

Thinkings 6

Collected Interventions, Evocations, and Readings 2016-2017



Jeff Noonan

Contents

Our Town	6
Poem for Autumn	9
Fragments From Days Spent in Paris	10
Windsor Spaces II: Ford City Parkette	15
Windsor Spaces III: 201 Shepherd Avenue East	17
Recitative for the Feast of the Most Precious	20
Second Last of the East End Bars (A Found Story)	21
True Ice: A Memoir	24
The Importance of Being Less Earnest	26
Identity Politics, Cultural Appropriation, and Solidarity	30
Rights and Responsibilities: Free Speech and Academic Freedom as Social Values	35
50 000 000 Trump Fans Can Be Wrong	40
The Bigger Story: Don't Pontificate, Organize!	43
Against the Politics of the Bogey Man	48
Re-Thinking Enlightenment Internationalism in the Age of Right-Wing Atavism	55
Alternative Facts: Humanitarian Edition	60
Tangled Web	63
Democracy, Competence, and Expertise	66
Labour and Democracy	68
Anti-BDS BS	72
Fractals of Violence	75
And Popper Thought Marxism Was Unscientific	79
Peter Singer Loses His Grip	82
Place	85
The Wish to be a Red Indian	88
Indigenous Knowledge and Intercultural Dialogue	92
Silence, Deafening	99
Readings: Carlo Fanelli: Megacity Malaise: Neoliberalism, Public Services, and Labour in Toronto	101
Readings: Enrique Dussel: Towards an Unknown Marx	108
Readings: Beyond Capital	113

Lessons From History: Herbert Marcuse: “Murder is not a Political Weapon”	117
Lessons From History II: Bernard Williams: What Hope For the Humanities?	120
Lessons From History III: Gadamer’s Truth and Method.....	124

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Cover photograph is a detail from a Miquel Barcelos installation in the Cathedral of Santa Maria de Palma

I: Evocations

Our Town

Originally Posted March 8, 2017

For my mother, on the occasion of her 70th birthday.



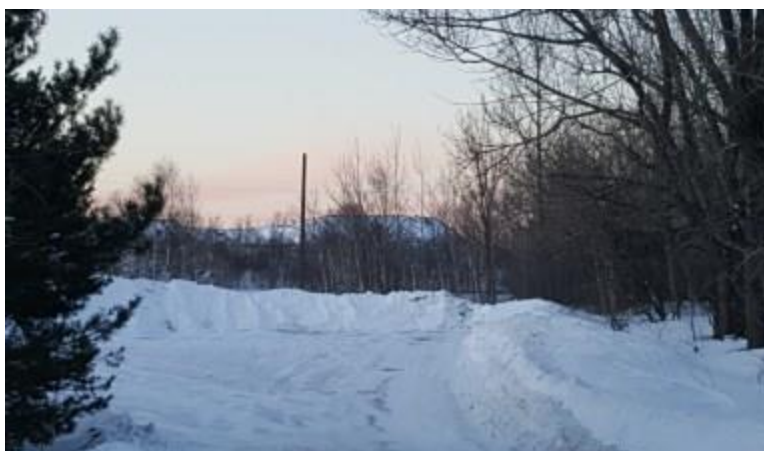
I'm glad to be from someplace that is a real place, not some god-forsaken suburb built on any old former farmer's field. I'm glad to be from someplace that's not a destination (there is no reason to go unless you know someone) but when you're here you know you're not just anywhere; a place where streets end in bush that's not for "trekking" (whatever that is), or "cottaging," (even worse), but bush that goes on and on.



A walk will not lead to a celebrity sighting but maybe a shot-up old car, or a bear-scratched tree, a ground-down ancient mountain, or a weedy lake. It's a hard place, built on rock: impacted, exploded, stretched, scoured, scarred, burned, blackened, mined, and smelted; a place of hard people: muddy boots, calloused hands sweaty in black leather mitts, thick French beards and toques, talking next to trucks, sleds in the back, getting ready to follow a trail carved from hard weather:

“How she’s goin? Goin’ out today?”

“Ya, goin to the hut on Wanapitei,”



Snow drifts against Inco Town houses. Inside, away from the clarifying cold, or at hotels, rowdy families and friends, too much cigarette smoke and not-craft-beer in the hands of the not-

beautiful people, workers, foul-mouthed gallows humour, sardonic and cutting, salacious, maybe even cruel (to sucks, who don't get the joke, so get it, or get lost).



Hard living (the birthday balloons didn't go past 60), but soft hearts; wrinkles from laughing, not old age: "Give 'er till the end, boys, go-fuck-go,"

'til the heart attack or cancer.

In me, a hard trace still left after I shed my skin in the city.



Poem for Autumn

Originally Posted November 4, 2016

Who knew dying could be so beautiful? A still life in the golden light of autumn. I can see the bridge through the bare trees now. In the garden, crimson grass is justification enough for the day.

An atmosphere of humid muskiness. The temperature: an absence, a clarity. The soil: yielding. A branch has fallen. It snaps easily for the fire.

A wind, more heard than felt, stirs itself. Clouds scudder across the sky; brittle leaves swerve in the vortex. Here below, the chill I have been waiting for has arrived. I can wrap my imperfections in scarves and sweaters.

It is a time for walking along rivers.

At the lip of the impact crater, the High Falls happily slide down billion year old rocks. We nervously clambered down, stopping to stare into star-shaped shattercones. A black bear left its claw marks on a poplar tree.

The Detroit is a working river. A small tug fights against the whitecaps, dropping beneath the horizon of the undulating grey cold. The blue has gone out of the water.

The Avon is more decoration than work. I followed the trail until it stopped at a sloping graveyard. A single oak bow, incandescent orange in the mist, made me feel sorry for the dead. The thoughts etched in granite born of despair and sorrow: "Asleep in Jesus." "Til he comes."

I thought: "We have no roots into which our life can withdraw until spring."

Chilly mornings when you can first see your breath are a blue darker than black. Above the peak of the garage implacable Orion, there. I feel intensely alone, even frightened. The stars bear witness but cannot intervene.

Later, the fax-crackle and squelch of birds happy for their wild grapes will begin. A squirrel will drop a quince, having found it too bitter. Traffic. Talk. But here and now: A moment for hesitation, a stopping.

I am the eye that knows that it sees and the ear that knows that it hears.

Here. Now.

Fragments From Days Spent in Paris

Originally Posted July 7, 2016

Paradox of the World City

There is a paradox at the heart of every great world city. Each occupies a specific geographical location and defines itself by a specific historical culture. The culture draws visitors to the location, but as more visitors come, their spending has the cumulative social and economic effect of commercializing the historically evolved culture that attracts them in the first place. The question is thus posed: what does one come to experience, and what does one actually experience: the living culture, or the commodified museum culture? What is living and what is dead in the world city?

Educated sophisticates are tempted by arrogant and elitist distinctions: *I am not a tourist like those gauche Americans, I want the real city.* But he does not take the bus out to the *banlieus* where reality lives but stays in the historical centre. She talks about elegance and grandeur and connects the history she has studied to the square where she sits to eat her *baguette*. They ain't fooling anyone: try as hard as they can to roll their r's properly, the locals can suss them out.

But then again: is this not part of the show that everyone comes to see? I mean, tourists are part of the world city, indeed, they make the world city, do they not? The world city blurs the distinction between local and visitor. It is a city of flows (of money, of politics, people, ideas, spectacles). The identifiable culture that serves as the initial attractor dissolves into these flows once you are in the midst of a world city. Maybe this is the element that entices and excites: to be part of this electric current of human movement before having to return to the decidedly more static world of the parochial local city?

Notes for a Philosophy of Sitting

If, as Frederic Gros argues, walking slows the passage of time and deepens our experience, ought we also not affirm the value of sitting, and for analogous reasons? To sit is to relinquish control over the sensory field, to give oneself over to what happens, to let thought work through and elaborate the ideas that emerge during a long stroll. The clock ticks, inevitably, but, if one is solitary (as a proper sitter should be), it loses its mechanical rhythm and stretches out languorously, making an hour seem an entire afternoon. To sit even when the world demands that you move is an affirmation of the joy of being-here over the accumulation of money-wealth, (think of a sit down strike). It is a rejection of quotidian fussing about getting things done. Sit, sip your beer, linger in the grotto while the rain taps the rhododendron leaves and misty light gently envelops you; sit and think. The world continues, it does not collapse.

Cell Phone– Sorry, Smart Phone– Apocalypse

If you are so uninterested in the art, if you are so indifferent to thinking or feeling anything you have not already thought or felt before, why bother visiting? Do you think that you are producing a watchable video, walking furiously along the corridor pointing your phone at the paintings? No, of course not. You do not expect anyone to watch the abomination your phone is recording, you just want to *post* it, not so that others will watch it (in any case, watching it would demand the capacity to pay attention that your friends lack too), but just so that there is a document that you were here, that can be added to a list, that can later be compiled into a bigger list. The more comprehensive list can later be reviewed by your network and a judgement rendered. But you are the same as you were before, there is a record but no memory; an external event that you passed through but no internal transformation through which you grew.

Indifference reigns.

The Mona Lisa: Why?

The Mona Lisa is in the Denon Wing of the Louvre. To get to it you first pass through a room of frescoes, including a [crucifixion by Fra Angelico](#). No one captures the human-hearted mourning that is the poetic core of the passion and death of Christ better than Fra Angelico. The two standing at the base of the cross look in tender sadness at a tortured and dead friend, not the majestic Son of God, and the sombre feeling is emphasized by the muted tones of the fresco.

The next room is full of pre-Renaissance Italian work, including another extraordinary [crucifixion by Giotto](#). Giotto is all mystical complexity and awe, angles (are they visible to the people at the foot of the cross?) swirl about Christ's body in its death agony. The more spiritually charged atmosphere is reinforced by the vivacity of his colours. Almost no one stops to look at either. Instead there is a pell mell dash for Room Six. For what? For La Gioconda—The Mona Lisa.

