the fact that at the empirical level at least, Fukuyama seems to have been correct. This is not to say that the spread of liberal capitalism after the collapse of the Soviet Union should be understood as the willing embrace of a self-evident political truth instead of the aggressive expansion of a politico-economic organism into new environments, but, nevertheless, there can be little doubt that the field of political discourse, especially in the West, has significantly narrowed over the past two decades in conformity with Fukuyama's thesis. While the conflicts between progressive and conservative forces continue to populate Western headlines as much as ever, these debates no longer hinge on fundamental organizational disagreements but are battles fought over more modest modifications to regulatory mechanisms, such as corporate taxation, environmental protection, immigration, and so on. As Slavoj Žižek is fond of reiterating, "it is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History', but most people today are Fukuyamean, accepting liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found formula of the best possible society, such that all one can do is try to make it more just, tolerant, and so on."<sup>5</sup> If one were then to articulate the mode of temporality with which Fukuyama's political narrative endows contemporary capitalism, it would surely be a kind of *stasis*: in accordance with the Hegelian legacy Fukuyama evokes, dialectical motion has all but ceased, and tinkering with a stable liberal-capitalist synthesis, rather than inciting violent and bloody revolution, has become the privilege of those who inhabit the spaces of the globe where History has finally ended.

Yet if liberal-democratic capitalism has been endowed with a static temporality at the level of official politics, it is simultaneously narrativized, even burdened, by an almost diametrically opposed temporality at the level of technological development. Far from having reached a point of finality or conclusion, the promise of new and ever-more sophisticated technics not only drives capitalist consumerism in the West but is readily evoked as a justification for exacerbating environmental degradation, under the pretence that new and as-yet-unimagined technologies will miraculously emerge at some future date to remedy problems that are perceived to be too difficult and expensive to address in present. From a technological perspective, then, contemporary capitalist society is witness to a strange stylistic inversion whereby the voice of the pragmatic and level-headed scientist has taken to enunciating claims that far outstrip anything that may have occurred to the most radical utopian philosopher. As popular physics writer Michio Kaku asserts with a surprisingly anachronistic Enlightenment cadence, human abilities within one hundred years will be such that the species will more closely resemble the "gods of mythology" than the more modest collection of natural subjects that informed the political philosophy of Locke or Rousseau:

By 2100, our destiny is to become like the gods we once worshipped and feared. But our tools will not be magic wands and potions but the science of computers, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and most of all, quantum theory... Computers, silently reading our thoughts, will be able to carry out our wishes. We will be able to move objects by thought alone, a telekinetic power usually reserved only for the gods. With the power of biotechnology, we will create perfect bodies and extend our life spans. We will also be able to create life-forms that have never walked the surface of the earth. With the power of nanotechnology, we will be able to take an object and turn it into something else, to create something out of nothing. We will ride not fiery chariots but sleek vehicles that soar by themselves with almost no fuel, floating effortlessly in the air. With our engines, we will be able to harness the almost unlimited energy of the stars.<sup>6</sup>

The conflicting temporality of the present age thus becomes outright paradoxical when examined in terms of the ontological assumptions informing a politics of stasis amidst technological revolution. At the political level, the impossibility of further innovation at any fundamental level is built on the solid ontological foundation provided by the (recently discovered) species *homo oeconomicus*: our fixed political and economic consensus is little more than the pragmatic resignation that, as Jacques Rancière puts it, “[only] the growth of consumer narcissism puts individual satisfaction and collective rule in perfect harmony” and thereby defends society against the excesses of substantive democratic rule.<sup>7</sup> Given, however, that the political excesses that are thought inherent to truly democratic life cannot be simply erased from the equation but must be balanced off by an opposing consumerist excess — which is best produced by a system that, to paraphrase Marx, must constantly revolutionize the objects of consumption — then the present moment is witness to a truly paradoxical and disjointed scenario: if it has already been said of our age that it is easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than the seemingly more modest task of imagining a different organization of production, then it is similarly the case that it seems infinitely easier to imagine the categorical transformation of the biological species through scientific marvel than to consider the seemingly far more remote possibility that a correlative notion of human nature might somehow shift enough to embrace a different mode of politics outside the current consensus.

It is through the narrative parallax opened by these two logically conflicting, yet empirically coterminous accounts of contemporary capitalist society that the theoretical interrelationship between technological development and political theory warrants more refined attention than it has often received. This is not to say that the tradition of Marxist thought has ignored the possibilities that technology offers the political: Jürgen Habermas's two-volume magnum opus *The Theory of Communicative*



*Action* took up this problematic explicitly (though it is generally agreed that this work signalled Habermas's departure from his earlier Marxist orientation for a more liberal stance) and some of the most innovative work over the past decade, most influentially the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, has been dedicated to studying the ways in which the transition from industrialism to post-industrialism — specifically the economic ascendancy of information and communications technologies in the advanced Western economies — poses serious challenges with respect to some of the basic mechanisms of capitalist accumulation. As part of a dialogue with this prior work, this essay aims to construct (or begin constructing) a more refined, or at least differently calibrated, means of theorizing the unassuming political implications of technological development by, in this instance, examining a discourse on the idea of a technologically-induced state of “post-capitalism” that pre-dates the current critique of post-industrialism or post-fordism. For while it is common, and not inaccurate in most respects, to identify the twentieth century as a golden age of capitalism in terms of sheer growth and stability — such that Giovanni Arrighi thought it appropriate to describe 700 years of capitalist development with the phrase “the long twentieth century” — it is telling to observe that twentieth-century literature on the topic of economics and technology, from the most renowned economists of the century, was uniformly convinced that the saga of capitalism was fast drawing to its conclusion.<sup>8</sup> According to this literature, advances in industrial technology and mass production, particularly in relation to efficiencies associated with economies of scale, meant the gradual but irreversible decline in the importance of the market in economic development and policy, and thus the end of capitalism in any essential terms. Examining this earlier discourse of technologically-induced post-capitalism not only provides greater conceptual clarity with respect to today's critique of post-industrialism or post-fordism, but also highlights the specific ways in which contemporary notions of culture, technology, and politics continue to stand in relief against one another and within the more general process of dedifferentiation with which Jameson (and others) characterized late or post-industrial capitalism.

### **Theorizing Post-Capitalism Technologically**

Of course, the idea that advances in industry and technology were producing an economy or society that was tending toward what could be called post-capitalism extends back to the beginnings of the industrial revolution itself, and found perhaps its first and richest resource in the work of Henri de Saint-Simon.<sup>9</sup> Yet where Saint-Simon's forecast of the planned industrial society is in large measure a utopian exercise that gathers up the entirety of the social into its formal parameters in an attempt to map out or construct, in great detail, how the future industrial society will be governed *in toto*, the principal object of this brief genealogy would be a more discrete and focused literature that understands technological advances during the twentieth century to have developed in contradiction to the laws of capitalist

accumulation, such that industrialization in general was thought to be producing a condition of post-capitalism. From across the political spectrum, twentieth-century economic thought manifests a remarkable consensus in which the principal effect of the progressive advance in scientific knowledge and its application in industry would be the demise of the market as the principal arbiter of value and allotter of resources in the industrial system. Capitalism, it seemed, was destined to become increasingly socialistic as technicians and managers wrested control of economic enterprises from the touted bourgeois entrepreneurs of the classical liberal age and, from this, ushered in a new programmed or managerial society of the future.

In methodological terms, this consensus was grounded in Marx's analysis of the laws of capitalist development in *Capital* (Vol. 1), specifically Chapter 32, "The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation," in which Marx describes what he calls the "centralization of capitals."<sup>10</sup> While many of the twentieth century's most renowned economists tended to balk at Marx's wild political imagination, almost none questioned the validity of Marx's contention that the laws of capitalist development compelled increasing capital concentration and the concomitant impoverishment of the market for appropriately allocating resources. In his widely read *Finance Capital* (1910), for instance, Rudolf Hilferding argued that the centralization of banking and credit, what he called "cartel capitalism," not only biased the impersonal and objective mechanisms of the market but actually worked counter to the general tendency of reification otherwise thought inherent to capitalistic governance:

In credit transactions the material, business relationship is always accompanied by a personal relationship, which appears as a direct relationship between members of society in contrast to the material social relations which categorize other economic categories such as money; namely, what is often called "trust". In this sense a fully developed credit system is the antithesis to capitalism, and represents organization and control as opposed to anarchy. It has its source in socialism, but as been adapted to capitalist society.<sup>11</sup>

While Hilferding's thesis that the socialization of the capitalist economy was based in the increasing role of credit and banking in the industrial economy may strike the contemporary reader as especially counterintuitive, what is germane in Hilferding's account is that the organic growth of what he calls "cartel capitalism," in which the principal economic actors are large organizations rather than enterprising individuals, necessitates an abandonment of the impersonality of the market and, in this sense, a counterforce against the general reification associated with capitalist development as a whole. If capitalism was defined by Marx as a system in which things or objects mediated and thereby disguised relationships between actual living subjects, the rise of credit and central banking de-reified capitalism by reuniting

these subjective agents within the economic process itself (though, it should be noted, Hilferding's conception of the personalized nature of this system was more similar to the economy of exchanges represented in *The Sopranos* than the association of free men Marx had imagined).

Yet it was not only economic theorists of a Marxian persuasion that had begun to draw the conclusion that capitalism may be working itself out of a job. In his polemical *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), Friedrich von Hayek focused more narrowly on the anti-market effects of technology, though Hayek is somewhat unique in this literature insofar as he fundamentally denied that the market's decline had anything to do with internal or infrastructural tendencies toward concentration: "the myth is deliberately cultivated," argued von Hayek, "that we are embarking on [a] new course not out of free will but because competition is spontaneously eliminated by technological changes which we can neither reverse nor should wish to prevent.... Monopoly and planning is not the result of any 'objective facts' beyond our control, but the product of opinions fostered and propagated for half a century."<sup>12</sup> Remarkably idealist in its execution, Hayek's argument simply asserts that those wielding political influence (in England predominantly, which was the context of his analysis) have failed to understand properly the efficiency of the market's means of resource allocation and are therefore supporting increased state planning out of sheer ignorance or naivety: "it is because everybody wants it that we are moving in this direction...the intellectual history of the last sixty or eighty years is indeed a perfect illustration of the truth that in social evolution nothing is inevitable but thinking makes it so."<sup>13</sup>

More influential than Hayek's ideological polemic, however, is Joseph Schumpeter's widely read *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (1942), in which Schumpeter approaches the analysis of capital from a surprisingly Marxian vantage given his politically conservative orientation, and concludes that the death knell of liberal capitalism would be sounded with what he viewed as the inevitable obsolescence of the entrepreneur, or more precisely the entrepreneurial function within the larger system.<sup>14</sup> For Schumpeter, the essential characteristic of capitalism, or rather the spirit of capitalism to borrow Weber's phrase, is entrepreneurialism: "though entrepreneurs do not *per se* form a social class," writes Schumpeter, "the returns on which the [bourgeois] class lives are produced by...the success of this more or less active sector....Economically and sociologically, directly and indirectly, the bourgeoisie therefore depends on the entrepreneur and, as a class, lives and will die with him."<sup>15</sup> Given the steady pace of technological development, Schumpeter thus argued that the mid-twentieth century onward would almost certainly see the steady transition from capitalism to socialism, and at the forefront of Schumpeter's considerations one finds Marx's assertions about the concentration of industrial magnates and the growing obsolescence of the entrepreneur and small businessman:

It has been pointed out that the very success of capitalist enterprise

paradoxically tends to impair the prestige or social weight of the class primarily associated with it and that the giant unit of control tends to oust the bourgeoisie from the function to which it owed that social weight. .... On the one hand, the capitalist process unavoidably attacks the economic standing of the small producer and trader. What it did to the pre-capitalist strata it also does to the lower strata of capitalist industry... On the other hand, the capitalist process also attacks its own institutional framework — let us continue to visualize “property” and “free contracting” as *partes pro toto* — within the precincts of the big units. Excepting the cases that are still of considerable importance in which a corporation is practically owned by a single individual or family, the figure of the proprietor and with it the specifically proprietary interest have vanished from the picture. ... Thus the capitalist process pushes into the background all those institutions, the institutions of property and free contracting in particular, that expressed the needs and ways of a truly “private” economic activity... The capitalist process, by substituting a mere parcel of shares for the walls of and the machines in a factory, takes the life out of the idea of property.<sup>16</sup>

As the capitalist process becomes increasingly concentrated and automatized, argues Schumpeter, the function of private property, and the concomitant element of entrepreneurial risk that propelled capitalism beyond the fetters of feudalism, is subsequently emptied of its substance as salaried managers and technocrats are increasingly tasked with economic command. As a result, economic decisions no longer tend to reflect narrowly the best interests of the businessmen, which is to say the profitability of firms to the exclusion of all else, but invariably begin to take into account the larger concerns of the professional class of decision makers, such as the importance of a general condition of social stability or harmony. It is in this sense that Schumpeter contends that the concentration of capital, in and of itself, tends to produce the very socializing effects that Marx more dramatically asserted would be the result of political revolt. The socialization of capitalism in the twentieth century, for Schumpeter, thus has its roots in two interconnected processes, one socio-psychological (as he puts it) and the other more properly economic. In the first instance, Schumpeter argues that the critical edge that allowed capitalism to spread the spirit of rational, logical, and empirical thought to all spheres of modern life has at last begun to undermine capitalism itself: “we have finally seen that capitalism creates a critical frame of mind which, after destroying the moral authority of so many other institutions, in the end turns against its own. The bourgeois finds to its amazement that the rationalist attitude does not stop at the credentials of kings and popes but goes on to attack private property and the whole scheme of bourgeois values.”<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the tendency of capitalism toward greater and greater concentration invariably

dilutes economic decision-making to the point where a socialistic logic pervades industrial capitalism not through an exogenous political process but by means of an immanent economic evolution:

Destruction may not be the right word after all. Perhaps I should have spoken of transformation. The outcome of the process is not simply a void that could be filled by whatever might happen to turn up; things and souls are transformed in such a way as to become increasingly amenable to the socialist form of life. With every peg from under the capitalist structure vanishes an impossibility of the socialist plan. In both these respects Marx's *vision* was right. We can also agree with him in linking the particular social transformation that goes on under our eyes with an economic prospect as its prime mover....In the end there is not much difference as one might think between saying that the decay of capitalism is due to its success and saying that it is due to its failure.<sup>18</sup>

The idea that control of capitalist enterprise was being transferred from the owners of the means of production to a new class of technicians and managers was similarly asserted in James Burnham's best-selling *The Managerial Revolution* (1941), in which Burnham contributed greatly to the still-pervasive discourse that state planning is a form of totalitarianism, though for Burnham the source of this totalitarianism was not corrupt politicians but scientific and technological management. A prominent American Trotskyist who would later become one of the United States's most prominent conservative thinkers, Burnham argued that the rise of the managerial society "is part of the general process of social transition...analogous to what happened in the transition from feudal to capitalist society."<sup>19</sup> The coincidence of New Deal America, Soviet Socialism, and German Fascism all provide evidence that even starkly divergent political societies are conforming to a general economic trend in which the reign of capitalism is not becoming more socialistic in the strict sense of workplace democracy, but was rather moving toward what he called the "managerial society":

We are now in a period of social transition...a period characterized, that is, by an unusually rapid rate of change of the most important economic, social, political, and cultural institutions of society. This transition is *from* the type of society which we have called capitalist or bourgeois *to* a type of society which we shall call *managerial*...The managers will exercise their control over the instruments of production and gain preference in the distribution of the products, not directly, through property rights vested in them as individuals, but indirectly, through their control of the state which in turn will control the instruments of production...and that will be quite enough to place them in the position of the ruling class.<sup>20</sup>



If Burnham was to some degree successful in associating technocratic rule with the notion of totalitarianism, then the importance of state planning and the efficiencies associated with economies of scale made possible by industrial technology was given a more benign inflection through the work of one of the more eloquent and influential supporters of rational planning in economic affairs, John Maynard Keynes. A student of noted nineteenth-century economist Alfred Marshall, Keynes's ideas about the necessary function of the state in economic planning would form the keystone of an economic consensus that would hold fast until the beginnings of the neoliberal revolution in the 1970s. In his early 1926 article "The End of Laissez-Faire," Keynes, like Schumpeter and Burnham, observed the tendency of large-scale enterprise to undergo a process of self-socialization as a function of the ascendancy of an intermediary class of managers and technocrats not driven solely by the profit motive: "one of the most interesting and unnoticed developments of recent decades," writes Keynes, "has been the tendency of big enterprise to socialise itself. A point arrives in the growth of a big institution...at which the owners of capital, i.e. the shareholders, are almost entirely dissociated from the management, with the result that the direct personal interest of the latter in the making of great profit becomes quite secondary."<sup>21</sup> While hardly a supporter of state socialism on the Soviet model, Keynes nevertheless opined that the sheer scale of industrial concentration suggested that "the battle of Socialism against unlimited private profit is being won in detail hour by hour."<sup>22</sup> In his most important work, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), Keynes therefore advocated for the socialization of investment, to a certain degree, as not only a means of ensuring near full employment but as a means of directing markets toward ends more amenable to the general welfare. In theorizing what he called "the state of long term expectation," Keynes argues that "in former times, when enterprises were mainly owned by those who undertook them or by their friends and associates, investment depended on a sufficient supply of individuals of sanguine temperament and constructive impulses who embarked on business as a way of life, not really relying on a precise calculation of prospective profit."<sup>23</sup> Yet as a result of the concentration of the forces of production, which was accelerated by the growing importance of scientific or technical knowledge in advanced industries, investment decisions had shifted from the almost complete sovereignty of ownership to a more diffuse assemblage of managers and technocrats and thereby invariably began to take in a wider purview, which in turn necessitated increasing state organization of the economy:

For my own part I am somewhat sceptical of the success of a merely monetary policy directed toward influencing the rate of interest. I expect to see the State, which is in a position to calculate the marginal efficiency of capital-goods on long views and on the basis of the general social advantage, taking an even greater responsibility for directly organizing



investment.<sup>24</sup>

Keynes's influence in economic theory and policy during the mid-twentieth century can hardly be understated. Aside from constituting the theoretical bedrock of the welfare-state system in the advanced industrial economies, Keynesianism was also (it is sometimes forgotten) the dominant trend guiding World Bank policy which, until the 1970s, promoted "a relatively open, eclectic and pluralist position on many questions of development policy, tolerating if not encouraging government intervention, capital controls and even a limited measure of protection against manufacturing imports."<sup>25</sup>

As the 1960s drew to a close, mainstream economic thought held fast to the consensus that the combined effects of concentrated industrialization, the growing importance of scientific and technical knowledge in the production process, and the fundamental change to the class structure which Burnham influentially identified ensured that the future of economic development in the technologically advanced sectors of the globe would increasingly reject the market as its principal organizational logic or matrix. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The New Industrial State* (1967) can thus be taken as perhaps the last major work in economic theory to argue that the market would continue to take a backseat in matters of production and resource allocation in favor of state planning and technocratic authority. The predominant force in production for the twentieth century, according to Galbraith, will not be entrepreneurial enterprise or small business, but will rather be what he calls the *technostructure*: "in the past, leadership in business organization was identified with the entrepreneur...[but with] the emergence of the organization required by modern technology and planning and the divorce of the owner of the capital from the control of the enterprise, the entrepreneur no longer exists as an individual person in the mature industrial enterprise...there is no name for all who participate in group decision-making or the organization which they form. I propose to call this organization the 'Technostructure.'"<sup>26</sup> And following the trajectory of those before him, Galbraith understands the rise of the technostructure as fundamentally altering the system that economists have traditionally understood as capitalism to such a degree that perhaps the term no longer applies:

We have come to the...conclusion that the enemy of the market is not ideology but the engineer...It is not socialists. It is advanced technology and the specialization of men and process that this requires and the resulting of time and capital. These make the market work badly when the need is for greatly enhanced reliability — when planning is essential. The modern large corporation and the modern apparatus of socialist planning are variant accommodations to the same need.<sup>27</sup>

According to this vast consensus in the economic thinking, stretching from the late nineteenth century to the late 1960s, the advancement of technology in combination with increasing scalar growth in the size of industrial firms meant an increasing socialized economy for interrelated reasons having to do with changes to the class structure and the role of knowledge in the production process. The sheer size and complexity of these productive units meant that the entrepreneur could no longer adequately or competently manage these firms and in their stead emerged a new intermediary class of technicians and managers controlling production and distribution. It was accordingly inevitable that this intermediary strata would expand the purview of the “ends” of the enterprise, so to speak, beyond the immediate profits of shareholders to embrace larger social concerns and, relatedly, the state was bound to intervene in matters once society’s main production units became too big to fail. Efficiencies in economies of scale and the growing importance of accurate scientific knowledge in the production process correlated politically as a gradual democratization of the economic realm.

Yet it is worth recognizing that the mode of democratization that this configuration of knowledge and technology favored was of a limited kind, insofar as it was based on what Daniel Bell described as specifically *mechanical technology*.<sup>28</sup> As this economic consensus continually reiterates, growth and increases in production were no longer dependent on the risk-taking behavior of entrepreneurs, but on the competency of scientists and technicians wielding formal, codified knowledge. Therefore, an economic system defined by a mechanical technology invariably necessitates a certain democratization of the economic realm, but a process of democratization that manifests itself through the standardization of the work force and the assumed supremacy of neutral scientific procedure that merely works itself through a relatively diffuse cadre of managers and technicians. As Galbraith explains,

It is a common impression, not discouraged by scientists, engineers and industrialists, that modern scientific engineering and industrial achievements are the work of a new and quite remarkable race of men. This is pure vanity; were it so, there would be few such achievements. The real accomplishment of modern science and technology consists in taking quite ordinary men, informing them narrowly and deeply and then, through appropriate organization, arranging to have their knowledge combined with that of other specialized but ordinary men. This dispenses with the need for genius. The resulting performance, though less inspiring, is far more predictable.<sup>29</sup>

Galbraith’s articulation of the specific configuration between technology and knowledge, emblematic of Bell’s notion of a mechanical technology, is based on a kind of knowledge that is uniform, standardized, linear, and gradual in its advancement

or development; it can be embodied within any individual agent, who is then slotted into a specific role within the technostructure functioning as a highly differentiated mechanical whole. In short, it is a form of technology that was precisely opposed by the spirit of '68, as it were, and is a kind of knowledge — and thereby a kind of socialism — in which culture, in both an ordinary and aesthetic sense of the term, is de-linked from economic affairs: while culture and cultural performance were crucial as a palliative for the physically deadening work of manual labor and the psychological monotony of the technostructure, cultural competencies had no direct applicability within the production process itself. However, with the return of market as an arbiter or matrix of economic organization after the 1970s, a new configuration of knowledge and technology would emerge that would not only incorporate cultural competencies into its logic, but would assign culture a hitherto unprecedented role in terms of its capacity for creating value. By examining the distinction between the mode of post-capitalist discourse that followed the neoliberal revolution from that which preceded it, it is possible to generate a more cogent notion of the way in which the synthesis of culture and economics under post-industrial conditions is mediated by technology and how this configuration of economics, culture, and technology might be alternatively theorized.

### **The Return of the Market**

In 1968, at just about the same time that Parisian students were revolting against the growth of the kind of techno-productivism (either socialist or capitalist) of which Galbraith spoke, the German Sociological Congress of 1968 took the concept of “Late Capitalism” as its annual theme. The object of the conference was to examine the degree to which the socialization of production in the advanced industrial economies, which included the significant role of state in economic decision making as well as the dampening influence of the market due to the increased role of scientific knowledge in the production process, had advanced to such a degree that the very concept of capitalism had become outdated. The keynote address at the Congress, given by Theodor Adorno and titled “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” precisely sums up the central concern of the conference in its opening remarks: the aim of the conference was to “ascertain whether the capitalist system continues to rule, albeit in a modified form, or whether industrial development has made the concept of capitalism itself, the difference between capitalist and non-capitalist states, and indeed the critique of capitalism, outmoded.”<sup>30</sup> Against the vast economic consensus that had prevailed in the West during the period of industrialization, Adorno was much more reluctant to view the advance of technology as itself sufficient to move society in a definitively post-capitalist direction. “According to [the current] thesis,” argued Adorno, “the world has been so thoroughly determined by an unimaginably-extended technology [*Technik*: technics], that the corresponding social relations that once defined capitalism, the transformation of living labor into commodities

and therein the contradiction of classes, is becoming irrelevant, insofar as it has not become an archaic superstition."<sup>31</sup> Against this predominant thesis, however, Adorno asked his audience to consider whether or not the impact of technology, as well as the increased role of the state in economic affairs, could not be better theorized as a strategy for the continuation of the logic of capital in disguised form. In other words, should we not consider, asked Adorno, if the increasing role of the state is merely a temporary solution, in the form of a displacement, to a specific crisis situation from which the market will then return rejuvenated:

Economic interventionism is not, as the older liberal school thought, something cobbled together from outside the system, but is rather system-immanent, the embodiment of self-defense; nothing could illuminate the category of dialectics with greater clarity. This is analogous to what became of the erstwhile Hegelian philosophy of law, wherein bourgeois ideology and the dialectic of bourgeois society are so deeply interwoven, in that the state, presumably intervening from beyond the reach of society's power-struggles, had to be conjured up out of the immanent dialectic of society in order to damper and police the antagonisms of such, lest society, following Hegel's insight, disintegrate. The invasion of that which is not system-immanent is at the same time also a piece of immanent dialectics, just as, on the opposite end of the spectrum, Marx thought of the overthrow of the relations of production as something compelled by the course of history, and nevertheless as something to be realized outside the closure of the system, as a qualitatively different action.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, it would take only another decade for the prescience of Adorno's remarks to become apparent. By the 1970s, the underlying contradictions in the Keynesian compact had become abundantly clear and it was argued, most forcefully by the newly renowned School of Chicago economists, Milton Friedman most predominantly, that only a grand liberalization of markets could solve the stagflation crisis plaguing the global economy. Yet while the return of the market in economic affairs in the late 1970s is a well-documented process from both a celebratory and critical perspective, two elements of this shift warrant particular attention in terms of grasping the new relationship between technology, culture, and politics under neoliberal and post-industrial conditions.