Why? It is as sentimental and uninteresting a painting as there is on earth. The misty mountains romanticize in a thoroughly cliched way the Tuscan countryside. And the smile, the mystery of the smile? What is the mystery? She is sitting for a portrait, why shouldn't she smile? And even if she is harbouring some secret, it would be thoroughly banal. Maybe she has cuckolded her husband with Leonardo just before sitting for the portrait? Maybe she is drunk? Who cares? It does not elevate the painting to the status of masterpiece it somehow has attained.

Claude and Erik in Montmartre

Tell me, Erik, my friend,

Why you wallow here

Night after night,

in the stink and the drink,

amidst these obnoxious whores

draping themselves everywhere?

Claude, you have answered your own question.

As life gets harder,

the problems more dire

the answers get simpler,

more precise and sharp.

It slows the music,

makes it clear,

and lets the humour shine through.

What is Our Position on Fashion?

The fashion industry seems to concentrate all the problems of capitalism: the elevation of priced style over substance, the “eternal recurrence of the new” (Benjamin) that keeps the money flowing, anchoring desire to the pursuit of unattainable ideals, normalizing an objectifying male gaze, and the super-exploitation of the labour that actually produces the clothes. And yet, is there not an analogy to be drawn between architecture and fashion that complicates the picture?

If you think about it, a building and a jacket, for example, serve the same function: to keep the elements out. Both functions could be served by the most utilitarian coverings, and yet no human civilization that I know of has ever rested content with pure function over form (the International Style, one can see now, was every bit as concerned with form and appearance as the art deco it replaced). We invest our coverings, whether buildings or clothes, with symbolic value, which means style in excess of functional requirements. To my knowledge, there are no socialist critiques of the stylization of buildings through architecture. So why so many of fashion?

Brecht provides the answer. In *The Messingkampff Dialogues* (about the theatre and problems of aesthetics and the politics of art generally) he quips that sometimes “one must chose between being human and having good taste.” Indeed, one must. On the street around the corner from our apartment there was a pop up fashion show for Men’s Fashion Week. Later that night, after the party ended, we saw a homeless man asleep in one of the discarded wardrobe boxes in the entrance way to the store. When it is a matter of homes verses skirt lengths, homes win.

Certainly there are moments in human history when providing the basic necessities of life was of paramount concern. But even in those circumstances, given the chance, people would reach for stylistic surplus. There is a hilarious scene in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* when Mephistopheles rains sexy underwear on the crowd at a Moscow theatre, setting off a frenzy amongst the women desperate for fashionable lingerie. I have spent a few nights in Stalinist apartments, I don't want to think about what Stalinist underwear felt like.

My point: we are not at a moment in human history where it is materially necessary to reduce human life to the provision of bare physical necessities. There are abundant resources and wealth, if only they were equally shared, democratically controlled, and governed by considerations of long-term sustainability. We need clothes; if there are no objections to the exercise of imagination in relation to what our buildings look like, I do not see any reason to object to its use in relation to clothes, provided, of course, the basic necessities have been universally provided.

For a socialism of beauty across all dimensions of human life.

Five Friends Meeting in the Marais

First three, then two more join. Young girls meeting for a night out. Trying to look sophisticated, still a little self-conscious, smoothing skirts, checking phones, but eyes sparkling. What is more beautiful than the eyes of the young, dancing towards a future not devoid of hope? The whole secret of life-value philosophy is in young eyes: wide open and alive to the adventure of discovery; longing to know but not yet knowing what everything is and feels like. Over time the dusk of knowledge and experience will matte the twinkle, (the eyes of the old, who have seen too much, are harder and sadder); wrinkles born of the sharper focus the "realities" of life demand will form around their edges, the lids will droop with the fatigue of earning your keep.

Pay no mind tonight! Look upon the world together wide-eyed and happy, and, if you would, permit me to gaze a moment on the joy of your anticipation, just a quick glance at those hopeful mirrors of the world when it is still unknown.

Two Old People Walk Down Boulevard St. Germaine

This is trust, this is love: a tremulous hand, attached to a rotund but weak body, holds fast to his wife's arm, the other on his cane. The eyes are almost closed by age, and whether they can see anything through their almost clenched lids is open to doubt. They appear of modest means but proud, dressed for their *promenade*, and moving in the world like they still belong to it (as indeed they do). They battle their frailties as they must have battled each other through the years, and they survive, shuffling like a single organism, he trusting her and she trusting her ancient memory to take them where they need to go. The Boulevard St. Germaine is busy, for a moment they look confused, but she strides confidently (but slowly, so slowly) into the street. A moment later, they are at their destination, embracing the restaurateur who has come down the steps to meet them. Their eyes no longer sparkle but express a different beauty, the beauty of enduring life.

Books and Water

If this were all it would be enough: *les bouquinistes*, their green book stalls lining the Seine, their patience as one browses the books, their persistence— 300 years— and their commitment to the patience of the written page in the age of the world distraction. Yet the sellers seem almost as old as their wares; not as old as the tradition they maintain, but who will keep it alive after this generation? In a few years will there be an empty bank where they once stood with an electronic interface where one can download and then project a hologram of what used to be?

Those future people, robbed of material reality, never having felt the pleasure of old paper, the rush of unexpectedly finding a volume for which they had long searched, will think they have had a real experience, that the projection actually enables them to inhabit the past. They will be wrong. There will be no musty paper to really smell, no real person to take your money and approve, smilingly, of your purchase, no real social exchange.

If not for real and novel social exchanges, why travel?

Windsor Spaces II: Ford City Parkette

Originally Posted August 12, 2016

This essay is the second in an occasional series of unambivalent notes of appreciation for some Windsor spaces that I like because they make me feel like I live in a city. (You can read the first essay, on Atkinson Park, [here](#)).

The guide books (are there guidebooks about Windsor?) won't know about these spots, so if you ever visit, seek them out and see what you think.

The second installment of the series takes readers to the heart of the Drouillard Road neighbourhood, the Ford City Parkette (Corner of Drouillard and Whelpton).

Centre

At the centre, *la machine infernale* touches the human hand and says, "it will be ok, follow where I lead," which turned out to be oblivion, unemployment. It arranges the workers in circular space around its structure, their strong hands gripping its appendages, the cables or hoses that feed it snake up and away from them, but have not been anchored to any ceiling. Instead, the sculptor let them extend into space and disappear, a true *deus ex machina* fed by transcendent forces. A terrifying mechanism frozen in bronze, an alien spaceship before everything became too clean and cgi; the workers masked and goggled and aproned to protect themselves from its heat or its blasts; faces covered save one, whose handsome beard and attentive eyes testify: we are still human beings.

Periphery

At the street's edge, still, human beings. Two fellows talk theology while I sip water in the heat-heavy sun, sweating through my atheist society t-shirt, thinking: "There is a difference between politics that (like the church across the street from which the disputants must have come) wants to save people by transforming them, and human respect that demands that those same people be left to be who they are. Some people take a sedimentary rock approach to the afflicted and the addicted, seeing a neighbourhood like this as the bottom of an immense pile of shells and bones that gets crushed under its own weight into limestone; the people just fossilized remains waiting for a saviour to rescue them."

But the people are, if anything, abundantly alive: laughing, some might say maniacally, but I will say exuberantly, debating, shuffling about in slippers and shower cap looking for a light, walking a giantly terrifying dog, and some, just sitting, forlorn perhaps. (But is that wrong? Not everything is funny).

Politics

In one of his "Questionnaires" Max Frisch asks: "Are you afraid of the poor?" and then immediately after: "Why not?" (*Sketchbook* 1966-1971, pp.207-208). He gives voice to every

middle class person`s anxiety: “If we do not do something, they will steal our shit.” But if you talk to people you discover that they don’t want your shit, only the resources that they are entitled to so that they can shape their own reality

Art

... the way the sculptor Mark Williams, (who was also a Ford journeyman) sculpted the extraordinary piece (the finest public art in the city by far) out of his own experience. His figures are not those of a Raphael (who was celebrated for paintings that made people appear “more real than they are”). Still less are they the cardboard heroes of socialist realism. His exquisitely detailed workers appear to be just what they are: workers- with hard hands and wrinkled clothes, trying to control a mechanism that would ultimately control them.

And this concrete and scraggy grass and faux-wood covered corner park is what remains. Perhaps it is not worth the historic losses, but there are no scales to weigh the cost of the losses of the past against the gains of the future. Some lose, and badly, and that is real, while others gain, and handsomely, and that is real. Art does not change that reality, but it can at least say: we were here, think about what that means.

Here, There, History

So it is a great space to sit and think about what that means, at the beginning (or the end, depending on whether you come from the north or the south) of this hardy historical neighbourhood. It is a gathering place, not a dying place, and a sitting and probably a drinking place (and how is that wrong); a corner parkette not unlike the one’s you find everywhere in Manhattan (if you stop looking up and shopping for a moment you will see them, little anchors for the micro-neighbourhoods that make up and make great that immense metropolis so, so far culturally, from here). But difference makes it worth being here when you are here and there when you are there. The new and hip is generic and without place, the true and the real are contoured and shaped by their historical grounding in historical-material space.

Windsor Spaces III: 201 Shepherd Avenue East

Originally Posted April 25, 2017

Windsor Truck and Storage Company, 201 Shepherd Avenue East



There is something about brick: solid, sensible, built to endure by subtly yielding to the elements, not absolutely resisting them. Brick bears the marks of its history, like a middle aged face; the sheen of youth exchanged for the wisdom of struggle. It is unpretentious, but responsive to the demand that a building— even an industrial building like this one— be form and not just function.

Brick also has a way of making buildings seem bigger. I know that the size of the building is a function of the underlying structure, but something about the iteration of the individual bricks makes even modest sized structures seem grander. In that way too bricks are like living elements, the cells that in their connection construct the organism.

It was the brick and the scale that drew my attention to this building. Truth be told, it is not that big, but it stands out amidst the small factories and bungalows along what, it must be said, is something of a backstreet. I had not expected to encounter anything of note as I rode along it a year or so ago. The only reason I was on Shepherd was because friends told me that it was the best bike route from their home in the east to mine in the west. So seeing the building was an unexpected pleasure. I felt like I re-discovered some forgotten architectural treasure.

As I neared, details emerged. The structure that first caught my eye was a clock tower, maybe three stories high. It had an Albert Kahn-ish look: handsome, a bit brooding, a little sinister, open about what it is, but not afraid to be noticed as architecture. The two tone brick that runs in vertical columns up its walls emphasize its height, and the softer coloured stonework that crowns it completes it aesthetically. The main body of the building extends along Windsor Avenue to the south. Geometrically, it is just a box that nests others boxes, but there is still pleasing attention to detail: the sign is painted, as they used to be in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, brass or iron designs bolted in rows along the western wall, a stone frieze that runs the entire length of the wall.

The best part is still the clock tower, and especially its impressive iron roman numerals. In memory it soars, but memory can exaggerate. So let's say it looms, empty, the clockworks have long since been removed. Nevertheless, there remains something sternly Victorian about its message to the neighborhood: see what time it is people, and get back to work!

an unnatural light,

Prepared for never-resting Labour's eyes

Breaks from a many windowed fabric huge;

And at the appointed hour a bell is heard,

Of harsher import than the curfew-knoll

That spake the Norman Conqueror's stern behest—

A local summons to unceasing toil!

(Wordsworth, "The Excursion")

I like it better empty. The danger of a botched and cheap renovation is avoided, while the eye is free to attend to its best features: the glass and iron clock face, without thinking about what time it is.

The building is clearly of a different era of urban industrial architecture when structures were built under the assumption that work was permanent and grounded in space. If the building is not exactly the [Battersea power station](#) on the south bank of the Thames in London, it is no Quansa hut or prefabricated sheet metal shell either. Ours is a more liquid age, used to comings and goings, openings and especially closings, and thus has become indifferent to factory architecture.

In a city with Windsor's history one would think that there would be hundreds of examples of serious industrial architecture, but there are not. A few small Albert Kahn buildings, the magnificent Ford Power Station on Riverside Drive, and not much else. There may once have been, but their traces have been erased. So it is a fitting metaphor for Windsor, stuck somewhere in the past, one is not quite sure when, (there is no dated cornerstone that I could find), but lagging somewhere behind history, for worse and for better.

Recitative for the Feast of the Most Precious

Originally Posted September 28, 2016

Mother yeast leavens the day and the sun shines bright on look-at-me boho-chic boots and artisanal quinoa ass walking a boutique dog past the Himalayan pink salt dispensary and the ganja yoga studio where locally sourced beards stretch curated limbs upward to farm to fork nirvana and then slide back into their craft brewed skinny jeans strutting past the innovative architecture of makers' culture baby strollers and hand-crafted organic car shares that convey them back to their whole grain condos where you would be at home right now if you lived here

Yes all matter is motion, change, transformation but *Anthropologie* instead of the *Squeeze Club*? I mean, fuck

Squeeze club, Ska-weeze Club? I mean really, grandpa, this is "The 6", yo, not your old TO, your black uniform is tired, hanging on the thin air of your unheeded history lesson about milk crates and old punk bars and leather jackets. We know it is half-heartedly spoken to no one. Now you care about a properly pronounced *latte machiatto*. You have been seen admiring the rows of well-formed loaves. You have been observed thumbing through vintage vinyl. So say: Getting down to one hundred per cent recycled brass tacks, it is all delicious.

Second Last of the East End Bars (A Found Story)

Originally Posted December 31, 2016

A night that began in billowing, silver mists in Richmond Hill has led here: an improbable bar toughing it out between Greektown to the west and the Afghani and Pakistani neighbourhood to the east.

He looks like someone I know, but isn't.

"Hey how are ya man, ya wanna shot?" he asks, before I even have my coat off.

You need people skills to drink in a place like this.

"No thanks man. I'm good with beer, but thanks, eh."

He does a shot of whiskey. "All ya got is friends, eh, that's this place. Friends, ya. I'm Hal."

Well, I have to shake his hand, no matter where it's been. "Hey Hal, I'm Jeff." I nod and try to disengage so I can watch the hockey game.

He looks at me, glassy-eyed, smiling, head orbiting its drunken axis, wobbly: "We've all been there, eh brother?"

"Fer sher," I reply, and turn to the television.

My shot goes instead to Tommy, the brother of Susie, the Vietnamese bartender and owner, cute in her grey tights and short-for-December skirt.

"Hey Hal," she kids, "you owe me 200 dollar."

Laughter. An ugly man, soon to pull out a harmonica, tells Susie that *she* owes *Hal* the 200 dollars.

Laughter.

Susie skiffles off, leaving Tommy and his iPhone to hold the fort.

There is a freezing rain warning, but I'm on foot. "Tower of Song" comes on. It reminds me of when I used to smoke.

“We invented NASA, all those guys who built the Avro Arrow, they went and built it. Hey Tommy, that’s good turkey, and I’ve been eatin’ turkey for thirty fuckin’ years.”

The time for more shots has arrived. The ugly harmonica player is standing the round this time. The play is clearly to get a woman (whose lower face seems to have shrunk to half the size of the top) even more drunk than she is.

All ya got is friends, eh?

“I’ll have the gold, the gold, ya know, gold, uh, cinnamon...”

“Goldschlager,” Tommy helps out.

“Ya, Goldschlager,” she repeats, then downs the shot.

“Pay back, baby, pay back!” she cackles, hugging the ugly man, smiling, hanging off his neck.

All ya got is friends, eh?

At the back, a table of Ethiopians with the drained-of-hope look of seasoned Northern Ontario alcoholics works through another round of Ex and OV. They chime in with half-hearted “Woy yoy yos!” during “Buffalo Soldier,” but leave after the third in a row AC/DC song. I wonder what dreams they packed when they emigrated. I am betting that being piss drunk in a place like this was not one of them.

All ya got is friends, eh?

“Toronto and Chicago are almost the same size, man. There were 60 murders in Toronto and 6000 in Chicago, 6000 that’s uh, 10, 100, no, fuck, 1000 times more. Holy fuck, eh.”

I notice: I am the only one here not wearing a baseball cap.

The harmonica has now been pulled from the pocket and brought to the ugly man’s lips. He is trying to play along, (appropriately), with “Have a Drink on Me.” He’s the closest thing to a rock star in here tonight so the woman with the shrunken lower face leers at him the best she can. I don’t imagine them fucking.

“Wait, shit, maybe it was only, like 600. Still, fuck.”

“We’re playin’ ball in hand, but we’re not playin’ it,” Hal announces in the general direction of the ugly man and the woman with the ill-sized face.

“There was an 18 year old running for parliament, did ya hear that? What the fuck does an eighteen year old know? What fuckin’ life experience he’s got?”

“We’re playin’ ball in hand, but we ain’t playin’ it.”

Laughter.

“Those are our fucking diamonds!!”

All ya got.

True Ice: A Memoir

Originally Posted January 8, 2017

I have never skated on such perfect ice, as pure as lead crystal and as hard, but receptive to my skate, my stride, as if friction had been eliminated and there is no loss of energy between leg thrust and forward motion, the turns easy, (except the first, when my imagining the breakaway got ahead of my feet and I tripped over myself and landed an embarrassed heap).

It is as if, as if 30 years had disappeared and I was a lithe, lean boy, all body and no mind, and not a round middle aged man squinting without his glasses to see the other end of the ice; just limbs harmonized and agile; as if there were no wobble to my left crosscuts, just a perfect arc you could trace with a compass, no ache in my knees, no worry that the pain in my left arm is a heart attack and not a bruise from falling, that energy doesn't run out and late does not keep getting earlier; that I am and we are just flesh and no responsibilities in pure playful motion, all of us together, for no one and nothing, just to feel the wind of the sprint as we skate, with nothing pressing after this hour away, just pure playing bodies, smiling, laughing at the bottom of the bowl of 6000 empty seats; just the ice, the puck, the back and forth and up and down of the play, the adrenaline and sweat, the jerseys still mismatched and uncoordinated, but the passes a bit crisper, the back checking more determined, the desire for one more rush stronger.

I have never wanted to beat the defenceman to the puck as badly as on that last rush, to hang on to it rather than pass, to drive just a bit harder to the net, head fake, to score, not for the fun of scoring but for the fun of making the maximum effort, to feel my lungs and legs at the limit.

There was a collective fantasy of moving faster, of being at full speed with just one stride, of being able to play on and on and on; as if each rush left me just as strong as before, but by 12:45 lactic acid reality is back, and my arm does hurt from the fall, and my feet feel cramped, and my knees burn, and I am not a lithe lean boy, and I have to teach in the morning.

II: Interventions

The Importance of Being Less Earnest

Originally Posted December 23, 2016

Of a Humourless Tone Adopted Recently in Politics

Iconic anarchist Emma Goldman is reputed to have said that if she could not dance in the revolution, she wanted no part of it. In fact, she never uttered that precise phrase. Here is her [explanation](#):

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a cousin of Sasha [Alexander Berkman], a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world—prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own comrades I would live my beautiful ideal.

[Living My Life (New York: Knopf, 1934), p. 56]

Goldman's point, I think, is that exuberance and joy cannot be postponed until after the revolution, but on the contrary are signs, even in the midst of oppression and exploitation, that life is worth living. If it is worth living, it is worth fighting for: the real motivation for revolutionary struggle is not some abstract intellectual desire to see programmatic change, but to create the social conditions in which the exuberance and joy of self-conscious presence, friendly and loving interaction and relationship, and creative activity are constant and not fleeting features of life. Like Democritus, revolutionaries should be laughing philosophers who fight because they love life and not because they hate an enemy.

I think political activists rightly anxious at the growth of right-wing populism in the United States and openly Nazi formations in Europe would do well to remember Goldman's lesson today. We are quite possibly present for the end of the liberal-democratic era. If that is too alarmist, then we are at least in the midst of a serious crisis. This crisis will not be resolved in favour of protecting the valuable gains of the past, necessary as a social plateau from which to build higher, without revived and *unified* social movements and progressive parties. To build those movements and parties, we have to be the sort of people who not only espouse good ideas,

but who live life in ways that prefigure the joyful values that we think should organize a future society.