First, the original premise offered in Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* on the altered class structure of advanced industrial capitalism began to take on a new valence. As mentioned above, Burnham argued that in the industrial economy, a new intermediary class of managers was rising between the two great camps identified by Marx, namely the owners and the workers. Following Burnham's lead, economists throughout the twentieth century believed that this managerial class, which included

industrial scientists and technicians, constituted a socializing force operating within the capitalist economy and foreshadowed a more socially stable, if less dynamic, industrial economy. By the 1970s however, a new literature on this subject appeared which argued that the advanced Western economies, as a response to stagnating growth and the inflationary tendencies associated with Keynesian planning, would be increasingly forced to globalize their production processes, primarily through the outsourcing of manufacturing, and this would definitively alter the way in which this former industrial-managerial class would fit into the new system. Paradigmatic of this shift in socio-economic theory is French sociologist Alain Touraine's *The Post-Industrial Society* (1971) and American sociologist Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973), both of which argued that the shift to what they tentatively called the "knowledge economy" signalled a new form of post-capitalism quite different from that discussed in the first half of the twentieth century. Touraine's *The Post-Industrial Society* begins, somewhat misleadingly, by describing the post-industrial society as a "programmed society" — which harkens back to the industrial age of technicians and scientists carrying out largely automated tasks — but Touraine soon hits upon the core distinction between the industrial and the post-industrial society in terms of its labor processes and its altered class structure. In the post-industrial economy, writes Touraine,

growth results from a whole complex of social factors, not just from the accumulation of capital. Nowadays, it depends much more greatly than ever before on knowledge, and hence on the capacity of society to call forth *creativity*. All the domains of social life — education, consumption, information, etc. — are becoming more and more integrated into what used to be called production factors. This is true of scientific and technical research, professional training, the ability to program change and regulate its elements, the management of organizations with multiple social relationships, and the communication of attitudes that favor mobilization and continual transformation of these production factors.<sup>33</sup>

Building on his assertion that "creativity" is becoming an increasingly important factor in the production process, Touraine foreshadows the later work of Boltanski and Chiapello by arguing that it is not simply exploitation or immiseration that fuels political antagonism in the post-industrial economy, but rather *alienation* in a more expansive or cultural sense:<sup>34</sup> "Today it is more useful to speak of alienation than of exploitation...ours is an alienated society not because it reduces people to misery or because it imposes police restriction, but because it seduces, manipulates and enforces conformism."<sup>35</sup> In a similar way, Daniel Bell's account of the transition to the post-industrial society places special emphasis on the new ways in which knowledge becomes a productive force in its own right, but Bell turns the relation



between knowledge and property in a new direction: while Schumpeter and Burnham had argued that twentieth-century industrialism was hollowing out the driving economic essence of private property through of the ascendancy of a decision-making managerial strata, Bell argues that the knowledge economy also undermines private property, but that it does so through the inherent difficulty in the new processes of commodification, and thus private accumulation, itself:

In capitalist society the axial institution has been private property and in the post-industrial society it is the centrality of theoretical knowledge.... Culture has replaced technology as the source of change in society, and the tensions between the adversary culture and the eroded Protestant ethic have created a remarkable contradiction in the value system of American society....Politically, the problem of post-industrial society...is the growth of a non-market welfare economics and the lack of adequate mechanisms to decide the allocation of goods. For technical and conceptual reasons one cannot measure the value of such goods [creativity, education, knowledge] in market terms....It [has] become the task of the political system to manage these relations in response to the various pressures for distributive shares and social justice.<sup>36</sup>

There are a number of concerns packed into Bell's forecast concerning the social, economic, political, and cultural characteristics of the post-industrial society that necessitate exegesis. First, it is important to say something concerning the infrastructural shifts that motivated these commentaries. For as Touraine and Bell both intuited, knowledge and creativity would indeed play an increasingly important role in contemporary post-industrial society. The ascendancy of creativity as an economic force was not, however, a purely idealistic solution to the problem of stagflation in the Western economies, but was rather the inevitable corollary of the specific technological advances that made the return of the market possible in the first place. Amidst a growing suspicion on the part of economists that economies of scale may not offer the endless increases in economic efficiency they imagined, advances in telecommunications technologies, beginning in the 1970s but growing more intense in the 1980s and 1990s, increasingly suggested that the future of the capitalist economy might lie with smaller (or medium-sized) firms rather than larger industrial giants of twentieth century.<sup>37</sup> By the end of the 1980s, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the growth of information technologies was drastically reducing the costs of decentralized enterprise, which ate away at the efficiencies of vertical integration and industrial concentration by negating the older assumption that intra-firm exchanges were cheaper than inter-firm exchanges. This reduction in the cost of telecommunications and information systems spurred on a profound overall transformation to the industrial regime of accumulation, which David Harvey



perhaps best captures with the term “flexible accumulation.” These advances in communications and information technologies not only undermined the almost century-long consensus that the greatest efficiencies were found in economies of scale, but they led to a broader epistemological transformation whereby an intensive market or network logic began to pervade not only the capitalist economy, but capitalist society as well. In *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), for instance, Manuel Castells observes that in addition to re-invigorating the market as an inter-firm matrix for economic development over the past three decades, innovations in information and communications technologies compelled firms to re-organize themselves *internally* along market lines: “to manoeuvre in the new global economy, characterized by endless flurry of new competitors using new technologies and cost-cutting capabilities, the large corporations had to become primarily more effective rather than more thrifty...to be able to internalize the benefits of network flexibility the corporation had to become a network itself.<sup>38</sup> And as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s argue in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), it was not only capitalist enterprise that became isomorphically market-oriented in all its aspects, but even social movements opposed to the politics of austerity that accompanied the return of the market likewise adopted the network as their preferred form. Based on their analysis of contemporary social movements and activist politics (in France predominantly), Boltanski and Chiapello contend that

without leading to the formation of a party, [contemporary social movements] likewise have come to recognize themselves in the metaphor of the network. In this network circulate people who are very different in many respects, with divergent opinions in many cases, but are able to come together and aid one another in actions against exclusion based on a minimal definition of rights, which are often demanded with reference to a “citizenship” whose definition remains fluid....[W]e can [therefore] recognize the morphological homology between the new protest movements and the forms of capitalism that have been established over the last twenty years. This homology affords these highly mobile movements the opportunity to recover some purchase precisely where the traditional organizations [political parties, labour unions] have lost their footing.<sup>39</sup>

If, then, the specific configuration of knowledge and technology that dominated capitalism in the early to mid-twentieth century, and which is associated with an earlier version of the post-capitalist society, can be described as a *mechanical technology*, then the configuration of knowledge and technology that characterizes the neoliberal, post-industrial, networked economy is more aptly described, again by Bell, as an *intellectual technology*: rather than defined by a regime of formal, standardized, and codified knowledge wielded by managers and technicians, the configuration

of knowledge and technology that characterizes the neoliberal, post-industrial economy is based on a non-linear or dynamic concatenation of culture, creativity, and communication across highly complex and heterogeneous nodes within a variety of interlinked networks.<sup>40</sup>

While contemporary business and management literature on the topic of innovation thus tends unendingly to sing the praises of creativity as an economic virtue, this literature rarely points out the ways in which the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, and from a mechanical to an intellectual technology respectively, also invites a new conception of post-capitalism. When Bell, as stated above, declared that “the problem of post-industrial society...is the growth of a non-market welfare economics and the lack of adequate mechanisms to decide the allocation of goods,” this is an acknowledgment that unlike the socializing effect of scientific knowledge in the industrial era, the centrality of knowledge in the post-industrial society pushes against the parameters of capitalist valorization from a different direction, namely, by virtue of the informal, uncodified, and communicative character of knowledge that produces growth under post-industrial conditions. Unlike the importance of scientific knowledge in the industrial economy, in which more or less automated technicians carried out tasks dictated by the iron laws of scientific necessity, the forms of knowledge that fuel the post-industrial economy, such as creativity, innovation, language, and cooperation, are all invariably impoverished when submitted to intensive formalization. As André Gorz explains,

This is one of the great differences between the workers of the early manufactories or the Taylorized industries and those of post-Fordism. The former group became operational only after they had been deprived of the practical knowledge, skills and habits developed by the culture of everyday life, and after they had been subjected to a thoroughgoing division of labour....By contrast, post-Fordist workers have to come into the production process with all the baggage they have acquired through games, team sports, campaigns, arguments, musical and theatrical activities, etc. It is in these activities outside work that their liveliness and capacity for improvisation and cooperation have been developed. It is their vernacular knowledge that the post-Fordist enterprise sets to work and exploits them.<sup>41</sup>

As Gorz and others thus recognize, the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist — or an industrial to a post-industrial — paradigm signals a fundamental shift in the relationship between everyday culture and economic production: where industrial production actively strips workers of their everyday cultural practices, competencies, and habits in order to integrate its workforce into a rigid, standardized division of labor, post-industrial capitalism places a premium on innovation, improvisation,

flexibility, and communication, and thus strives to merge culture and economy into a contiguous system of creative production. Yet this incorporation of “creativity” or “culture” into post-industrial capitalism is not without its challenges, particularly insofar as the same innovations in communications and information technology that made the neoliberal revolution possible also threaten to undermine some of the central mechanisms of capitalist accumulation as such. First, the principal production force of the post-industrial economy is no longer what Adam Smith described as *simple* or *manual labor*, whose economic value can be calculated through a linear equation of units of production per hour, but is rather described as *cognitive* or *intellectual labor* whose value, in economic terms, resists such simple forms of measurement or evaluation.<sup>42</sup> Second, the commodities produced by cognitive labor, as opposed to the physical commodities produced in an industrial economy, are generally defined by their immateriality: they are ideas, knowledges, affects, and social relations that are not only dynamic or non-linear with respect to the value they produce, but function contrarily to material commodities in terms of their economic accumulation. As Michael Hardt summarizes,

Private property in the form of steel beams, automobiles, and television sets obey the logic of scarcity: if you are using them, I cannot. Immaterial property such as brands, code, and music, in contrast, can be reproduced in an unlimited way. In fact, many such immaterial products only function to their full potential when they are shared in an open way. The usefulness to you of an idea or an affect is not diminished by your sharing it with me. On the contrary, it becomes useful only by being shared in common.<sup>43</sup>

We may conclude, then, that the infrastructural changes that define post-industrialism not only proffer a different version of post-capitalism, but a more intense version. Unlike the post-capitalism that inhered in industrial production, which was a formal phenomenon relating to the system’s class structure and the diffusion of decision-making therein, the iteration of post-capitalism that is borne through the shift to post-industrialism is situated more squarely in the very contents of capitalism itself: it is the very commodities that capitalism produces that threaten to exceed its grasp and unfold into a more inclusive cultural sphere fundamentally antithetical to the logic of private accumulation.

### **Conclusion**

While there may be a number of insights one might take away from this brief genealogy, I will, in conclusion, enumerate only a few. The first and more general conclusion would simply be to temper proclamations about the imminent demise of capitalism as a result of the differing technics associated with a post-industrial regime of accumulation.<sup>44</sup> As the twentieth-century economic literature on the subject of

capitalism's possible futures reveals, capitalism has been existing at the edge of the abyss for at least a century, and possibly longer. On a more substantial point however, I think this examination of the shift from industrial to post-industrial capitalism reveals, at least to some degree, that while the general process of dedifferentiation Jameson identified does indeed define the morphology of capitalism over the past several decades, especially where the previously discrete fields of "economy" and "culture" are involved, it is increasingly insufficient to leave matters in this general state. As the analysis of the infrastructural shift that underwrote the neoliberal revolution demonstrates — especially where information and communications technologies are concerned — it is not merely the case that culture and economy have amorphously collapsed into each other, rendering the two difficult to discern. While it is surely the case that the rigid hegemonic distinction between "work" and "leisure" that partially defined industrial society has, for instance, collapsed, the current comingling of the economic and the cultural process has not simply negated the concept of culture in relation to economics but has produced a new positive concept of culture as a source of value-creating activity in its own right — which George Yúdice calls a "social imperative to perform" — that conforms to the new conditions of economic production.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the general dedifferentiation of the spheres of industrial modernity did not simply produce an amorphous composite of heterogeneities in a confused postmodern present but, over time at least, new cultural and economic positivities began to cohere and assert themselves within this overall process of dedifferentiation based on new laws of production and distribution governing post-industrialism. And it is based on this recognition of the new positivity of culture in today's changing economic context that, I argue, considerably different political categories from those that circulated within Western industrial modernity become a real possibility. For while Jameson's thesis of dedifferentiation constitutes a crucial starting point for theorizing the changing politics of the present, much analysis and criticism has not only held fast to the discretely related categories of liberal industrialism — the individual, the public, the state, the economy, civil society, and so on — but has attempted to ascertain, anachronistically, to what degree the new technologies either solve or exacerbate the problems of liberal, industrial modernity. "The printed book," as Marshall McLuhan was fond of noting, "did not extend the older forms of [scholastic] education to a wider public — it dissolved the dialogue and created wholly new patterns of political power and personal association."<sup>46</sup> Analogously, it is increasingly important to expand our conceptual horizon beyond the categories that currently populate our political vocabularies and begin to consider to what degree this fundamental transformation in the current mode of production will dissolve the very dichotomous categories of the individual and society that have hitherto defined the politics of modernity, and from this, what new social forms and political categories will cohere within a new epistemological and political syntax.

### Notes

1. David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (Suffolk: Profile, 2010) 120.
2. Fredric Jameson, “‘End of Art’ or ‘End of History?’” *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (New York: Verso, 2009) 73.
3. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992) 2.
4. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* 2.
5. Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), 88.
6. Michio Kaku, *Physics of the Future* (New York: Doubleday, 2011) 10-11.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy* (London: New York, 2006) 21.
8. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1994).
9. See Henri de Saint-Simon, *Social Organization, the Science of Man and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. Felix Markham (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).
10. Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977) 929.
11. Rudolf Hilferding, *Finance Capital: A Study of the Latest Phase of Capitalist Development* (London: Routledge, 1981) 180.
12. Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (London: Routledge, 1944) 32.
13. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* 35.
14. Unlike von Hayek’s superficial knowledge of Marxian or socialist economics, Schumpeter’s familiarity with Marx’s analysis of capital is extensive, to the point that *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* makes original contributions to the field of Marxian economics as such. Schumpeter was personally close to the school of Austro-Marxists that included Max Adler, Otto Bauer, and Rudolf Hilferding, whom he met in graduate school at the University of Vienna in 1905-1906. Accordingly, Schumpeter adopted much of Marx’s approach to his own study of modern capitalism, particularly when it came to the wider social and cultural — or superstructural — changes associated with the rise of capitalism. As K.W. Rothschild puts it in *Schumpeterian Economics*, “if we want to oversimplify we could say that while there exists any number of people who are regarded as non-Marxist socialists, there are very few specimens who can be regarded as non-socialist Marxists. Schumpeter is one of them.” See K.W. Rothschild, “Schumpeter and Socialism” in *Schumpeterian Economics*, ed. H. Frisch (New York: Praeger, 1981) 114.
15. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* (New York: Harper-Perennial, 2008) 134.
16. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* 139-42.
17. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* 143.
18. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy* 162.
19. James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (New York: Van Rees, 1941) 112.
20. Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* 71-72.
21. John Maynard Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire.” *The Collected Works of John Maynard Keynes* (London: MacMillan, Royal Economic Society, 1972) 289.
22. Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire” 290.
23. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*. (London: MacMillan, Royal Economic Society, 2008) 96.
24. Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* 164.
25. M.C. Howard and J.E. King. *The Rise of Neoliberalism in the Advanced Capitalist Economies* (New York:



- Palgrave-MacMillan, 2008) 187.
26. John Kenneth Galbraith, "The Technostructure." *The Essential Galbraith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008) 71.
  27. Galbraith, "The Technostructure" 33.
  28. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (New York: Basic, 1973) xxx.
  29. Galbraith, "The Technostructure" 67.
  30. Theodor Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?" *Opening Address to the 16th German Sociological Congress, 1968*. <http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/AdornoSocAddr.html>
  31. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?"
  32. Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?"
  33. Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Random House, 1971) 5-6, emphasis added.
  34. See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso 2000).
  35. *The Post-Industrial Society* 9. Touraine's notion of alienation, it should be noted, is more Hegelian than this excerpt may make it appear. As Touraine writes, "a man is not alienated because his 'natural' needs are crushed by a 'dehumanized' society, by work on an assembly line, by urban congestion, or the mass media. Such expression only gives rise to vague moral philosophy. It is easy to understand why they irritate philosophers who have learned the more exacting use Hegel made of this notion. Alienation must be defined by social relationships. A man is alienated when his only relationship to the social and cultural directions of his society is the one the ruling class accords him as compatible with maintenance of his own dominance. Alienation means canceling out social conflict by creating *dependent participation*" (8-9).
  36. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* 115, 118, 119.
  37. As economist J. Quiggin observes, "for most of the 20th century, the cost of telecommunications services has declined at a real rate of 4-5% per year. For long-distance services, the decline was even more rapid — around 10% per year. Over a period of 100 years, the compound effect of these declines yields a reduction in costs by a factor of one million or more." See Quiggin, "The Rise and Fall of Economy: Finance." *Globalization: Australian Impacts*, ed. C. Sheil (Sydney: U New South Wales P, 2001) 25.
  38. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 164.
  39. Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* 53.
  40. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* xxx.
  41. André Gorz, *The Immaterial*, trans. Chris Turner (Calcutta: Seagull, 2010) 9-11.
  42. For a theoretical exegesis of the concept of cognitive capitalism, see Carlo Vercellone, "From Formal Subsumption to General Intellect: Elements for a Marxist Reading of the Thesis of Cognitive Capitalism." *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007): 13-36.
  43. Michael Hardt, "Two Faces of the Apocalypse: A Letter from Copenhagen." *Polygraph* 22 (2010): 268.
  44. For an apt critique on this point see Slavoj Žižek, "The Revolt of the Salaried Bourgeoisie," *London Review of Books* 34:2 (January 2012): 9-10.
  45. George Yúdice. *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham, Duke UP, 2003) 40.
  46. Marshall McLuhan, "Pop Culture/Mass Culture: American Perspectives." *Understanding Me: Lectures and Interviews* (Toronto: McClelland & Stuart, 2005) 25.





Robert Ryder. "Immer Aktuel." *Mediations* 26.1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013) 181-185.

[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/immer-aktuell](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/immer-aktuell)

*Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno*

Miriam Bratu Hansen

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## Immer Aktuell

Robert Ryder

Today's rapidly changing media environment makes it difficult enough just to keep up with current technological innovations and their impact on politics and society, let alone stay abreast of the accompanying, often reactionary media theory that attempts to reconcile these innovations in relation to the longer perspective of early media history and theory. On one hand, there is a tendency to reduce the kaleidoscopic media reflections of the Frankfurt School to implicit references that are themselves deemed unproblematic. Terms such as "the optical unconscious," "mass ornament," and "aura" are treated as if they themselves carried a certain aura of originality and historical authenticity that need not be further questioned. The result is that such terms are then thoughtlessly appropriated to explain the current state of media technology and digital information culture. On the other hand, there is a countertendency to believe that the appropriation of critics such as Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno, and others is misplaced because they are too far in the distant past, and so recourse to them cannot be considered critical in any genuine sense. The problem with this tendency is that in doing away with the critical theorists of the so-called Frankfurt School, media scholars believe they are breaking new theoretical ground, which seems appropriate since their object of study is the "new" media of the day. To successfully avoid these two tendencies, one must be both a thorough historian and keen theorist. Miriam Bratu Hansen was one such thinker, who consistently throughout her scholarly work up to and including her final book, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno* (U California P, 2012), successfully argues for the "currency" of these important German critical and cultural theorists with a breathtakingly clear understanding of the institutional, social, and political constellations through which

they moved. *Cinema and Experience* is without a doubt the single most important contribution to the understanding and “reopening [of] ostensibly closed chapters of film theory” (xvii) to be published in many years, and the pinnacle of her scholarly achievements.

Since there is so much to learn from the 280 pages that comprise the book, not to mention the nearly eighty extra pages of intricately researched footnotes, it is difficult to know where to begin. Let me start with the structure of the book, which roughly follows the three names that constitute its subtitle. Two chapters devoted to Kracauer begin the book proper. They also act as exemplary models of Hansen’s clear methodological style, which runs throughout the book: steeped in critical history and theory, Hansen’s text is nevertheless punctuated throughout with helpful and clearly-marked intentions, succinctly orienting her reader to the precise questions and problematics that motivate every section of every chapter. A short passage from early on in Chapter One illustrates her exacting style and frequent thetic markers:

The present chapter deals with Kracauer’s efforts to develop an aesthetics of film from the perspective of a particular experience and critique of modernity. The following chapter focuses on his exploration of modernity as a mass-produced and mass-consumed, highly ambivalent and contested formation, in which film and cinema were playing only one, albeit a crucial role. As a hinge between these perspectives, I discuss Kracauer’s essay “Photography” (1927), a text that displays key traits of his peculiar method. (6)

One might well argue that there is little left to say about Kracauer’s “Photography” essay, but Hansen contends that the essay’s insights lie beyond the typical reading that tends to assimilate “Kracauer to a genealogy of media pessimism” (27), and focuses instead on the question of historicity as well as the “gnostic-materialist vision of modernity” (39) in Kracauer as she moves easily between his more canonical works and the lesser-known film reviews and essays to ground her claims. Her exhaustive knowledge of Kracauer’s *oeuvre* is in fact what helps structure the book as a whole: the final chapter of *Cinema and Experience*, which constitutes the only break with the Kracauer-Benjamin-Adorno trajectory, involves a substantially updated revision of her original 1997 introduction to Kracauer’s *Theory of Film*. And yet, like all her chapters, whether revised from previous articles or written specifically for this book, there is a certain logic in the placement of this final chapter: “*Theory of Film* ranks as a canonical work, one of the last, of so-called classical film theory” (254). Throughout the three chapters on Kracauer, which act as bookends within *Cinema and Experience*, Hansen consistently emphasizes Kracauer’s “anticlassical stance” (14) and “material aesthetics” (37) in order to show how he attempted “to reimagine the conditions of possibility of experience” through specific encounters “with concrete physical reality

enabled through film” (266). Hansen puts into relief, with explicit references to thing theory (Bill Brown) and phenomenological media theory (Mark Hansen), ways in which Kracauer’s various explorations of material events in film anticipate similar observations in postmodern media criticism.

Although there is no sustained comparison between Kracauer and Benjamin, Hansen nevertheless points to necessary contrasts between the two thinkers when meditating on convergent topics. Thus, when examining mass culture in Kracauer’s work, she writes that whereas “Kracauer self-consciously constructs the reality of the salaried employees through at once participatory and critical observation, Benjamin’s image of the masses, whether projected backward into the nineteenth century or forward into the not-yet of the proletarian revolution, ultimately remains a philosophical, if not aesthetic, abstraction” (63). This comparison offers an insight into one of the more important ways Hansen approaches Benjamin: as a media philosopher and aesthetician, whose “abstractions” she reveals in Part II as productive antinomies and tactical dichotomies. Comprising the greatest number of chapters and almost half the total number of pages of the book, Part II on Benjamin begins with a chapter entitled, “Actuality, Antinomies,” in which Hansen sets up multiple lines of inquiry that resurface in the subsequent chapters. Hansen outlines here what she calls “the antinomic structure of Benjamin’s thinking” as both “liquidationist” and “culturally conservative,” that is, as the tendency both to welcome the then-new media and to lament the decline of experience, respectively (81-82). While she is aware of the reductive nature of these two trends, Hansen wishes not to celebrate the importance of one over the other, but rather to maintain both in a productive antinomy that can generate the possibility of change, “but may just as well turn into a *mise-en-abîme*” (82). Much of her work on Benjamin can be read through the lens of this irresolvable tension or antinomy in his thought. Specifically, she puts “into question the liquidationist tenor of the [artwork] essay” (83), while later she reminds us that “we should guard against reading Benjamin too optimistically as assuming that the anaesthetization and alienation wreaked by technology on the human sensorium could be overcome” (146). But the most central argument for recognizing and maintaining the irresolvable tensions and contradictions in Benjamin’s work is that they are what make him most prescient:

His speculations on film and mass-mediated culture still speak to our concerns because the problems he articulated and the antinomies in which his thinking moved persist in the globalized media societies of today — in different forms and on a different scale, to be sure, but with no less urgency and no more hope for easy solutions. His actuality consists, not least, in ways in which the structure of his thinking highlights contradictions in media culture itself, now more so than ever. (80)

After this opening chapter on “Actuality, Antinomies” — a title which succinctly encapsulates the passage above — Hansen’s larger goal in subsequent chapters is to focus on key concepts that, despite their tendency to overlap and interact with each other, constitute a Benjaminian theory of cinema. For those who have read Hansen’s previously published articles on Benjamin, chapters four through seven will be familiar ground: Chapter Four is based on her masterful essay on aura in *Critical Inquiry* (2008), Chapter Six on “Of Mice and Ducks” in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1993), and Chapter Seven is a shortened version of “Room-For-Play” in *October* (2004). And yet, taken as a whole, this string of five chapters reveals her systematic methodology of reading Benjamin’s late work in order to recontextualize more fully, and therefore defamiliarize, terms that have become all too familiar. So, for instance, with Chapter Four she wishes to defamiliarize the concept of aura from its oft-repeated references in the artwork essay by examining “the broader anthropological, perceptual-mnemonic, and visionary dimensions of aura” which she takes “to be of interest for more current concerns” (105). Chapter Five traces the terms “innervation,” “mimetic faculty,” and finally “optical unconscious” in order to reconceptualize Benjamin’s oft-cited yet elusive optical unconscious as a singular combination of the former two terms, i.e., as “a form of mimetic innervation specifically available to photography and film” (133). Hansen returns in Chapter Six to her love for the figure of Mickey Mouse in Benjamin’s earlier versions of the artwork essay, but the chapter’s placement emphasizes how much Mickey Mouse functions as a collective extrapolation of the terms presented in the previous chapter. And the final chapter on Benjamin, specifically Hansen’s focus on *Spiel* in all of its multiple German meanings, acts as a culmination of Benjamin’s “alternative mode of aesthetics” coupled with his experiments in the “modern collective experience”; *Spiel* thus allowed Benjamin to imagine “an aesthetics that could counteract, at the level of sense perception, the political consequences of the failed — capitalist and imperialist, destructive and self-destructive — reception of technology” (183).

Beyond the careful layering of concepts that simultaneously build from — and once “built,” continue to reverberate with — each other (an architecture, furthermore, that can only be grasped by reading all five chapters in order), Hansen reserves the last pages of the final chapter for Benjamin’s “actuality,” suggesting that Benjamin would likely “have welcomed digital technology for its potential to open up for human beings a further, globally enlarged *Spielraum*, a virtual space [...] that offers hitherto unimaginable modes of playful innervation” (202). While pointing to possible avenues for further study, including video game studies, Hansen nevertheless cautions her readers “against a reductive, applicationist version” (203). It is within these speculations on making Benjamin “up-to-date” in today’s media culture that I find Hansen’s overall motivations for Part II most revealing. Her exhaustive approach and carefully layered genealogies of theoretical concepts reflect the high scholarly standard that she would no doubt have expected when future scholarship attempts

to make Benjamin *aktuell*. In this sense, Hansen did all she could to bring Benjamin to the point where he can now be taken up and placed, albeit not uncritically, into new contexts and made “available for different readings” (83).

The single chapter on Adorno that constitutes Part III appears at first glance to lack the extensive erudition that makes up the five previous chapters dedicated to Benjamin. But to disregard her chapter on Adorno would be to weaken the overall impression of the book. First, it is clear that Hansen seeks the productive contributions that Adorno made, however indirectly, to the question of film aesthetics. Once again, her careful analysis of Adorno’s work as a whole allows her to move in a stepwise motion through key concepts like *Technik*, nature, and, finally, the experience of rhythm in his music aesthetics in order to discuss the extent to which they reverberate with his otherwise incomplete aesthetics of film. The result is an intense and well wrought chapter that succeeds in its recuperative project, i.e., of a film aesthetics for future readers of Adorno. At the methodological level, however, this chapter also suggests ways in which Adorno’s reflections on the culture industry and his philosophy of modern art can be made *aktuell* for film and media studies. This means, on one hand, a consideration of where his reflections might be relevant today: in her analysis of Adorno’s “Transparencies on Film,” for instance, she begins “by addressing the problem Adorno considered key to the question of an aesthetics of film — the relationship between technology and technique — a problem that, in new configurations, is still haunting today’s debates on cinema in the age of digital moving” (210). On the other hand, she also shows where Adorno’s “actuality” may be taken too far: just as she warns us of the applicationist approach that uncritically attempts to update Benjamin’s theoretical reflections, she is equally hesitant to install even Alexander Kluge, friend of both Adorno and Hansen, “as the proof text for the fruitfulness of Adorno’s aesthetics of film” (250). It is this cautious investigation into the future reception of Adorno in film and media aesthetics, informed precisely by looking back through his entire *oeuvre*, that makes this chapter consistent with the goals of the book in general.

*Cinema and Experience* is, in short, a faithful guide not only to three great thinkers’ elucidations of cinema, but also for any future endeavors that seek to extrapolate those elucidations beyond cinema and toward emerging global media networks and the accompanying information culture. Perhaps, more modestly, one is reminded of the metaphor Kluge uses on the back of the book, comparing Hansen to “a careful gardener.” In keeping with this metaphor I would extend it slightly: like its multiple footnotes that, despite their thoroughness, leave room for further speculation and encourage further scholarship, *Cinema and Experience* is like a well-tended garden whose keeper has left careful instructions precisely where and just how much to water.