Building the movements and parties that need to be built means understanding what the real causes of the present crisis are. Those causes are structural and rooted in private and exclusive control over the resources that we all require in order to live. Progressive struggle needs to focus on reclaiming those resources: as the Sioux of Standing Rock have just demonstrated, victory means taking back the land from capital. And that means: understanding who it is we should be fighting against: the ruling class, not each other.

I understand that critical politics requires self-criticism, that many people, especially white men, who want to change the world bear the marks of having grown up privileged in the world as it is, and need to be reminded about the ways in which this privilege can shape their character, their assumptions about what is funny or sexy, in all sorts of problematic ways. I understand that everyone needs to be reflective about the language they use and the hurtful implications it sometimes has. Since speakers are sometimes ignorant of these implications, everyone needs to be open to listening to the voice of others when they try to explain why something the speaker thinks is funny is actually offensive.

At the same time, everyone also has to keep in mind that revolutionary change is about collective and individual self-transformation, not more repressive regulation by the authorities, and that individuals also have to be free to laugh and desire and relate to each other based upon their own tastes and interests, to the extent that those tastes and interests do not actively exclude, dominate, or impede others from doing the same.

There is such a thing as white male privilege, there are offensive jokes, and we do need to pay attention to what marginalized others want to be called. But regulating jokes and relationships and pronouns are not the sole and ultimate ends of progressive political struggle. While it may be true that all white men are privileged vis-a-vis historically oppressed groups, there are class differences that mean that some white men— a very small minority— rule the world, while most other white men are exploited and alienated. Punctuating any intervention a white man might make into a political argument with the reminder that he speaks from a position of privilege might be true, but in itself does nothing to help understand this class difference. It becomes a predictable refrain, and thus leaves everything as it is, including the problematic white male privilege. At the same time such mechanical repetitions can alienate a subset of white men who need to be allies in the struggle. To overcome the very real problem of white male privilege requires changing the structures of liberal-capitalist patriarchal society. That requires unified political movements and not lectures— generally delivered by the highly educated (itself a site of privilege)— about privilege.

We can say the same thing about humour. Of course jokes can be sexist and racist and homophobic. But in humour, context and intention counts. Some jokes are racist and are intended to mock and harm. Other jokes play on racial stereotypes in order to expose their absurdity. Laughter can be harmful but it can also be liberating, a means of establishing connection across racial or ethnic divides, and we need to be able to tell the difference (and to laugh at ourselves, whomever we are). If we are afraid to laugh because, as the character

Richard Splett on Veep (a very funny stereotype of the sexually ambiguous male low-level Washington insider, brilliantly played by Sam Richardson) says “It’s not funny unless everyone can laugh” we are in effect abolishing humour from our lives. Work out his principle as an argument:

It is not funny unless everyone can laugh. The ability to laugh depends upon one’s sense of humour. But people have different senses of humour. Therefore, not everyone can laugh at the same jokes. Therefore, no joke is funny.

But the argument, if true, is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the principle.

The real issue is not whether everyone can laugh, but whether the joke at which some laugh and others groan is spoken with hateful or loving intentions. When jokes that play on stereotypes are told by people we love and trust they are funny; when structurally similar jokes are told by bigots, they are not. We need to learn to better distinguish bigotry from humour. Not only is life without laughter hardly worth living (perhaps not worth living at all), it also makes the left too easy a target for the right, who are happy to protect their bigotry by portraying us as dour prigs allergic to fun and prone to call the police every time we take offense.

The issue here is that if in our struggles against oppression we start to fear the spontaneity of desire and wit as the enemy we run the risk of seeing suffocating bureaucratic-legal regulation of every aspect of individual life and relationships as the solution to social problems. In fact, the very need for bureaucratic-legal regulation is the sign of, not the solution to, those problems. For example: rape is not caused by too few legal regulations on sexual relationships, rather, the need for legal regulation of sexual relationships is a function of patriarchy and male sexual violence. Hence the *ultimate* goal should not be more and more detailed regulation of sexual lives and connections, but (as radical feminists and gay and lesbian activists in the 1960’s argued) a liberation of sexuality from its deformations under patriarchal capitalist relationships so that the very idea of sexual violence becomes oxymoronic.

Of course, this point does not mean that we should not be scrupulous about consent or responsive to the names by which marginalized identities want to be called, but rather that we understand that the deeper political project is to build a world in which we all treat each other as ends-in-ourselves, whatever our identity and in all relationships, so that there is never a question of coercion or violence, physical or emotional. I know that this goal is a utopian horizon, but it is nevertheless the one towards which we need to be working.

The joyous essence of the emancipatory vision of radical politics that Goldman insists upon has animated the best of socialism, feminism, anarchism, black, and gay liberation movements (we can set aside the differences and difficult relationships between them for the time being). We are not fighting to be tokens of types but individuals who fully enjoy our brief time on this mortal coil and contribute something of value to others who will take our place. Let the light of Goldman’s defense of the “right to beautiful, radiant things” shine in the darkness of the current political moment.

Identity Politics, Cultural Appropriation, and Solidarity

Originally Posted October 13, 2016

The Political Aesthetics of Abstraction

It is easy to change the appearance of political arguments by abstracting them from the historical context in which they emerge. Just as the apparent colour of an object can be changed by altering the light in which it appears (an object under ultraviolet light looks to be a different colour than under infrared or sunlight) so too serious political arguments can be made to appear frivolous when separated out from their historical background. Certain figures in the media are masters of the parlour trick of cherry picking titles and argument-fragments that, in abstraction from the argument as a whole and a longer-term view of history, sound absurd. [Margaret Wentz](#) is a paragon of this intellectual non-virtue. In a recent article she makes fun of academic cultural studies for making what sound like non-sensical critiques of the “whiteness” of pumpkin latte and the sexism of glaciology.

Let us be fair: if you only read the title, and you do not link the *particular* claim (about lattes or glaciology) to longer term histories of racism and sexism, then it does *sound* ridiculous to claim that pumpkin lattes are racist or the study of glaciers sexist. But is it ridiculous to argue that there is a history of sexism in Western science or that Tim Hortons has built a coffee empire on an advertising construction of a very white Canadian cultural practice: early mornings drinking coffee at the rink while your boy (and now girl) plays hockey. How many women scientists were there in 1820? How many black Canadians do you see in Tim Horton’s commercials? Not many, because the image of Canada those commercials are conjuring is an anachronistic image of the cultural essence of Canada as the small town arena and hockey as a democratic cultural glue. Now, there is some truth to that picture (I lived it in fact) but it is only one fragment of a much more complex cultural picture, and it leaves out of the frame everyone who cannot afford to play hockey or who does not care about it.

When we put the deconstruction of the pumpkin latte in this context its claim is not so silly. What makes it seem silly is the micro-focus on a drink, and peoples’ assumptions that something so trivial as a cup of coffee cannot be so pregnant with offensive symbolic meaning. But a cross abstracted from context is just two pieces of wood intersecting at a right angle. What could be more banal? But put that banal construction in a Christian Church and it becomes symbolic of the suffering and redemption of humanity. The same general process of the inflation of symbolic value is at work in the Tom Horton’s commercial. When set in the

context of the construction of Canadian culture around spaces and practices that are predominantly white, the symbolic value of the coffee cup rises, and it can be a fit subject for cultural criticism. So: seemingly insignificant elements of a culture *can* have profound symbolic importance, and the *value* of work that brings this importance to light is that it opens a space for critical reflection and the democratic construction of new cultures in which more voices are heard and new practices born.

This critique is liable to get people's backs up, because they sometimes think that if the symbolic value of something which they enjoy has racist implications, then they are being called racists for enjoying it. Sometimes claims of cultural appropriation are made with an air of self-righteousness moralism that makes them easy targets for rejection on these defensive grounds. It is certainly not the case that every white person who wears dreadlocks is a racist any more than heterosexual white transvestites are sexist for wearing women's clothes. In matters of politics, intentions matter as much as actions, and sometimes the intention is just to look a certain way, or respectfully (and playfully) participate in a practice that one finds valuable even though participation demands a certain degree of transgression of cultural or gender-boundaries. Sometimes a dreadlock is just a dreadlock.

But sometimes not, too, and again it will be context and intention that determines the political meaning. Wearing dreadlocks because you love reggae is one thing, going in blackface to a hallowe'en party is another. Wearing blackface has an undeniably racist history; reggae, while rooted in a trenchant critique of the slave trade and colonial domination, nevertheless (at least in its original expressions) preaches a universal set of values: peace between nations and cultures and the equality and dignity of all people. Burning Spear's magnificent song *The Invasion* begins with the line "They take us away from Africa, with the intention to steal our culture," but continues with the invocation of the need for "Love in Africa, Love in America, Love in Canada" i.e., not retreat into a closed community but openness towards difference and reconciliation (but without forgetting the history of violence, either).

So: the problem of cultural appropriation is real, but becomes pernicious only when it involves the permanent appropriation of essential elements of a group's conditions of life and self-understanding, as in the history of colonial domination. The aim of opposing cultural appropriation should not be to prevent real communication, inter-cultural dialogue, and the creation of new forms of expression and identity, but to ensure that all members of all cultures have secure access to that which they require to live freely.

Against the Politics of Banning and Apology

Unfortunately, the goal of cultural critics is not always to widen the space for novel cultural interactions and inventions but to justify banning and silencing and to demand apologies for arguments and theories that give offense. It would be wrong to argue that there are *never* grounds to ban certain forms of speech or representation. However, the bar must be set very, very high: 1) There must be demonstrated and pervasive harm to an identifiable group and not a merely asserted harm to a random individual or individuals claiming to speak for the whole group, and 2) harm must be understood as equivalent to a physical barrier preventing the group from exercising its full range of life-capacities. So, it would be reasonable to ban Ku Klux Klan

outfits from a university campus, because the Ku Klux Klan is inseparable from a history of racist violence, and any black student who saw people walking around in Klan gear would reasonably fear for their safety, and this fear could well prevent them from freely enjoying campus spaces and feeling safe enough to think and study. Racist jokes, on the other hand, while offensive, should not be banned, but their teller challenged, because it is not always the intention of the teller of racist jokes to promote racial intolerance. Often times the teller does not think that they are racist, because they think that humour changes the literal meaning and implications of words— a not unreasonable position that must be answered with a reasoned critique. The ensuing argument can thus be a moment of productive political engagement and education rather than the regressive alternative: censorship imposed by the ruling powers.

This argument applies with double force to the lamentable and frankly reactionary practice of trying to silence theories and political positions which might give offense to some group by banning speakers from campuses or trying to control the content of courses. Academic freedom is not a liberal platitude but has been, overall, a force of progressive change, and a crucial contributing factor to why there is any political criticism on campus at all. There would be no women's studies department without the struggles of women academics, but those academics would never have survived the wrath of the boy's club without the protection of academic freedom, because it gave them the space and time necessary to defend the integrity and value of their work from charges that it was intellectually weak. There is no doubt who will be swept out the door if academic freedom is fatally compromised by misplaced political outrage and moralistic whinging: feminists, queer theorists, Marxists, and critical race theorists as well as heterodox critics of the history of science will be gone and universities returned to what they were formerly: transmission belts of the ruling ideas of the age, taught to the sons (and only much later) daughters of the ruling class.

Thus, activists and critics need to recover the value of political *argument*. If there are fault lines in a society, then it follows as a direct consequence that there will be groups on the other side of an issue, and they will not go away unless the fault line is sealed through some sort of fundamental social change. Silencing the opponent through whatever means has *never* worked (even revolutionary attempts to 'liquidate the class enemy' have never succeeded). There is no alternative but to argue (not *only* argue, obviously) and convince the opponent to change their position. Hegel is correct: the conceit that refuses to argue impedes political progress because the "achieved community of minds" which our rational nature makes possible depends upon the "power of the negative," his name for the ability of philosophical thinking to detect and overcome contradictions. If the other side does not speak, the contradiction is hidden from view but not resolved. The strategy of banning and silencing is therefore self-undermining and must be rejected save in the most extreme cases of overt advocacy of violent assault on vulnerable groups.

Solidarity

However, rejecting a self-undermining politics of the silencing (but not defeat) of the opposed position leaves open the more difficult question of how the positive programs of movements against different forms of oppression can be brought together in some sort of coherent political synthesis. A coherent political synthesis would allow for the elaboration of shared goals without

requiring the submerging of particular histories or subordinating the particular identities to an imposed agenda. It is crucial to remember that the emergence of radical feminism, Black Power, the American Indian Movement, and the gay and lesbian rights movement in the 1960's was in part made necessary by the woeful failure of the Marxist left to acknowledge the *political reality* of different histories of oppression. Of course, these movements were made necessary by those histories, and their successes owe to the intelligence and energy of their organizers. At the same time, part of the reason why these movements had to split off from the Marxist left was due to a mechanical and dogmatic insistence on the "primacy of class." There is a non-dogmatic argument to be made for the primacy of class, but I am not going to make it here. Instead, I want to conclude with a different account of how solidarity might be built in the present, which draws on some core ideas of Marxism, but re-interprets them in light of contemporary political realities.

The core problem of building real solidarity is how to identify real common interests and articulate them in such a way that their pursuit does not demand subordination of particular identities to another identity presenting itself as universal. The historical problem of the dogmatic Marxist approach was that, from the perspective of a radical feminist or black power militant, *class was itself an identity as particular as the Marxist charged feminism or black power with being*. If a common interest is to be found, it has to be deeper than class. I think we find this deeper ground in the idea of a shared set of socio-cultural human needs whose satisfaction allows anyone to realize their latent human power of living as a social-self-conscious agent; i.e., a person who has the power to shape their own identity rather than than be dominated as an object of oppressive power. When we focus on needs first, it becomes apparent that oppression is essentially about demonizing specific groups of people and using that demonization to justify the fact that they are systematically deprived of one or more of the set of fundamental human natural and social needs. They are oppressed because they can live as full social self-conscious agents, and they cannot, not because they are not essentially social self-conscious agents, but because they are deprived of that which they require to live as such.

So, to give only one example, when women were denied the vote (their need to participate in the determination of the laws they were forced to obey) sexist ideology argued that women lacked the intellectual capacities to effectively participate in government. When African Americans were denied the same means of satisfying their need to participate, racist ideology argued that they were similarly intellectually unfit for self-government. Here we have two distinct groups denied the same means of satisfying a political need by reference to a false construction of their nature and possibilities. The details of the histories of their respective deprivation differ, but the cause is the same: the system-need of the ruling class to ensure the conditions of its own rule. If the ruling class is primarily white and male, then the demands of women and blacks for political power is a threat, and racist and sexist ideologies a means of warding off that threat. Solidarity in the struggle can be constructed by appeal to the shared need, while the specific identity of the group is preserved because they orient their contribution to that struggle on the basis of their own particular experience of the general causes of the deprivation.

This example abstracts from a great deal of complexity of the contemporary political terrain, but I believe that if people examine fundamental problems of structural oppression, they will discover at the root of that oppression deprivation of needs that are also felt by other groups. I have defined and defended a theory of what fundamental human needs are in two previous

books, *Democratic Society and Human Needs* and *Materialist Ethics and Life-value*. The practical implication of the argument is that all the particular histories of oppression converge on the control of natural resources, social wealth, and social institutions by a ruling class. Solidarity in struggle is rooted *not* in everyone identifying themselves as working class against the ruling class, but in all oppressed and exploited groups articulating the specific ways in which they experience the deprivation of their needs, and working together to reclaim the resources and institutions that can satisfy them.

Politics cannot ensure that no one is ever offended, and if it tries to do so, it will degenerate into irrelevant squabbling (or worse, demands that the authorities solve the problem through repressive measures). Progressive politics is about people seizing the power to solve their own problems by changing the system at the foundations. It would be best if this were a simple and swift problem to solve, but it is not. Because it is not, and because opponents cannot be wished out of existence or completely destroyed, the patience of argument will always have to be part of the tools of struggle.

Rights and Responsibilities: Free Speech and Academic Freedom as Social Values

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Historical Context and the Principles at Issue

Three recent controversies have raised questions about the value and limits to free speech and academic freedom. The first involved the paintings of Canadian artist Amanda PL. She claims that her paintings were inspired by the work of the Anishnabe artist Norval Morisseau. She has been criticized by the Chippewa artist Jay Soule as coming close to committing an act of [“cultural genocide.”](#) The second concerns an editorial penned by now-former editor Hal Niedzviecki in *Write* magazine. He called for a “cultural appropriation prize” for the author best able to write characters not of their own culture. The third concerns a paper published in the journal of feminist philosophy *Hypatia*. The paper argued that there was an analogy to be drawn between transsexualism and transracialism: if people celebrate Caitlyn Jenner for changing sexes, then they should, by analogous reasoning, celebrate Rachel Dolezal, (a white woman who lived for years as a black woman), for wanting to change races. The article provoked an unprecedented [public campaign](#) that demanded the journal retract the article.

I will work through each of the criticisms in turn. However, before any useful light can be shed on the controversies, the historical context of the emergence of the principles of free speech and academic freedom need to be examined. One of the most lamentable facts about public discourse in the age of Twitter is that even thoughtful people do not—indeed, cannot, because immediate comment is demanded—stop to think through the historical process through which contemporary political values have emerged. When we do stop and think things through historically, the political implications and limitations of the value in question become clear, and we are then better able to negotiate controversies and work out *appropriate* forms of response to controversial instances of their use.

On February 17th, 1600, the philosopher Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome. His execution was ordered by the Pope because Bruno’s teachings: that matter itself could be understood as the active, self-forming principle of reality and that an all-powerful god would create a universe teeming with other forms of life were deemed heretical. One hundred and fifty years later the Enlightenment would confront the violent dogmatism of theological authority with the rational principle that disagreements be settled by the better argument. My point is not to compare critics of potentially offensive speech to the Inquisition, but to remind everyone that the right to free speech was (and should still be) a social value. It defended the right of individuals to question orthodoxy and repressive power. As such, it was a powerful tool in the struggle against all forms of oppression. It is not—as it is sometimes thought of today— a right to say whatever one wants and give offense just because one can. Rather, it was a right, in its origins, to explore alternatives and criticize; to expand the scope of human understanding; to protect the voices of the less powerful; to create a social space for the formerly voiceless to speak; and to catalyze non-violent forms of social and political change.

Academic freedom is a species of the genus free speech. It has no constitutional grounds but is protected only by convention and faculty collective agreements. In Canada its origins date to the firing of Harry Crowe. In 1958 the history professor was fired for criticizing the religious authorities who ran United College (today the University of Winnipeg). His firing spurred the formation of the Canadian Association of University Professors, whose core mission includes protection of academic freedom from threats inside of and outside of the academy. The only reason any critical voices are heard in universities anywhere today is because of the space academic freedom protects. Marxists, feminists, trans-activists, and critical race theorists would all be gone if academic freedom did not protect their right to criticize established structures of power, gender and racial norms, and anything else that can be made the object of critical scrutiny. Struggles around free speech, free expression, and academic freedom have often been led by the most marginalized and oppressed groups. Their struggles to give public expression to their realities and needs has radically transformed the cultural landscape of liberal-democratic-capitalist society for the better.

That free speech has been an important vehicle for the struggles of oppressed groups does not mean that it should never be limited. What principles should govern its limitation? If the basic social value of the right to free speech is that it allows for the expression of perspectives that would be silenced otherwise, then the basic limitation on free speech, expression, and academic freedom is the opposite: when one group's free speech actively silences another group or explicitly targets them for destruction (as in anti-Semitic hate or racist hate speech that calls for the extermination of the demonized group) then the speech is no longer properly understood as falling under the category of free speech, but becomes an expression of oppressive ideology. Merely giving offense does not pass this test. To be offended is not to be silenced (if it were, no one would know that someone is offended, because the offended party would be unable to express their displeasure).