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## **Void of Debt: Crisis and the Remaking of Indebtedness**

**David Janzen**

In the wake of the credit crisis of 2008 the management of debt became a central justification for a state of exception — the so-called “age of austerity” — that continues to have drastic and violent effects. Driven by a media spectacle that claims for itself the role of informer and arbiter, the rhetoric of crisis has been used to reorganize economic activity, leading to further entrenchment of the dominant economic role of creditors and banks (and their financial and military minions), creation of ever-deeper forms of peonage for the vast majority of the global population, and dismemberment of the social and governmental structures created to maintain some semblance of economic equality.

Richard Dienst’s *The Bonds of Debt* re-examines and expands existing concepts of debt to argue that what has been perceived as an economic crash may, in fact, be symptomatic of a more foundational crisis. The objects and discourses Dienst takes up in this analysis are compellingly diverse — they include statistical indices for measuring economic inequality, the infamous photo of Bono and Bush traversing the White House lawn, and the architecture of Prada stores. The theoretical framework, too, is wide-ranging, traversing disciplinary distinctions and drawing on phenomenological, constructivist, and Marxian approaches. In this sense, *The Bonds of Debt* aims less at a fully cohering social, economic, or philosophical conception of debt, than a constellation of insights regarding the situation of indebtedness. Though heterogeneous in content and approach, the book offers a sustained critical trajectory that can be organized into three general modes of inquiry. The first few chapters develop a socio-economic critique of the nature of crisis, institutional discourses on poverty, and the relationship between Keynesian economics and Kant’s notion

of perpetual peace. Following this, Dienst examines, with particular verve, the ways in which cultural images and representations of spaces inform (and potentially enforce) capitalist modes of indebtedness. Lastly, Dienst mobilizes insights from his socio-economic and cultural critiques toward a more speculative and philosophical intervention.

This philosophical intervention is framed by a distinction between the concept of debt as a measurable economic obligation and a more foundational concept of indebtedness, defined as “the reciprocal bonds of productivity generated between people, in their work and their lives alike” (30). Any community, Dienst asserts, must create and maintain modes of mobilizing the potential of labor and resources, and such mobilization is only possible on the basis of some form of obligation or indebtedness. The issue, in this more foundational sense, is not the simple fact that we are all indebted but rather that, within the framework of global capitalism, modes of social obligation are continually reconstituted such that all forms of indebtedness are increasingly mitigated through and determined by the nexus of money.

The tension between capitalist debt and indebtedness is the driving force of Dienst’s book. Through the dynamic negotiation of this tension, he argues convincingly that the current crisis of indebtedness necessitates an escape from the fetters of global finance capitalism. Such an escape must be premised on the projection of new possibilities, on a reinvention of the ways in which we are indebted to one another. Moreover, Dienst speculates, it is from within the system of capitalist debt itself (and the crisis thereof) that we will discover and potentially generate leverage for the undoing of the system.

### **Debt and the Representation of Inequality**

The credit disaster of 2008 and the ensuing media spectacle led to a proliferation of rhetoric declaring doom in increasingly serious terms, from “crisis” and “crash” to “meltdown” and (Alan Greenspan’s term) “tsunami.” Yet in spite of the severity of the situation, and in spite of the fact the crisis was, at least to some extent, understood not as an aberration but as an effect of a problematic or mismanaged system, this crisis has not led to a moment of revelation or transformative truth. In the U.S. (on which Dienst’s analysis is primarily focused), it was largely assumed that the individuals and groups that created the storm were the only ones adequately qualified to navigate through it, and the four-year transition from the initial state of panic to the relative restoration of faith has led to a deeper entrenchment of existing powers. Even in EU countries experiencing widespread popular dissent, austerity measures are being forced through. In short, Dienst suggests, “[t]he crisis of knowledge — as messy, confusing and embarrassing as it was — did not turn into a crisis of faith” (12).

The opening three chapters of *Bonds of Debt*, which intervene in the rift between the crisis of knowledge and the disavowed crisis of faith, analyze the frameworks by which we currently understand debt. Seeking to expand the concept of debt, Dienst argues that the supposed stabilization and recovery of the economy hides a more

foundational historical fissure. The debt crisis (crash, meltdown, whatever designation we wish to give it) and the accompanying media-driven frenzy — both of which have been represented as a moment of credit instability — are in fact symptomatic of a “crisis of indebtedness”: a crisis, that is, in the psychic, social, and economic forms of human relations that bind human beings together across time (13). By examining the constitutive forms of indebtedness and the modes by which indebtedness is distributed — what Dienst calls the “regime of indebtedness” — *Bonds of Debt* raises several central questions: How has the contemporary regime of indebtedness been understood? How does this regime appear in the everyday spectacle? And how might we better understand and engage in the restructuring of this regime?

Broaching the first of these questions, Dienst examines the ways in which inequality, poverty, and indebtedness are measured and accounted for, particularly from the perspective of international organizations. He suggests that the myriad of indices economists use to calculate equality and poverty — purchasing price parity, Human Development Index, the Gini index, and so on — are necessarily reductive for a number of reasons. In measuring equality, how can one account for the experience of abject poverty? And, as there is no legislative body capable of addressing global inequality, to whom would such a measurement be addressed? Still, such calculations work well enough to show that in the decades leading up to the economic downturn the world was becoming less and less equal and, with the growing disparity between wealth and poverty, affording less and less freedom to large portions of humanity. Even if drastically limited, this knowledge is significant for understanding the potential of solidarity.

Indebtedness, Dienst suggests, “marks the Real of solidarity” (57). The binding force of financial debt rests on the capacity to connect borrowed currency to some external sources of value — collateral, projected future earnings, other paper wealth, and so on — that may themselves be unstable. At any point, debt can be cut off from the value of its source (through a decline in the value of collateral, loss of projected earnings, and so on), and when the referential form is undone, debt takes on potential meanings, potentially becoming a crushing and impossible infinite, a disappearing void, or anything in between. In short, Dienst asserts, “a system of debt both *allows* and *requires* people to build upon the void without being crushed by the infinite” (58).

But what occurs when this precarious system collapses? The brief history of neoliberalism demonstrates that when the credit system is driven to the brink by reckless production of private wealth, debt becomes a public burden to be borne in the form of austerity measures and bailouts that, in turn, necessitate further restructuring that deepens of the regime of indebtedness.

Particularly during moments of instability and restructuring, this system requires both military force and careful media strategy. In the realm of warfare technology, Dienst suggests, one of the most crucial breakthroughs has come in telecommunications — specifically, in the technological capacity to manipulate

“the distances between those who decide strategy, those who fight, those who die, and those who sit and watch” (70). Moreover, media strategies are never tied to a single ideal or front. They re-order and reconstitute what appears in extremely diverse ways, from the absolute invisibility of conflict (in cases like Rwanda and Chechnya) to the calculated bombardment by fear that prefigured the Iraq war. With the power to determine (or ignore) the ways in which a conflict can be understood, Dienst argues, “media strategies now perform constitutional functions *in absentia*, producing ‘legitimation’ without recourse to legal processes, a ‘popular mandate’ without recourse to democratic procedures, and ‘universal principles’ that need not last beyond the particular task at hand” (71).

Such strategies obscure the ways in which the promised era of liberal peace is built on a generalized system of violence while, at the same time, claiming that such peace rests on a state of exception that forges a new link between indebtedness and war: anyone who wishes to partake of the “opportunities” advertised by the market-state must be willing to pay, in advance, the cost of maintaining a particular world picture. This world picture, Dienst argues, may allot freedom in immense disproportion — securing real freedom only for the very rich — but it offers the rest of us, insofar as we accept its terms, the chance to take part in the “view from above.” After 9/11, for example, the turnaround from vulnerability and fear to ruthless vengeance took mere days. By drawing people into endless so-called debates on security and foreign policy and into the “buzz of the war room” the media spectacle allowed anyone to join the side of power, to participate in the making of important decisions: not how to respond — this had already been decided — but rather “when and where to drop the bombs” (91-92).

### **Culture and the Spectacle of Obligation**

Following the critique of economic and political understandings of indebtedness, Dienst shifts perspective, reading debt through a series of cultural objects and projections in order to get a sense of how the current regime of indebtedness operates — what it does, how it appears, and what it looks like in an everyday sense. In what is perhaps the book’s liveliest chapter, a letter addressed to “the persona, the media image known as Bono” (95), Dienst examines the role of the media spectacle in the negotiation of debt and global poverty. In good constructivist fashion, the essay eschews questions of morality and policy, asking instead: What does Bono-as-media-image do? And how does this projection work?

The chapter begins with a look at the infamous photo of Bush Jr. and Bono (who at the time was lobbying the Bush government for debt cancellation and AIDS relief in Africa). From this starting point, Dienst analyzes the ways in which debt co-opts and replaces older social and economic relations, but also — and this is where Bono literally enters the picture — the ways in which the mass media spectacle reinforces and remakes a top-down order. Claiming to speak on behalf of “the poorest and most

vulnerable people...whose rage, whose anger, whose hurt I represent,” Bono stands in for those who cannot be present (116). But in what sense? Neither Bono-the-man nor Bono-the-image is capable of representing the diverse, directed, and articulate expressions of inequality that sometimes puncture through the media spectacle. To the contrary, Dienst argues that Bono’s presence at the White House, in the media, at Davos, and so on, depends directly upon the continued absence and silence of those he claims to represent. The issue is not only that the compassionate Rock Star is allowed to be present while legitimate representatives are not, but also that the philanthropic, sympathetic figure postures as the limit of the political struggle against poverty, thus closing the circuit between the media spectacle and existing powers. “What is missing, invisible, off the agenda,” Dienst writes, “is any belief that economic development can be a mode of collective self-determination, opening up a realm of freedom for the poor beyond that envisioned for them by billionaires” (117-18).

Shifting from the spectacular to the spatial, Dienst analyzes this top-down structure by reading shopping spaces — specifically, Koolhaas’s New York Prada store — as extensions of the regime of indebtedness. Shopping space is a form of enclosure that aims to configure encounters between shoppers (or their credit) and commodities, thus giving place to the “basic contradiction of consumerism, offering a way to bear being in debt, turning endless obligation into fleeting enjoyment, staking a claim in a collective excess that would be inaccessible to mere individuals” (129). Koolhaas’s Prada store exemplifies the multivalent nature of this contradiction, addressing the potential consumer both as a subject showered with the brand’s costly aura and as individuals who, in return for Prada’s generosity, are under implicit obligation to buy.

### **Re-Inventing Indebtedness**

The media spectacle of war, Bono’s campaigns, the architecture of Prada stores: all of these cultural forms give subjects the “opportunity” to express indebtedness to the existing order and to possibilities already decided for them by that order. But can our indebtedness be lived otherwise? Is there something about the existing regime of indebtedness that generates leverage for its own undoing? Is it perhaps precisely the spectacle of insupportable debt that could make visible the collective force that supports such indebtedness? These are the questions posed in the final chapters of *Bonds of Debt*.

Arguing for a committed re-reading of Marx, Dienst gleans from Marx’s writing three understandings of debt: the philosophical, the economic, and the political. The philosophical and economic perspectives emphasize the ways in which credit and debt mediate the master/slave relation between the creditor who “stands in for the judgment of *all those who possess wealth*” and the debtor who must accept credit (148). Within this relation the living body is inscribed and enclosed within, and dependent upon, the law of debt. It is in Marx’s political reading of debt that Dienst discovers the revolutionary possibility of indebtedness. On the one hand, the credit system



accelerates production by harnessing more labor and organizing resources. On the other hand, its existence, caught as it is between the void and the infinite, rests on an imaginary plane that reveals its absolute dependency both on the real productive forces of bodies and on the collective imagination that sustains the fiction. But what would happen, Dienst asks, if this collectivity were able to recognize its investments and claim “the imaginary powers of this system as its own”?

The insights and tensions taken up throughout the book point to a fundamental contradiction inherent to the existing regime of indebtedness. As social beings, Dienst suggests, we bear a form of indebtedness that is continually reasserted in the existence of community, and therefore can never be “paid off” in any final sense. Negating this collective indebtedness, we are inscribed in a complex order of things that remakes and dominates potentiality, placing past and future in perpetual debt to the present and to the forms of power therein. As Dienst writes:

We live between two debts. On the one hand, there is the ineradicable debt described by Agamben that comes from having or being a potentiality that we can never really possess, exhaust or fulfill, which prompts us to live as if we were always in pursuit of something else, like happiness, which can never be our own. On the other hand, there is the full array of as yet unreckoned debts that constitute the complex historical situation in which we live, ranging from unresolved family romances and the duties of identity to the very persistent obligations imposed by the dominant forms of political and economic power. (156-57)

The contradictory forms of indebtedness demand that we resist or refuse the obligations set upon us by the media-finance order — that we liberate one another from the apparatuses that make capital the basis for all forms of human indebtedness. But for Dienst, as I have already implied, there is no pure escape. Radical exoneration from capitalist debt must proceed through the constitution of new narratives of indebtedness and new modes of organizing the forms of potentiality that emerge in solidarity. “The key historical task,” Dienst writes, is to “constitute...a properly historical connection between indebtedness and the common good on a global scale” (158).

What might such a connection look like? For the most part we lack the understanding needed to make positive projections, but Dienst does gesture toward a few key ideas. For one, he asserts that the dialectic of indebtedness, if it is to gain any transformational leverage, requires that we eschew optimism. Thus, following Fredric Jameson, Perry Anderson, and others, Dienst argues that, in spite of the political risk involved, the only way to escape triumphalist neoliberal discourse is to “declare defeat” and to “recognize failure” — to “go through defeat *without saving anything*, and to go through failure *without losing everything*” and to do so without

knowing in advance “what will be given up and what will be kept” (169). Perhaps, in precisely this regard, our historical moment offers new opportunities for insight. A decade ago many thought it safe to assume that there was an inherent link between capitalism, democracy, and the global economy, and that, eventually, the “rising tide” ideal would play out. As Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman suggest, in the discourse of capitalism and globalization the blunt language of economics has largely replaced the more romantic language of freedom, democracy, and liberalism.<sup>1</sup> Austerity measures, the ongoing instability of the labor market around the globe, bailouts for banks and investors — the current situation is leading to increasing indebtedness while, at the same time, making increasingly visible the oppressive nature of the existing regime of indebtedness. Perhaps, then, we are poised to learn what Dienst calls the “vital lesson” that “the only way to bear the dead weight of history is to push back against it” (170).

#### Notes

1. Eric Cazdyn and Imre Szeman, *After Globalization* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).



Andrew Pendakis. "Moderation and its Discontents: Liberalism, Totality, and the Limits of Centrist Prudence." *Mediations* 26.1-2 (Fall 2012-Spring 2013) 195-203.  
[www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/moderation-and-its-discontents](http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/moderation-and-its-discontents)

*The Left at War*

Michael Bérubé

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## **Moderation and Its Discontents: Liberalism, Totality, and the Limits of Centrist Prudence**

**Andrew Pendakis**

*Michael Bérubé's Left at War*, is an analysis of the habits and prospects of Left thinking in America since September 11. It is also a book about the continuing relevance to that left of not just Stuart Hall, but Cultural Studies more generally. Its specific focus is the ideological temperament of what it calls the "countercultural" (3) left, a segment primarily identified with the "Z-counterpunch" (27) matrix, but sometimes elastic enough to include anti-liberal academic Foucauldians and other darkly indexed postmodernists (3). For Bérubé, the social theories produced by figures like Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky no longer shed light on our moment's least tolerable injustices and instead largely obstruct effective political perspective in an hysterical, anachronistic locutionary mode better fitted to the system-smashing 1960s. Nowhere is this more evident, he argues, than in these thinkers' response to America at war. Busking clumsy Marxist orthodoxies about the relationship between culture and power, they transform every American military intervention into an act of sheer imperialist brutality, reduce popular enthusiasm for war to deception and false consciousness, and ritually invoke media conglomerations shadily manipulated by a homogeneous, self-interested, and wholly sovereign ruling stratum. Such rhetoric, says Bérubé, divides truth in such a way as to render its fragments preciously hoarded secrets: illusion becomes the prerogative of the many and reality the arduous bounty afforded those few brave enough to follow Chomsky through the veil.

As a form of sociological description this paradigm, argues Bérubé, is simply false, screening out entirely the topsy-turviness of postmodern cultural production. Though

he roughly concedes (and laments) the political economy of information in America, and admits that media outlets often reflect uncritically official government positions, he contests the adequacy of the propaganda model to the present conjuncture, just as he resists the suggestion — popular among leftists — that the United States is a democracy in name only, Republicans and Democrats minutely differentiated heads on the same always-gorging oligarchic dog. Vulgar economic determinism displaces the genuine relative autonomy of the political, exaggerating the unanimity of public discourse and ignoring the tenuousness, heterogeneity, and struggle which characterize any project of governance. The most egregious misstep of these discourses, he contends, concerns their inability to recognize the changed dynamics of American foreign policy in the aftermath of Kosovo. Intervention in the Balkans, Bérubé insists, was motivated by genuine “humanitarian” concern, involving a geographical region in which the United States had no significant economic stakes or clear strategic investments. Kosovo, then, “clearly demonstrates the complexity of geo-political life, the conflicts within various factions of the West’s ruling classes, and the extent to which political debate cannot be brutally reduced to the economic plane” (113). According to Bérubé, American military intervention abroad should no longer be understood through the anachronistic lens of crypto-imperialism — oil and blood prettied up as rights to vote and own — but as an ideologically ambivalent terrain on which authentically emancipatory left-liberal universalists and neoconservative (nationalist) realisms wrangle over the terms, limits, and tenor of engagement. Fettered by the requirements of ideological consistency, this “Manichean” leftism closes itself to the responsibility of empiricism, replacing anomaly — reversals of policy on the part of the American government — to say nothing of nuanced geopolitical explanation with the monotonous cruelty of imperial force (15). It is from this angle, says Bérubé, that Chomsky argues himself into blatantly illogical quarters, the 9/11 attacks morally equated with Clinton’s bombing of Al-Shifa or traced back monocausally to CIA blowback and the mujahedeen. All of this, it would seem, to secure the comfortable causal anchor of an original sin — America.

Before I go on to address Bérubé’s primary argument, I want to stop and quickly make an aside about the relationship between style and thought. If a book about politics is to convince or interest us, a certain polemical economy is of the utmost importance. Bérubé’s book wholly lacks this difficult eye to the flow and texture of an argument. This is in part traceable to the difficulty he seems to have coordinating the relationship between a proposition and the examples chosen to enliven or illuminate it. The reader consistently finds herself in the foggy mid-section of a chapter, disoriented by a series of exemplary excerpts which do not seem to grip or relay a point made on a higher level of generality and instead flatten outwards onto a mess of empirical details fastidiously denounced or praised. The conversations he chooses to enter also tend to be overburdened by their own inter-citational natures, creating hideously long chains of reference that strain a reader’s belief in his selectiveness and obscure rather than accentuate his argument:

But because the object of the game here is to stake out a position to Lott's left by citing the correct African American intellectual (Brennan sees Lott's A. Philip Randolph and raises him a Lani Guinier: one can only respond by seeing Brennan's raise and countering with Manning Marble, Adolph Reed or Robin D.G. Kelly), Guinier's work on voting rights gets a dismissive gestural subordinate clause so that we can get on to the important work of associating her with Janet Reno and the horrific siege of Waco. (22)

The problem, here, is that Bérubé is called on to position himself at each moment in the signifying chain, stopping to adjudicate assessments of assessments (up to and including an opinion on "horrific" Waco!), rather than tightly following the imperatives of a necessary rhetorical task. There is a polemical claustrophobia in all of this — a sense of needlessly cluttered volume, but also unintelligently economized energy, points that are microscopically finessed at junctures irrelevant to the macroscopy of the whole. Bérubé at times appears to be returning punches with a length of memory and precision that borders on pettiness or vendetta. At one point he takes the time to respond to a statement posted to a thread on his blog; at others, trivially contradictory statements are used as evidence in a scintillating logical crime, proof of deep fatal inconsistency, and delivered in a winning tone which leaves the reader wondering just what else is at stake in these exchanges. An argument which relies so heavily on the machinery of brute contradiction strikes an interlocutor as somehow inherently famished, its misdirected bluster the plumage of choice for those too weak or disoriented to grip the strong directly at the throat. Perhaps the strangest habit of the text is a tendency to hyper-stipulate: "Let me be clear about my citation of Heath and Potter: I am not claiming that Noam Chomsky somehow patterned his political commentary and his rhetorical style after a science fiction movie that came out in 1999" (83); and "Again, let me take a moment to state the obvious: I am not suggesting that the left should have responded to 9/11 with a series of brilliant cartoons" (92). Pre-empting implausible misreadings in a tone thought to be frank (but which is really just overly fastidious) only sharpens the reader's sense for a paranoia or nervousness structural to the book as a whole — a hiccup or failure at the very heart of its targeting system.

These stylistic grumblings aside, Bérubé's book raises a number of questions that bear some close scrutiny. Central to this work is his analysis of "hard left habits," a comportment he sees expressed paradigmatically in paranoid countercultural invocations of the System (2). The presumption of insidious, self-transparent intention on the part of a "ruling class," the latter's sociological homogeneity and effectivity of action, as well the notion of capitalist culture as unequivocally manipulated by the requirements of production (a veil behind which exploitation stalks): all of this is exposed by Bérubé to the standard neo-Gramscian critique, "false consciousness"



replaced with protocols of persuasion and linear verticality, direct domination replaced with complex horizontal patternings of power and powerlessness. I think it is fair to say that none of this is controversial to scholars working within the purview of contemporary Cultural Studies (and in fact borders on disciplinary truism). The problem, however, seems to arise when this necessary re-conceptualization attaches itself to a wholesale abandonment of our sense of structure — of coherent, inertial tendency, the full weight and speed of things as they are, the hold on the virtual of drifting, entrenched actuality — to which the concept of system gives rise. Capitalized it is, of course, arch parody; abandoned it becomes instantly indispensable. Bérubé's attempt to shed light on the tactical uselessness of System-rhetoric is politically relevant and probably requires a good deal of attention; that said, the ease with which such a critique merges into an acceptance of existing social and economic structures, replacing theoretical urgency with a relaxed empiricist cognition of the complicated is well-known to any close reader of *The Economist*. Moreover, it remains the case that the idea of transparent, malevolent intention, homogeneous control, and absolute public passivity, can be subtracted from the concept of system without in the least way affecting its functionality. One doesn't need an outside — be it a self-grounding *cogito* or even a firm distinction between the true and the false — to insist on the ideological monotony and sameness of American public discourse, nor does this sameness need to be affirmed away from an eye to the tiny distinctions; rather, it is enough to point out the incredible range of alternative interpretive options — ranging from eco-feminisms to classical social democracy, from anarchisms to contemporary variations on council communism — screened out (and thus negated in advance) by the dominant discourses (be they Democratic or Republican or whatever). Simultaneously, the fact that ideology is never controlled from a supreme or homogeneous point of enunciation does nothing to dissipate the narrowness of a cultural context in which popular culture often spontaneously operates within the discursive tenor and consistency of the economy (to say nothing of its logistical imperatives).

Refusing the old image of the cave-dwelling masses as well as the audience reception theories articulated by its critics does not *de facto* leave us somewhere between the two, happily content in the knowledge that truth lies somewhere in the middle. In fact, one can affirm agency on the part of the subject without for a second declaring the context in which it is enacted and deployed free *tout court*. There are better questions one can ask here. Has a subject been exposed *systematically* to critical conceptions of the cultural practices in which they are affectively engaged? Has the virtuality that constitutes the heart and horizon of human subjectivity — a position sustained from Rousseau and Marx to Heidegger and Foucault — been honored in the conditions encountered by a subject on its way through the multiplicities of experience? In other words, have its schools *measured up* to the burdens and possibilities of ontology? Only on the basis of an affirmative answer to these ultimately Hegelian questions

can we begin to speak about freedom (given that the latter is not mere happiness nor the *a priori* simplicity of doing what one wants to). Certainly, there is freedom and limitation in every human gesture; the question, the great political question of our time, is what kind of society can best lay down the conditions for the production of *relatively* self-determining subjectivity. All subjectivity is, of course, residual, partial, inherited, and so on; the question lies in our ability to envision pedagogical and cultural arrangements that maximize the tension of an education, as well as social relations which grant time and space to an auto-production of the self. To echo the still utterly relevant Sartre: how can subjects, amidst the always tenuous and tentative constriction of ontological ignorance, and with no guarantee of success, *relatively choose themselves*? This is the question. A society in which retirement is disappearing as fast as youth employment, in which funding for the humanities is as scarce as noncommodified social spaces, in which labor precarity and competition secretes a certain mundane dread into the open potentiality of being alive, only very dubiously meets this standard. Nor, even were we to concede it possible, would Bérubé's social-democratic utopia: prosperity and employment for all are still poor substitutes for a genuinely dialectical freedom which presumes both without deifying either.

It needs to be said that a great deal of Bérubé's polemical work is done for him by the cultural immediacy of middleness itself. Positioned between the twin "Manichaeisms" of Bush and Chomsky, Bérubé avoids associations with the center as slough by discriminately attacking his flanks while at the same instant escaping ascriptions of dogmatism through the slippery zone of a middle thought to be smarter *a priori*; from this angle, and in distinction to the "tunnel vision" of the poles, the center gains a certain legitimacy that is wholly structural, the outcome of an untheorized phenomenological association with a thinking that is "in the round," *there in the middle of things*, rather than locked up blind by ideology. Our notions about the agility and intelligence of the centrist are already fully encoded here in the spatial imagination of a middle that must simultaneously intuit two enemies at the same time (rather than the cliché of the political ideologue who thinks in nothing but caricatures of one obsessional enemy). Unlike the poles, which transmit their traditions linearly through parties, old boy's clubs, and secret societies, the center (so the story goes) must forever triangulate its own content, spontaneously discovering itself in the rationalized here and now of reality. In other words, the act of taking leave from the poles, this sojourn out of extremity and binarized ideology and into the empirical variety of the world as it is (or still might be through sensible reform) repeats all of the old errors of every philosophical realism even as it shores up its persuasiveness on the back of a post-Marxist cultural suspicion of precisely such exits. The efficacy of this gesture is only increased by its resonance with the putative Gramscianism of Bérubé's intervention: to the left exists the old elitist corpse of false consciousness, the vanguard distance of a truth reserved only for the few, while on the right a twin phenomenon appears: neoconservative mendacity inflected by Leo Strauss's

governing Platonic lie. Not only, then, does the middle contain things themselves, finally discovered beyond the illusion of ideology, it also, happily enough, contains the people as well, ordinary folk and the commonsensical notion they have of their own pleasurable freedom. For Bérubé, the “hard left” desires nothing more than its own peripherality, wedded as it is to the pleasure of the margin and a deep contempt for all things mainstream, just as the neoconservative right anti-democratically declares war against the overwhelming resistance of majorities. Which is to say that in speaking from the middle one also speaks from the place of the people, the place, that is, *where everybody already is*. Everybody, but also nobody, for the radical centrism practiced by Bérubé is also framed as a seldom-practiced art and the exception to a boringly heeded rule.

It is precisely this structure of matching Manichaeisms which allows Bérubé to posit his welfare liberalism as the only left position acceptable to a person of sense. By tethering any stance left of Richard Rorty to the same terrain occupied by Chomsky, Bérubé obscures the entire gamut of contemporary post-liberal positions for which concepts like false consciousness or ontological class interest are simply no longer relevant. However, one should ask: why write a book on the binary habits of Left theory at a moment in which those habits have never been less germane? Why target the rhetoric of anti-imperialism when means have been found (in Hardt and Negri, for example) to think Empire apart from the moral geography of colonizer and colonized, as well as the bad equation of America with primordial evil? Given, for example, that neither Slavoj Žižek’s re-deployment of the concept of ideology or Giorgio Agamben’s notion of spectacular democracy rest on some stable distinction between appearance and essence, nor any clear functionalist sociology, why focus on media theorists whose primary texts were written in the 1970s and whose works are still dominated by these problems? Is Žižek, then, part of what Bérubé calls the Manichean Left? Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Wendy Brown, Alain Badiou? Though I think Bérubé’s critique of Žižek’s anti-liberalism is fundamentally correct and that the Marxist imagination lives or dies with the fate of its capacity to invent a theory of politics — one which draws on, rather than eschews, rule of law, constitutionality, possessive individualism, etc. — it nevertheless remains that his attempt to connect the critique of capital with reductionism plays an old game whereby the project of abolition is always already a kind of simplification, a fairy tale flush with comforting goods and evils as well as fantastical arrivals at an end to tension. The desire to *address* the dispensability of capital needn’t be simple, any more than the rhetoric of market complexity is complicated: what seals the meaning of the exchange here is the popular equation of nuance with negotiation and of abolition with a logic of moral abnegation premised on ignorance, reflex, or terror.