Cases in Point

I think that of the three cases, only the case of Amanda PL comes close to crossing the line towards forms of expression that are justly censored. However, even in this case I think the gallery was wrong to cancel the show. The case of Niedwiecki is a case of misinterpreted satire that was then exploited by right-wing forces who have nothing to do with Niedwiecki. The *Hypatia* case is a debacle of the highest order and a serious threat to academic freedom.

1. The artist at the centre of the controversy, Amanda PL, studied at Lakehead University and claims inspiration from Anishnabe artist Norval Morriseau. From what I have seen of her paintings, they would be better described as vastly inferior mimicry rather than works of art. The colours, the motifs, the enclosing of structures within coloured spheres all linked together with curving tendrils are obviously reminiscent of Morriseau and other Anishnabe artists. But as Soule points out, in PL's case, it is all surface and no cultural-spiritual depth. Morriseau, according to Soule, was giving painterly expression to stories that PL did not know and whose spiritual depth she could not understand.

Soule is right to criticize her for cultural appropriation. Even though she acknowledges the source, the source is so obviously grounded in a cultural tradition that informed the work, and

which has not become internationalized (in the way, say, that the blues or jazz have) that her mimicry is illegitimate. Cultural appropriation is different from being influenced and inspired by a foreign culture. Beckett wrote in French to make language seem strange, to force himself to think about the task of writing, but he lived in France and learned the language. Amanda PL has not served any sort of cultural apprenticeship amongst the Anishnabe, has not tried to get inside the culture to learn the stories or the connection between style and story. She has tried to advance her art career with derivative paintings that nevertheless look enough like admired Anishnabe work that it might sell.

That said, I cannot agree with Soule that the work counts as cultural genocide. The United Nations defines genocide as:

Genocide is defined in Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national ethnical racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its

physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Cultural genocide would then be a set of practices, imposed by the dominant group upon the oppressed which is designed to systematically eradicate their culture. The forced teaching of English in residential schools would be a clear example. There is nothing in PL’s work to suggest that she intends to destroy the Anishnabe way of painting, or to prevent its transmission and teaching. Her work is bad, but it does not prevent Anishnabe painters from continuing their traditions.

Because it does not directly prevent Anishnabe painters from painting, or criticizing her for her derivative work, I would argue that the gallery was wrong to cancel the show in response to criticism. The show perhaps should never have been offered on grounds that the work is not good enough, but, once offered, it should have been seen through. The principle here is: fight back with the weapons with which you are attacked. If the weapon here is derivative art and the attempt to make a name for oneself by superficial copying of others’ traditions and practices, the response should be to publicly call attention to the problem and critique the work. Force her to answer and to become a better artist, to find a way to creatively give expression to influences genuinely felt without just copying their surface appearance. Argue and critique, don’t ban.

2. The Niedzviecki controversy overlaps with the Amanda PL problem because it to concerns the matter of who speaks for First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. From my perspective it seems much less serious a violation of their voices than the Amanda PL case. Niedzviecki was clearly being satirical when he called for the creation of a cultural appropriation prize. The main thrust of his editorial was not about cultural appropriation but the importance of imagination to literature. Literature is not just recounting stories, it is the invention of literary

worlds. Invention forces authors to go beyond their own private experiences to *create* worlds that do not exist in material reality. Dostoyevsky did not have to murder a miserly slumlord in order to explore the psychology of guilt and the ethics of redemption in *Crime and Punishment*. If we limit art to mere description and representation, we destroy art, whose truth is the invention of worlds and not the accurate description and proportional representation of real members of this one.

Part of that invention has to be the imaginative occupation of perspectives different from one's own. If not, every work of literature would be nothing but monologue (but maybe even not that, since we are not transparent to ourselves but have different sides). All writing therefore takes us beyond what the self has directly experienced. That was the main philosophical and artistic point he was making, but it got lost completely in the critique of an obviously satirical call for cultural appropriation and the cultural appropriation prize.

In humorous utterance, intent matters. Niedzwiecki intended to provoke, no doubt, but to provoke thought about the role of imaginative transposition, not to support cultural appropriation. Now, I say this as white male philosopher not aware, from the inside, of what it feels like to suffer deprivation of voice. I am sure my history influences my reading. At the same time, I am not saying that Niedzwiecki is beyond criticism, but only that reasoned criticism takes time: our world demands instant response, and instant responses are rarely wise. A more productive conversation and critique might have been had had a moment's reflection on context and intentions preceded the calls for retraction and resignation. These do little to solve the deeper problems of First Nation's and Inuit and Metis lives, but they do engage/enrage the right wing (like former national Post publisher Ken Whyte) who *did* intend to harm and humiliate by offering to fund the prize.

Niedzwiecki's comments might have hurt the feelings of members of vulnerable cultures, but they were included in an edition of *Write!* given over to First Nation's writers. Clearly, in terms of actions, Niedzwiecki was their ally, not their enemy. All satire, all humour, runs the risk of giving offence to someone. Do we really want a world without satire? A world where everyone has to triple guess themselves before they speak lest some ears take offence? I'll book my ticket for Mars — I'll take a room in the Don Rickles suite, please— if jokes, satire, hyperbole, farce, and laughter are forbidden on earth.

Again, the principle is: fight back with the weapons that attack you (although in this case I do not see an attack). If someone makes fun of you, make fun in turn. It is better to laugh at each other than to destroy each other.

3. The cases of Amanda PL and Niedzwiecki at least raise important questions about cultural appropriation. Hopefully these questions will generate on-going dialogue that explores the crucial issue: how can members of dominant groups speak responsibly when exploring problems stemming from histories of cultural oppression, and how can members of historically oppressed groups criticize that history as forcefully as they need to, without in effect silencing satirical voices. The *Hypatia* affair has no such virtues.

The signatories to the letter demanding the retraction of the Tuvel piece are in open violation of the norms of academic freedom, and really over a paper that is eminently reasonable, whether or not one agrees with her conclusion. The paper proceeds from the principle that thought must:

hold open a space for real intellectual curiosity, for investigations that deepen our understanding of how identity claims and processes function, rather than rushing to offer well-formed opinions based on what we already think we know” (Stryker 2015, quoted in Tuvel, p. 264)

The paper unfolds according to this logic of respectful inquiry and is sensitive to the ethical and political complexities involved. Others may disagree: they should do so and respond, but there is nothing in the paper that would warrant its retraction.

If we conspire to undermine academic freedom in the way proposed by the signatories of the letter we will all suffer. I subscribe to the American Association of University Professors’ electronic bulletin. Almost everyday it relates a horror story of a professor fired for running afoul of administrations or governments. Turkey is in the midst of a purge which has seen thousands of academics lose their jobs. The Turkish government’s position is clear: academics serve at the pleasure of the President. Anyone who criticizes his line forfeits their job.

We cannot mince words here: the principle that underlies the demand to retract the Tuvel piece is identical: conform your thought to a reigning orthodoxy (or some self-elected group’s definition of orthodoxy) or be placed on the Index. That *Hypatia* is a path-breaking journal of feminist philosophy makes the demand all the more disgraceful. *Hypatia* would not exist unless feminist scholars had successfully contested academic orthodoxy. Academic freedom was a vital principle in that struggle.

Philosophers, as philosophers, simply cannot call for any other to be silenced. *Ever*. Philosophy responds to untruth with better argument, always, everywhere, in all cases, or it is not philosophy. Not every political problem can be resolved by argument, but when we are active as philosophers, whatever our identity, we argue, we do not silence. If people’s sensibilities and anxieties make it impossible for them to hear certain arguments, then philosophy is not for them. “The study of philosophy is much hindered,” Hegel wrote, “by the conceit that will not argue,” a conceit which “relies on truths which are taken for granted and which it sees no need to re-examine.” The truth in philosophy is always contested: argument is the means of contestation: no limits, no hurt feelings allowed. Philosophers listen, think, criticize, accept criticism, re-think, revise, and re-argue, forever if need be.

The actual criticisms articulated in the letter may very well be sound. They should be developed into a rebuttal and published, perhaps with a response from Tuvel. Maybe a special issue of *Hypatia* could be devoted to the controversy. But the demand to retract smacks of the worst sort of moralistic Maoism. Shall we have re-education camps next (or maybe just mandatory training)? Thinkers who want to be taken seriously as philosophers have to speak out against this reactionary and repressive politics in the most forceful terms.

50 000 000 Trump Fans Can Be Wrong

Originally Posted November 9, 2016

In the end, [Van Jones](#) and not [Slavoj Zizek](#) is right. The Trump tide, Jones argued, was a “whitelash,” not just against eight years of Obama, but more deeply against the *idea* of what 59 million mostly rural and small city whites regard as America. Given the intensity of the race and immigrant baiting in Trump’s campaign and given his total lack of appeal to Latino and Black voters, racism has to emerge as the dominant explanation of his victory.

What that means for the future is not- as the lamentable and politically stupid Zizek thinks- a final provocation which will push Americans towards communist revolution- but the emboldening of the most politically backward and vicious elements of American society. When Trump fails to deliver on his promises towards them they are not going to become Communists, they will double down on their hatred and xenophobia.

On what basis do I make this assertion? The media relentlessly tracked Trump’s lies, they obsessively repeated his violent sexist comments about women, they interviewed the women whom he allegedly assaulted, they made fun of his gaffs and mannerisms, they mocked his qualifications, they catalogued his business failures, and *it made no difference*. He deflected every criticism in the same way: “The establishment” is thwarting me. Stand by me. I am with you.” Who can say now that this strategy was not stunningly successful? When the steel mills of Pennsylvania and the auto factories of Michigan fail to re-open, he will deflect blame again, and, absent any coherent and credible response from the left (and there might be a coherent response but it will not be credible, at least not in the short term) he will survive, cocooned in the racial anger underlying his success.

If there is going to be a coherent and credible response, where will it come from? The radical left? They (we) will have the appropriate (and defensible) arguments, but insignificant numbers of people will read them. The respectable left-liberals of academia, the quality press, and the intelligentsia of Democratic Party? Last night’s results answer this question. They will make arguments that appeal to the 58 million people who voted for Clinton, but there is no evidence they can move the 59 million who voted for Trump to their camp.

In the early nineteenth century Hegel wrote that a historical period in which the contradictions of social life had become polarized needs philosophy to help resolve those contradictions. Philosophy would resolve the contradictions by revealing the point of overlap of the opposed positions on which a synthesis can be constructed. Marx, eschewing synthesis for revolution, nevertheless still stood in Hegel’s shadow when he argued that radical social transformation occurs only when the conditions are right, only when classes cannot cooperate in any way any longer, and the subordinate rise up to reconstruct society on the basis a more comprehensive set of values that ensure the satisfaction of their life-interests. He also noted another possibility: the mutual ruin of the contending classes. The depth of opposition in the United States right now feels more like a situation that threatens mutual ruin than one which will lead to resolution on the basis of a more comprehensively inclusive value system.

The analogy with Marx here is imprecise, because the class struggle going on right now in the United States is not between the working class and the ruling class, but between at least three segments of the working class. On the one hand, the traditional white working class, the working class of industry and industrial unionism, is, through the desperate rear-guard action of electing Trump, trying to re-establish a secure place in the contemporary capitalist economy. Their lives and life-conditions have been ravaged by the last forty years of capitalist globalization, of freeing capital and keeping people (except the rich) pinned in place. Their jobs have disappeared, their pensions have been stolen, the future of their children jeopardized. They are angry, and they should be angry, and their needs must be satisfied.

However, in the absence of a trade union movement and radical left with: a) a coherent policy response to these changes, and b) the numbers and credibility to put theory into practice, the rage of the white industrial working class is being directed to two other segments with whom they ultimately need to build alliances. On the one hand is the Black and Latino working class, working in the same or worse precarious service jobs, under the table employment, or unemployed. On the other hand is the newly emergent working class of educated urban professionals and their support staffs (workers, in Marx's sense, because they do not own the means of production, but 'middle class' in the popular imagination). This section has acquired the education and skills to find or build niches in new techno-culture industries. They live in large cities, typically on the east or west coast, far from the "fly over states" where some of their parents and families might still live. Just as young Britons were shocked and angered by the Brexit vote, so too will these young professionals be appalled by Trump. They should be, but they need to spend a weekend at home and listening to and arguing with their families. Dismissive epithets are understandable, but the problems that America is facing right now are going to require understanding the anger of the abandoned America. And once that understanding has been achieved, then everyone can sit down and figure out politically a new way forward.

One condition of ultimate success in this project is that all hope for short-term recovery must be abandoned. A few days before the election left-liberal pundits were speculating that the Republican party's future was in question. Really? They have the presidency, the Senate, and the House of Representatives. It is the Democrats who are in crisis. They have alienated completely their most politically energetic and progressive constituency: the young voters who mobilized in their millions for Sanders, (who taught, at the very least, that the word socialism can be a mobilising tool in the United States). This whole new layer of activists were taught two nasty lessons. The first, in party *real politik*, that entrenched leaderships will conspire against heterodox candidates. The second, in political dynamics, that in times of crisis (or perceived crisis) the safe option does not win.

Now is the time for those young people to have the courage of their convictions and get out of the Democratic Party once for all.

There needs to be some new national political force built, one that does not see the old as sacrificial victims of the new but prioritizes transitional programs for people displaced by new technological developments, so that they can move from manufacturing to other forms of meaningful work rather than brutalized and degrading precarious employment. This new

movement needs to continue to push for living wages and revitalized, democratic, multi-racial unions, but it also needs to draw conservative white workers into a conversation about why gay and lesbian and trans culture is not a threat to them, why the traditional is the way things *were* done but not the way they *have to be* done, that new horizons of possibility open up with technological and cultural change, and that diversity can be an exciting cultural strength, not a threat.

It needs to draw on the history of American Freedom that Eric Foner traced, a history in which individual freedom was understood socially and not as a gift from God, as the result of collective struggles (against the British colonialists, against white slave owners, as in the brief period of Radical Reconstruction after the Civil War, of the sit down strikes and struggles to legitimize trade unions, the civil rights struggle, and the myriad of radical struggles through the 1960's.

But history does not work according to a logic of abstract demands. People do not do what theories predict they will do. (As a case in point, consider that the polls were, once again, off, as they were in Brexit. This fact should give pause to everyone who thinks human life and struggle can be mapped and comprehended by machine algorithms). I expect that the broad left in the United States (liberals, in their idiosyncratic use of that term) will be in for many dark nights. But they will not emerge from this crisis unless they turn to the spirit of American inventiveness to start to build some new political vehicle for their values and goals. And they will not be able to build that vehicle unless they listen to what "the other America" of the twenty-first century said last night. The important lessons in politics are taught by voices progressives would rather not hear.

The Bigger Story: Don't Pontificate, Organize!

Originally Posted November 16, 2016

Amidst Defeat, An Opening

Trump's selection of Steve Bannon to be part of his transition team confirms everyone's worst fears about the role race played in the campaign, and portends the worst about the role it might play in his administration. The so called "white nationalist" movement to which Breitbart news gives voice is— like the "men's rights movement"— a transparent attempt to cloak a history of being the oppressor in the cloak of being oppressed. Still, the implications of an election are not determined mechanically by the team that the President elect chooses to bring about the transition of power. On going political action matters: no one is powerful enough to resist mass action for ever (witness the overthrow of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe through concerted workers' struggles).

In that light, perhaps the biggest story of the American election is not that Donald Trump won, or that Hilary Clinton won the popular vote, but that [45% of eligible American voters](#) did not cast a ballot. As of November 12th, Clinton had won the votes of 26.5% of eligible voters, Trump, 26.3%, about 3% to third party candidates, and the remaining 44 % did not vote. One can interpret these numbers as signs of political apathy, or as signs of a tremendous opening for new political argument, mobilization, and party building.

Apathy comes in two forms, let us call them negative apathy and positive apathy. In either case one cannot be moved to perform some task, but in the case of negative apathy it is because one really does not care at all about the task one does not perform, while in the positive case one might in principle care, but for whatever reason does not like what they are being asked to do on a particular occasion, and uses apathy as a form of protest. I do not know what the distribution of negative and positive apathy is in the case of the 2016 election, and it does not really matter: both positive and negative apathetic voters represent an opportunity on the Left for [the construction of a new political movement and party.](#)

Think the matter through. Whether one could not be bothered to vote because one thinks the task a waste of time, or whether one was actively protesting the choice between Trump and Clinton, (as many Sanders supporters seem to have done), one is rejecting American politics as it is currently organized: an either or choice between two massive political machines, both of which are deeply in the pockets of corporate donors and lobbyists, both of which have presided over the expansion of a totalitarian surveillance state, increasing inequality, economic crises, and military adventures abroad. Any dispassionate analysis of American politics would lead to the conclusion that with rare exceptions, for the past forty years, the range of policy options pursued has not changed the conditions of life in any positive way in any fundamental respect for working class Americans of whatever race or gender. [Inequality has continued to grow](#), precarious labour has continued to replace secure full time work, and working class Americans

form the bulk of the foot soldiers sent off to foreign wars in a failed effort to subordinate the world to American interests. Race and gender make these economic and political problems more intense, but this difference is one of kind, not degree. I will return to this important point below.

If we treat apathy as a political position and not a political failing (as too many Clinton supporters are doing, railing against those who did not vote as the reason why she lost rather than reflecting with the appropriate degree of self-criticism on the problem of why she did not move those people to vote for her), then the task for the American Left over the next four years is clear. Nearly half of eligible voters rejected the choices on offer: figure out how to build a movement and party that they will vote for and back in movements beyond the White House and Capitol Hill.

No doubt my math is overly crude: 45 % of eligible voters is about 80 million people and in a set of 80 million people political positions are bound to vary widely. Nevertheless, as heterogeneous as the positions might be, they have one important feature in common: they rejected both the Republican and Democratic parties. Assuming that it is almost impossible to not care at all, in any conceivable way whatsoever, about political problems (which are, after all, just problems about how we organize the public and collective aspects of life in which we are enmeshed as individuals), this silent 45% is not a lost cause but an opportunity to take American politics in a new direction.

Don't Pontificate, Organize.

The old Wobbly slogan "Don't mourn, organize!" is a propos of the given moment. The phrase comes from a telegram sent by Joe Hill to Big Bill Haywood while Hill was awaiting execution. His point was that what matters in life is what we do for the future: we do not honour the dead by memorializing them, but by carrying on the valuable tasks to which they devoted their lives.

Clinton is no Joe Hill. She certainly did not devote her life to mobilizing the working class to improve its conditions of life and free itself from domination by capital. Nevertheless, her loss is being portrayed as a loss for progressive social forces. It is certainly a loss for polite liberals, and, in so far as the polite liberals lost to a campaign that consciously stirred up racial anxieties, deliberately targeted immigrants and Muslims (and the establishment politicians who have purportedly abetted them) as the primary cause of America's decline, and portrayed African Americans as ghettoized objects of failed Washington politics, the loss is significant. At the same time, the question should be posed: if Clinton was the progressive alternative, why did she not motivate more young progressive people to vote for her?

The question can only be meaningfully addressed by getting out into local communities everywhere and asking it. But not only asking it. Political mobilization presupposes political argument. Of the many troubling features of this campaign, the seeming impossibility of conducting a political argument, i.e., a more or less structured attempt to prove the truth of a conclusion through reason and evidence, which the opponent must either accept or reject by appeal to superior reason and evidence, is perhaps the most worrisome. The only alternatives to

political argument are ideological sloganeering and overt violence. We have seen much ideological sloganeering and some [overt violence](#) in the wake of Trump's victory.

The empty sloganeering has affected the anti-Trump side as well. It is fantastic to see young people demonstrating across America and people criticizing his tactics on social media. But demonstrations peter out and Facebook chatter changes nothing at the level of fundamental social structures. Ultimately, new political *movements* require people to commit time and energy to finding ways to institutionalize a set of values not adequately served by the established political parties rather than just re-assuring those they already agree with that they are free from the most odious traits of their opponents.