It should be said that Bérubé’s division of the left into orthodox and democratic factions reflects not only a distinction between two different ways of thinking about popular agency, but also two distinct interpretations of political structure. For the

Manichean left, “there are no anomalies in world affairs, no reversals of policy...the empire has no choice but to behave as an empire” (xx). On one side exist left ideologues who forever discern, amidst the variety of the real, the same monotonous economic legality, politics turned again and again on the dull spit of money, class, and power; on the other, liberal empiricists open to glimpsing within the present forms of mutation and contradiction capable of breaking with the history of capitalist imperialism. If there is a vantage point, however, from which Bérubé’s critique of left structuralism appears convincing, the danger lies in this tangential correctness displacing the broader landscape of its blindness. The bi-valence, here, lies predominantly in the way “foreign affairs” perpetually vex and derange left critique, Reaganite murder in El Salvador balanced out and annulled by some mirroring Soviet atrocity, calls to heed ecological limits and structural poverty diluted by the ethical immediacy of whatever new American intervention we are called upon to express our opinion. Any coherent post-Gramscian Marxism has to concede the theoretical possibility of a congress or president which acts on the basis of some abstract humanitarian principle in direct opposition to economic interest; this is not to suggest that such an intervention can be justified, nor that such operations stand to succeed, only that in the black box of American governmental intentionality the possibility exists for some entirely new ethical axis to appear.

Bérubé, in this sense, is right to suggest that however interpenetrated by interests and money, and however in the pocket of business campaigns and candidates may be, it remains technically possible for radically new cultural standards to appear within the political elite of any given state structure. To deny this is to erase all of the gains made by Althusser’s conception of the relative autonomy of the cultural sphere. Whether or not, however, such a possibility is probable is an entirely different question and one which returns us to the ontological status of the tendency or law in Marxist theory. Tendencies are not composed of deterministic necessity, but represent the probable, almost assured trajectory of a system organized around a given set of structuring coordinates and relations.

This insistence, however, on the possibility of sectoral mutation — revolutions of the part, rather than the whole, as it were — may command a certain grudging assent in the domain of American foreign policy (addled as it is by an almost impenetrable moral complexity and knottedness), but becomes positively disastrous in the context of ecological considerations. For Bérubé, there is simply no necessary contradiction between, for example, the imperatives of infinite economic growth and the fragility of a physically finite ecosystem, just as the rebirth within the United States of social democratic ideals hinges for him on a simple change in the winds of governance. In other words, though Bérubé seems to know neoliberalism exists, he misconstrues it as a linearly reversible change in policy rather than a mutation within the nature of the global totality itself. And in this he wanders into the bad utopianism he associates precisely with Žižek’s injunction to “be realistic, think the impossible.” If we can at

least speculatively admit that there is something adventitious, something structurally errant about the logic of foreign interventions, the possibility of a swerve or deviation, a one-off that arrives at humanitarian ends via inhumanitarian means, we should simultaneously admit the incommensurability, the enormous requirements of the newness that any sustained reconfiguration of a domestic or global economy would imply, as well as the full weight of the tensions exerted on such a possibility by the existing dispensation (cultural habits, financial arrangements, interested resistance). Whether it be in the name of the fragile terrestrial whole or the erased incomes of an American (or global) middle class, any such change would be far less linear than any military deployment (whatever fractal chaos such an intervention implies) and involve a pragmatics, a political *modus operandi* very far from the liberal welfarist coordinates proposed by Bérubé. It is in this light that his impatience with incantations of American duopoly should be placed; though we should heed his call to the virtualities inherent in parliamentarianism, eschewing the notion that states are implacable machines without multiple use values and effects, his persistent invocation of a Democratic Party still available to radical transformation should be responded to with the same incredulity we reserve for new year's resolutions.

Bérubé's call to an internationalism premised on ungrounded yet universal human rights will no doubt fail to convince those for whom a Rousseauian or Marxist critique of law remains the final word on rights-based politics. Certainly, concerns about the verticalism and structural hypocrisy of such systems — regularly adjudicated from above in the interests of a propertied few, often subtended by predictable forms of brutality and force — remain precious critical amendments to a language of rights that frequently extorts consent on the basis of mere proximity to common sense and power. However, those invested in the fortunes of a genuinely emancipatory politics — one oriented towards globally systemic change — should embrace with caveats Bérubé's proscriptions, taking cues from Hegel's insistence on a critique that dialectically sublates rather than frontally eschews existing normative systems. What would it mean for Bérubé to follow to the letter the universalist spirit of the liberalism he avows? If, as he insists, the content of right extends beyond its dominant Lockean mode (emphasizing personal freedom from arbitrary violence and non-consensual government, as well as the sovereignty and inherent fecundity of property) at what point does Bérubé's affirmation of a global social democracy begin to enter into critical tension with his avowed liberalism? What if this much-vaunted "right to protect" were extended to include victims of structural violence and immiseration (rather than reserved for flagrant, exceptional acts of state repression)? The liberal tradition has always limited its concept of domination to the spectacular immediacy of violence and theft. It is, in this sense, a tradition hamstrung by its taste for the obviousness of atrocity, for the lucid/morbid intentionalities of crime, one unable at this point to think or manage the slow-motion horrors of phenomena like ecocide or unemployment. Would Bérubé consent to logically extend his humanitarian



interventionism into this less-literal, less-spectacular domain of violence, this zone where pain, hunger, and death ensue but at a snail's pace and beyond the moral Etch-A-Sketch of dictators and genocide?

*The Left at War* is an important book, if only because it forces into contiguity conversations long sequestered by the standard parochialism of the disciplines. Bérubé's profile, perched at the leftward edge of the center, activated by a broadly "respectable" public visibility, the stylistics of the text (accessible, argumentative, almost journalistic in tone), as well as the wide-sweep of its polemics (pulling in enemies from a genuine range of positions), makes it a book readable across the usual, miserable trenches. It stands to be read by conservatives, centrist liberals, cultural theorists, Marxists, IR scholars, policy makers, as well as many of the Manicheans he routinely dismisses. The text's usefulness, however, is more the by-product of the rarity of its conceit than it is the sustained labor of a conceptual synthesis or bridging. Bérubé's attempt to bring discussions about American foreign policy onto the terrain of cultural studies is genuinely provocative and interesting, but it resembles a mechanical binding of opposites rather than a full-scale intermeshing or testing of their logics and consequences. His book is not, as one sometimes thinks it might be, a critique of the illicit institutionalization of the division separating geopolitics and culture; it does not, for example, disassemble the statist presuppositions of IR theory with the methods of cultural critique, nor does it flush out the latter's own tendency to avoid contact with the organizations, practices, and documents of transnational "foreign policy" with the former's global, institutionalist scope. Rather, it is one book about Chomsky and Iraq followed by another about Stuart Hall and the culture wars. Though it's unclear that we were in need of another survey of Stuart Hall's necessary work — and this is precisely what the latter half of the book is — the value of Bérubé's text lies mostly in its function as material point of contact between ideological lines of sight which rarely meet. It is primarily in the pleasure created by the thought of an improbable future reading of Hall by Fukuyama that the book should be recommended.





## Acropolis, Montreal: Charles Taylor at 80

Adam Carlson

Recognized worldwide for his contributions as a theorist of modernity and multiculturalism, Charles Taylor is Canada's foremost philosopher and political theorist. In honor of Taylor's eightieth birthday, an international conference was held in March 2012 in his hometown of Montreal. Over three days, colleagues presented papers spanning the diverse disciplines and fields "Chuck" has touched, in effect sketching a précis of his life's work.<sup>2</sup> Always just as concerned with participation as he is with contemplation, Taylor himself exercised the "right of first response" to each of the ten panels.

In the following paper I read Taylor's life through the lens of this remarkable gathering to demonstrate the crucial relevance of his thought to contemporary Canadian politics. The inseparability of thought, language, and politics has always been axiomatic for Taylor, an authority on Hegel and Wittgenstein who argues that the self is constituted in dialogue and takes on meaning against a fusion of horizons.<sup>3</sup> While he has been a professor of philosophy and political science at McGill, Oxford, and Northwestern universities, his academic life has always been rooted in political practice. A founder at Oxford of one of the journals that would become the *New Left Review*, Taylor was a leading figure in the British New Left, as he was in Canada's social-democrat New Democratic Party (NDP), serving as its vice president under the legendary Tommy Douglas.<sup>4</sup> Taylor ran for office four times for the NDP, including in 1968, when he lost the race in Montreal's Mount Royal riding to Pierre Elliott Trudeau, who would become prime minister. As a teacher and a public intellectual, Taylor has trained generations of philosophers, activists, and politicians. A former student of Chuck's, the late Jack Layton, who last spring led the NDP to official opposition status on a much-celebrated wave of support in Quebec, wrote that Taylor was instrumental in helping to elect Quebec's second-ever NDP member of parliament, Thomas Mulcair in 2007.<sup>5</sup> Mulcair was elected Layton's successor to the NDP leadership a week prior to this conference. While never holding office, Taylor has nonetheless played an active role in Quebec politics. In February 2007, responding to a perceived increase in ethnic

and religious tensions across Quebec — a perception fueled by such spectacles as the town of Hérouxville’s publication of “*normes de vie*”, or behavioral norms for immigrants<sup>6</sup> — Jean Charest’s provincial Liberal government enlisted the bilingual federalist Taylor along with prominent French sociologist and committed separatist Gérard Bouchard to form the Bouchard-Taylor Commission (BTC). The BTC held public hearings in order to clarify the state’s role in accommodating minority demands according to the principle of *accommodement raisonnable*.<sup>7</sup> And it is this role — the engaged intellectual in dialogue throughout his milieu — that best illustrates how the various threads of Taylor’s thought and practice are woven together in a continuing project to understand the ways of being together that mediate and generate belonging.

Taylor is often labeled a liberal or a theorist of identity politics. But such labels reveal their inadequacy when applied to Taylor. Too often on the left we accept caricatures of liberals — theorists content to speak from behind Rawlsian veils of ignorance — and as such we don’t take the confluence of imaginaries that make up “liberalism,” nor those who get lumped in with them, seriously enough.<sup>8</sup> Taking Taylor — a thinker who carefully avoids extremes and lauds cooperation while conscientiously denouncing any program aimed at “consensus” — as its subject and object, this conference forced its participants to discern the contours of an incredibly nuanced and even radical realm of possibility in which to consider the fundamental liberal question of the individual’s relationship to the state.

Taken on its own terms as a certain approach’s self-reflection on its conceptual wholeness, the conference explored how phenomenological structures translate into political structures of respect, mutual recognition, and tolerance. However, when it came to imagining how these structures could measure up against today’s most urgent stakes, the discussions seemed to dead-end in a philosophical speculation curiously detached from the praxis that characterizes Taylor’s life’s work. As we sat in the darkened lecture hall, red felt squares pinned to shirts and schoolbags reminded us of the fight going on outside, a fight against so-far unmatched forces of intolerance. For weeks, almost daily protests against the Charest government’s plan to significantly raise tuition rates for Quebec university students (\$1,625 CAD over five years) had been met with unblinking repression. As one day’s tear gas dissipated, a new cloud of gas would explode the next day only a few kilometers away. *The Concordian* reported that earlier that week, a group of unionized, striking Concordia University students had had their picket line crossed by members of another union of university security guards, one of whom later reportedly punched a student in the face before fleeing the scene.<sup>9</sup> The student protests have been significant. An estimated 200,000 people attended a march in Montreal on March 22 — one of the largest demonstrations in the history of a province known for taking to the streets in protest of injustices; an even larger demonstration took place a month later on Earth Day (April 22), when striking students, unions, and environmentalists came together to denounce the paths taken by both provincial and federal governments on a whole array of issues.

Far from engaging in any meaningful dialogue, in line with the Charest government, university and CEGEP<sup>10</sup> administrations have taken legal actions against students, repeatedly banning picket lines and turning political protests *a priori* into matters of “law and order.”<sup>11</sup>

This depoliticization-through-criminalization is of course not confined to the provincial level. The very fact of my attendance at the conference was due to the federal government’s continuing intolerance toward labor action of any kind.<sup>12</sup> A week earlier, my flight to Montreal had been saved thanks to pre-emptive back-to-work legislation against Air Canada pilots, the first in a string of injunctions which memorably climaxed when a disgruntled passenger spit in the face of a baggage handler during an “illegal” (although the distinction seems somewhat redundant) strike, an episode we might see as a supremely effective case of the privatization of union busting, or at least the neoliberal downloading of official hostility into the sphere of civil society.<sup>13</sup>

While it might seem difficult to reconcile the subject matter of the conference with such gross intolerance, each can nevertheless be understood in Taylorian terms. Clearly, the structures which give and guarantee meaningful belonging are increasingly closed off to those who would demand accommodation. In the face of such depoliticization, we’re left not only with the problem of how to deal with being shut out of the polis, but also with the problem of how to avoid diverting antagonism down unproductively atavistic channels. These two threats emerged in the press on the second day, when the French-language daily *Le Devoir* fumed that the conference, sponsored in part by the provincial government, was being held in English.<sup>14</sup> It is true that aside from a very well-attended public panel on Taylor as a public intellectual, there was only one paper delivered in French. The implied excuse, that it was an international conference and therefore had to be staged in the international language, was just more grist for the mill. But in electing not to rehearse the familiar debate, one may glimpse the radical subject Taylor is figuring, an identity simultaneously decentered and rooted in language, and which he discussed in both official languages. Taylor told us that on the Bouchard-Taylor Commission he often heard that English is a mere instrument while French is the expression of a whole culture. “As one who reads Herder,” he said, “I realized the French were right!” However, he has grave concerns that the hermeneutic background of this Herderian culture is formed by old narratives maladapted to our current moment, which at their worst “point to a dangerous problem of the lack of fit in Quebec.” The question of alterity is indeed worth posing as student protestors eagerly redeploy overdetermined and not-unproblematic symbols from Quebec’s nationalist patrimony.<sup>15</sup> But the re-emergence of old social contradictions in response to new ones also points to the valuable lessons we can learn from Taylor. This circulation of the old and production of the new is after all the collective production of new forms of subjectivity, a production which negates the very possibility of a stable, Lockean, liberal identity, of an individual separable from

the community. As Taylor put it in one of his bilingual responses: “*Le grand récit de Canada et multiculturalisme* is full of abstractions of identity that posit themselves as normative, [yet] we’re all on the same footing *Canadien*.”

We can best apprehend this footing when we consider Taylor himself as *Lebensform*: a shared form of life and embodied practices — and an example moreover of the engaged subjectivity that can navigate and move beyond this moment of depoliticization by resituating the polis outside of official structures. The theme that emerged as the collective thesis of the conference was that Taylor is a living expression of the good life, the Socrates in Montreal’s acropolis, and as such he embodies an alternative that is written into the milieu from which he organically emerged, a milieu with home-grown gadflies. Anglophone as well as Francophone, deeply religious and profoundly secular, progressive while cherishing the particular cultural riches which give life meaning — in Montreal, as in Taylor’s life, conflicts and antagonisms generate forms of subjectivity, ways of being together that cannot be contained.

A friend for fifty years, philosopher Richard Bernstein summarized Chuck’s life’s work in relation to the acropolis: “Taylor’s thinking is grounded in his experience. [...] He is an example of the Rooted Cosmopolitan — his roots are in Montreal.” “*Taylor is a Quebecer*,” Bernstein emphasized, “with fierce loyalty to his French and English heritage!” In Bernstein’s view, “Charles Taylor is primarily an eighteenth-century moral philosopher.” There’s no easy way to fuse horizons, but working together is a task, a Kantian *Aufgabe*. In dialogue, “antitheses come together and tend to mellow out.” Sociologist José Casanova would later say Taylor’s greatest contribution has been to show that “social processes are mediated phenomenologically.” For Bernstein, Taylor’s life and work have articulated the expressive vocabulary of this mediation. In response to these points by Bernstein, Taylor likewise located his theory and practice in his bilingual family. As political antagonisms in Quebec are channeled through language politics, each public crisis was felt deeply in his domestic sphere. He therefore became “an anti-liberal of a certain kind” — against any procedural or distributive liberalism. Dismissing John Rawls, Taylor says, “It’s not about individuals but how we relate to each other. *Égalité est un relation*.” And democracy is the means of figuring this relation: “On the [Bouchard-Taylor] Commission, you’re trying to do this way of working out. It’s one of the great issues of our day — how to get along and work together as equal citizens. You find your humanity in this work — it’s very Hegelian!”

The inseparability of humanity and work in this form of life was again the topic of Friday’s public panel, “*Charles Taylor, intellectuel engagé*.” Here, political scientist Guy Laforest invoked Jan Patočka’s measure of the true philosopher, recounting Taylor’s service “*sur la ligne de front*,” and concluding, “Our debt to Charles Taylor is he’s helped us toward understanding our *propre vie*.” Conference organizer Daniel Weinstock then explained that by resisting becoming a party mouthpiece or a dogmatic militant, Taylor is a model for how public life is essential to political philosophy. Eminent

Montreal lawyer and constitutional rights activist Julius Grey gave concrete examples, explaining that as vice president of the NDP during the Quiet Revolution, Chuck helped usher in “a huge change” in Quebec politics by bringing labor into a more urban, less Catholic brand of socialism. Grey stressed that everything Chuck had campaigned for in those early years has since come true, and the victories continue. By successfully managing the demographic shift away from labor into new political forms, today’s NDP has become “the party for Everyone and the Other — the party of Tolerance.” Grey proclaimed, “*Charles Taylor is our guide to social democracy as it should be!*” (to which Weinstock shouted “Mount Royal 2015, Chuck — it’s ripe!”).

But the climax of this rousing retrospective came on Saturday as political philosopher James Tully synthesized Taylor’s *oeuvre*. Taylor has taught Canadians a “language of self-understanding for living in a deep-diverse federation, a language of lived experience” expressed in four main concepts. The first, “deep diversity,” is a concept for Canadian cooperation. A phenomenological supplement to the legal language of rights, this is a first-person vision for consciously recognizing different structures of experience. Through deep diversity, we see that “what counts as Canadian changes across Canada.” This vision opens onto a stance of “mutual recognition.” Against the idea that politics can be mediated by grand theories or super-constitutions, Tully says, Taylor argued that “recognition is mutual. Partners have to do it from a first-person perspective.” Descrying the outlines of conceptions of the common and of exodus that I believe are integral to Taylor’s thought, Tully insists that mutual recognition saved us from more “distrust-generating top-down negotiations of monoculture.” Thanks to Taylor, we as citizens can now “do it ourselves,” talk to each other in a language that is respectful and bring prejudices and misrecognitions into a public “space of questions” in a dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding. Unlike standard dialogue, which progresses from particular differences toward a transcendent norm, in mutual understanding “we go the other way” in order to understand the past in our present. And while this approach is not a formula for action, that’s not the point: “*the dialogue you’ve gone through changes both partners and demands*. That’s why it has to be mutual.” Such mutually-expressive-and-determining dialogue articulates and creates the terms at work in social relations: it’s neither hegemonic nor subaltern, but rather a totally local language “within which we can reconcile differences over time, which permeates the public sphere from the ground up. Reconciliation is an ongoing process: every generation gets brought in, and it changes over time.” “This,” Tully says, “is civic ethics. The greatest gift Taylor has given us.” In this model of mutual dependency — Tully calls it a “Federal, ontic or ontological ‘being with’” — we realize “*we can’t fully be Canadian without all our Others*”; we transcend instrumentality and open up to care “not just within your group but with all others. *This can only be autogenerated by passing through this civic ethics*.” For dialogues to work, “you have to manifest the mode of mutual recognition you want. You embody the change you want within dialogue.” As dialogues prefigure



a better mode of being together, the means of making change are also the ends. One is exemplary, exemplarity builds trust, and therefore the exercise is both normative and utopian. With tears in his eyes, Tully concluded: “*Charles Taylor embodies this Civic Ethic; in the Bouchard-Taylor Commission he did it; he’s a teacher in the class and in public life.*”

By the end of Tully’s moving peroration, Taylor — the teacher, the man who lived history by forming and articulating the present he was mapping — was practically a Gramscian organic intellectual and the transubstantiated embodiment of the Socratic method wrapped up in a World Historical Individual: he was the unity of thought and practice! Finally, Chuck assumed this pan-Hegelian image as he responded: “I sound so coherent! In the ’80s and ’90s I was stumbling around writing papers, and I see now the sense they made.”

As caught up as I was in this celebration of a *Lebensform* who worked to ensure equality and tolerance within liberal society, when I noticed the *carré rouge* on the moderator’s jacket, I had to wonder if Taylor, who had just been so struck by the coherence of his life’s thought, wasn’t now playing the owl of Minerva. Was his 900-page *A Secular Age* an epic, articulating and preserving the relations of his time at the very moment they dissolved into history? When one panelist had said, “Let’s wish the students luck in their struggle!” there had been an awkward smattering of applause. Surely most in the room were sympathetic; but while everyone no doubt felt that the conference proceedings were urgently connected to events outside, it was not an easily intelligible relation. How, after all, are the lessons we might learn from a critique of liberalism — and its attendant problems of inclusion and tolerance — to be applied in an age of neoliberal intolerance of dissent, when the question no longer concerns a group’s alterity or accommodation within the greater polis, and instead concerns the systematic shutting down of political spaces?

The day I started writing this, seventy student protestors were arrested in Montreal in clashes with police. On the day I finished, the form of civic dialogue had again been filled with the ringing, stinging content of police tear gas and concussion grenades in Montreal; 150 had been arrested in Gatineau; and Premier Charest was suggesting that Quebec in 2012 doesn’t negotiate with violent terrorists. This is a good time to remember that this is the government that convened the BTC in a cynical maneuver to depoliticize the debate over minority/majority relations by deferring it into a pseudo-public sphere better described as a public/private zone of indeterminacy; this is the government that stoked a popular intolerance that was mostly a spectacular media creation<sup>16</sup> to the province’s great embarrassment by providing a forum for racist xenophobia, which some saw as an effective public shaming to neutralize the threat of the right-wing, anti-accommodationist Action démocratique du Québec party.<sup>17</sup> As Taylor reminded us, on the day the BTC report was released, Charest immediately rejected the commission’s first suggestion — to remove the imposing crucifix hanging over the president’s chair in the provincial parliament — by arguing that “we cannot

erase our history,” thereby echoing Parti Québécois leader Pauline Marois, whom Taylor quoted as saying “[Ici,] *c’est pas la religion, c’est la patrimoine!*” It would seem that whether in the indelible patrimonial “history” or in “2012,” the Charest government has little interest in negotiation.<sup>18</sup>

Against this horizon, we see Charest coloring in the often-traced lines Marx sketched in “On the Jewish Question.” Affirming religious freedom-as-right, the state frees itself from having to deal in religious matters, thereby making public matters into private ones. When rights are private property, all the state has to do is ensure the conditions by which this legal property can be maintained. Most importantly, the BTC gave Charest’s Liberals an opportunity to appear to be managing cultural antagonisms while defending religion, seemingly partaking of two important liberal narratives, while cynically exploiting many others. But again, even if his participation has been severed from any effective relationship to policy, as an exemplar of a *Lebensform* Taylor diagnoses these contemporary problems by urging, “How can we rectify our narratives?” When depoliticization is *l’ordre du jour*, we can draw on the phenomenology of accommodation to redefine political space. Reading the Wittgensteinian understanding of rule-following through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, Taylor brings epistemology into social theory to show that human agency is contingent on a social space that is open and accommodating of judgments.<sup>19</sup> When political battles are ruled on in courts before they begin, decided on before they’re even made fact, it would seem there’s no space for agreement. But of course any agreement takes place in the common space of language. Taylor’s thought gives us the expressive vocabulary to engage an already-privatized civil society, to sidestep government action or inaction and, as Tully suggested, to do it ourselves. This is another version of Hardt and Negri’s or Paolo Virno’s figures of exodus: a communally generated form of life that is written into the fundamental ontological resource, the source of the self, which is held in common. And while this resource can, has, and will be controlled and manipulated, it’s also impossible to dominate entirely.

Taylor’s life forms part of the horizon of his milieu, Montreal — an acropolis awash in contradictions generating new forms of life that actualize the promise of democracy. On Saturday, Taylor had said, “Like everyone, I’m so connected to this society. But like everyone, I misunderstand it.” The next day, having responded to the final panel, he uttered the last word, a slogan for this acropolis — not a program of corruptible content, but a political form, a *Lebensform*: “A philosopher is someone who doesn’t know anything.”

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Imre Szeman for his generous assistance with this project. Thanks also to Brent Bellamy, Dan Harvey, Michael O'Brien, and Katie Lewandowski for valuable suggestions.
2. The impressive roster of presenters is too extensive to detail here. See <https://secureweb.mcgill.ca/rgcs/sites/mcgill.ca/rgcs/files/ctprog.pdf>.
3. It's often noted that Taylor's doctoral supervisor was Isaiah Berlin, but he was co-supervised as well by G.E.M. Anscombe.
4. Taylor helped found *Universities and Left Review*, which in 1960 merged with *The New Reasoner* to form *New Left Review*.
5. Jack Layton, "Foreword" in Robert Maynell, *Canadian Idealism and the Philosophy of Freedom: C.B. Macpherson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2011) iv-xv.
6. The document can be found on the town's website: <http://municipalite.herouville.qc.ca/normes.pdf>. Also see Sourayan Mookerjee's "Hérouville's Afghanistan, or, Accumulated Violence." *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31 (2009): 177-200.
7. The complex of antagonisms at play in the so-called "reasonable accommodation" debate — philosophical discussions of pluralism, the incongruence of translations between the English "secularism" and the French *laïcité*, policy incongruence between France's Republican conception of *laïcité*, Canadian multiculturalism, and Québécois conceptions of interculturalism and *accommodement*, etc. — is far too complicated to gloss here. See the BTC report: *Fonder l'avenir: le temps de la conciliation. Rapport de la Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliée aux différences culturelles* (Montréal: Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliée aux différences culturelles); *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation* (Québec: Gouvernement de Québec, 2008). Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor's *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011) is also very informative.
8. For example, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's simplistic — not to mention simply *wrong* — gloss of Taylor as exemplar of liberal "identity politics" in *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009) 330. Those who consign Taylor to the "liberal" camp tend not to address the fact that in Canada's version of liberal democracy Locke and Mill have always had to make room for Hegel. For a short, fascinating summary of the Hegelian tradition in Canada, I recommend David MacGregor, "Canada's Hegel" (<http://publish.uwo.ca/~mcgregor/published/hegel1.html>). For a deeper treatment, see Meynell. Barry Cooper offers a Canadian Kojévian thesis that anticipates Fukuyama in *The End of History: An Essay on Modern Hegelianism* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1984). An update on this end of history from the semi-periphery thesis can be found in Robert C. Sibley, *Northern Spirits: John Watson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor: Appropriations of Hegelian Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2008). And for an in-depth discussion of Taylor's complicated relationship to Marxism, see Ian Fraser's *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (London: Imprint, 2007).
9. "Campus Security Clashes with Students." *The Concordian* (27 Mar. 2012): 3.
10. CEGEP (*Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel*): Quebec's system of public colleges founded in order to make post-secondary education universally accessible and to serve as an intermediary step between secondary school and either university, or the job market.
11. "Quebec Student Wins Injunction, Returns to Class." *CBC News* (3 Apr. 2012). <http://www.cbc.ca/news/>

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