It is certainly the case that Trump's campaign was odious. It is also certain that Trump was able to effectively tap into a section of white working class America that has not been well-served by the changes to the capitalist economy over the last forty years. They too must be listened to if effective political arguments in support of a new political movement and party are to be marshaled.

The most difficult thing about political argument is that it requires us to engage with people with whom we disagree. The more meaningful a political argument gets, the more heated it becomes. There is nothing wrong with the heat, in fact, it is a proof that the argument concerns problems of vital importance. Nevertheless, because they get heated, these arguments are uncomfortable. It is easier to talk to people with whom you agree, and confirm for each other the superiority of one's own beliefs and values. However, where there are real divides and conflicts in society, where lines are drawn, those who worry that those on the other side of the line are motivated by racist or other forms of demonizing thinking have an obligation to cross over the line and engage with their opponents. How else will people come to see that low wages and insecure work are not caused by illegal immigrants but changes to the way in which capitalism was organized and governed since the 1970's. How else to make the case that [immigrants from Latin America are the victims](#), not the beneficiaries of those same policies, if people do not go into the truck stops and bars and neighbourhoods where Trump voters live and make the case?

Every effective argument starts with listening to your opponent, proceeds by finding common ground, and concludes with the opponent seeing that what they initially took to be the solution to their problem and in their interests really is not a solution and not in their interests. But the first step must always be to listen. It is impossible to work out effective counter-arguments if you do not listen carefully to what the opponent has to say. In the case of Trump supporters, one will undoubtedly hear hard core and probably unshakeable racists beliefs. But those positions will be in a very small minority. More likely one is to find people who are frustrated, scared, angry, and feeling isolated from social forces that seem, from that position of isolation, uncontrollable. Over and over again in political history (Plato was the first to theorize the phenomenon in the 5th century BCE) powerless and voiceless people throw their lot in with demagogues who promise to solve their problems for them. They have always been disappointed.

Workers and the oppressed have improved their lives when they rely upon their own collective agency. The labour movement was the primary political and economic vehicle for the

improvement of working conditions and standards of living, the civil rights movement overthrew Jim Crow laws in the US South, the women's movement in its multiple manifestations has enfranchised women and given them control over their own bodies. But these movements were not the mechanical result of social forces but were built through political organizing. Political organizing requires political argument: with conservative members of the constituency one is trying to mobilize, and the enemy one is trying to defeat.

Ultimately, stable solutions require convincing enemies as well as friends. So, unless one thinks that human society is better when it is in a permanent state of disorder and conflict, (and the people who do believe this tend to be able to live outside of the conflict they endorse as good) argument in support of values which really would ensure access to the goods and institutions people require in order to become social self-conscious, self-determining agents, are necessary. Success in political argument is never guaranteed, and cannot be expedited. It takes time. How much time, no one can say. But more than a bare start should be achievable in the next four years if progressive Americans take up the task.

Against the Politics of the Bogey Man

Posted on January 20, 2017

Fair is Foul, Foul is Fair

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the United States military, under Commander in Chief Barak Obama, dropped [26 171 bombs](#) on seven countries in 2016: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan. All of these countries are in the Middle East or Africa, all have been de-stabilized by direct or indirect American military intervention, all are amongst the poorest in the world, none is capable of defending itself from American military might. Since World War Two, the CIA has been involved in [57 interventions](#) to destabilize and overthrow other governments. Yet today, laughingly, embarrassingly, cringingly hypocritically, Democrats invoke the CIA as the protector of democracy and scold the Russians for “destablising the world.” The blood of the millions of people killed by American interventions cries out in protest from the grave.

The CIA serves the American imperium, not democracy, and if Americans want to blame someone for the election of Donald Trump they should blame: their own anti-democratic electoral college system, the near total disconnection between the leaders of the Democratic Party and white, middle America, and their own machinations against Bernie Sanders, as revealed by the emails leaked by Wikileaks but written by [John Podesta](#), not Vladimir Putin.

The Democrats felt certain that Sanders could not win, and so worked against the millions of young people and workers mobilized by Sanders to ensure that Clinton won. Well, she did not win, and that is not a bad thing (although Trump winning is a bad thing). Sometimes in politics there are no good short term alternatives.

People worried about Trump also need to remember what Hilary Clinton actually stood for while Secretary of State. It certainly was not for educating the poor, huddled masses of the Global South, but violently forcing them into line with American priorities. There was no war in the Middle East or North Africa in which she (and her fellow travellers like Samantha Power who cloak their imperialism in human right platitudes) did not want to intervene. Have people already forgotten her [psychotic grin](#) as she crowed over the death of Muammar Gaddafi: “We came, we saw, he died,” she laughed. Like Meursault in *The Stranger*, killing an arab was nothing to be troubled about. One might think a feminist would be more troubled by the anal rape (with a steel rod) and summary execution of a fellow human being, even if he was a “terrorist.”([Watch the video](#) and see if you think it is funny, and whether you think differently about someone, Clinton, who did).

In the West, Gaddafi was demonized as an oppressor and terrorist. In [Africa there was another side](#) to his rule, the side that was more vexing to Western interests: Gaddafi’s willingness to put his money where his mouth was to fund an African Central Bank and an African Investment Bank were far more troubling than his authoritarianism. If either of those two institutions had

been successful, African economies would have been able to free themselves from debt-bondage to America and Europe.

One might have thought the first black president would have been more in tune with African socio-economic realities. Yet, despite the historical importance of the election of the first Black president in a nation founded on slavery, despite his talent for transporting rhetoric, despite the mild reforms he was able to make, (Obamacare was a real victory but it did not end the stranglehold of private insurance companies over the American health care system), the world carried on as before his election. America conspired with Egyptian generals and Saudi monarchs to destroy the Arab Spring, (isn't it funny how the Islamist opponents of your enemy (Assad) are your friends (in Syria) while the Islamist opponents of your friends, (the Egyptian generals), are your enemy, who must be toppled after winning a democratic election)? Domestically, Obama did not cause the Great Recession, but inequality continued to rise. He commuted the sentence of Chelsea Manning and let 330 people incarcerated for drug offenses free, but left America's two most prominent political prisoners, [Mumia Abu Jamal](#) and [Leonard Peltier](#) in prison. In all, [more than 2.3 million](#) people are imprisoned in the United States.

These are not just anecdotes, they help establish a political point of general significance. The world under Obama was not at all safe for Arabs, Africans, black and poor Americans. Prior to Obama, under George Bush II, the world was not safe for Arabs, Africans, or black and poor Americans. And before that, under Bill Clinton, the same points were true, as they would have been under Hilary Clinton. Neither Clinton, nor Bush, nor Obama created these problems through acts of sovereign will. They were elected to lead a system which has, historically, relied upon exploited and alienated labour, super-exploited slave and colonial labour, has been patriarchal, racist, and homophobic, has been colossally crass, ignorant, and violent.

Today, Donald Trump will take the helm, and to hear too many liberals tell the tale, we are leaving utopia for hell. The Obama years were utopic only for people who live on symbols and half measures: none of the major problems facing America or the world were addressed in a systematic way to the short term advantage of the disadvantaged or the long-term interests of a democratic polity, society, and economy, a pluralistic, creative, and dynamic culture, or peaceful, just international relationships.

Might Trump make things worse? Indeed. But that which he will make worse is already bad for a majority of the world's people, and has been so through many presidencies, some which inspired hope (Kennedy, Clinton, Obama), and some which inspired fear (Nixon, Bush II, Trump). Somehow, problems were able to survive beneath the changes of administration. Why? Because the problems are structural and systematic, and presidents are elected to preserve, not radically transform, the structure.

Fight Dem Back

But what about the "alt-right" that has helped propel Trump to victory? What about them? Are they racists, vile, and violent? Indeed they are. But there is an unnoticed irony in their name. "Alt-right" is supposed to make us think that there is something new, something trendy or avant-garde about them. If, however, we read "alt" as the German word "alt," it

translates as “old.” And really, that is a more appropriate term, for there is absolutely nothing new or avant garde about the ideas of so called “white-nationalists.” They are nothing more than white supremacists that have always formed a troublingly large segment of the American population. They may dress differently from the cliché image of the southern racist with his car oil stained t-shirt and confederate flag baseball hat, but the politics, at a deep level, are the same. Has the Tea Party already been forgotten?

My point is not to dismiss the threat of the white nationalist elements amongst Trump’s supporters, but rather to note that those politics have been around in different forms since the American Civil War. They are no more or less frightening now than they ever were. Let us not forget that the legal racial violence of Jim Crow laws were administered mostly by democrats (the so-called [Dixiecrats](#)). Donald Trump has skillfully played the racial card available to every white American politician, but he did not invent that trick (remember [Willie Horton](#), whose demonization allowed George Bush I to beat Michael Dukakis)?

The sad lesson of the history of political struggle is that it rarely advances through rational debate between two sides one of which is willing to cede to the force of the better argument. Rather, the struggle for an egalitarian and positively free society will bring you into contact with people who think that only a select few should have power, and they will violently resist anyone’s attempt to democratize the system. They will demonize, mock, slander, shame, insult, beat up, imprison and even kill opponents.

This history cannot be avoided and it cannot be defeated by asking the authorities to silence the slanderers and bigots. As Linton Kwesi Johnson said in his powerful dub poem written in defiance of the racist violence of the National Front in England: “Fascists on the attack we not gonna worry ’bout dat, fascists on de attack we gonna fight dem back.” All the movements that have made for a more democratic, egalitarian, and culturally diverse and dynamic world have been movements of self-emancipation in the service of self-determination. The level of protest activity has picked up significantly since Trump’s election and will culminate with the Women’s March the day after Trump takes office. But structural change will take more than marches, which are powerful testimony, but their effects are ephemeral.

Credit Where Due

In a recent book Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams argue that the left has retreated to books and slogans and sniping at each other over language and micro-aggressions while the right has seized control of almost every major institution in the Western world and used that social power to inflict macro damage (see above). While I disagree with some elements of their program and some of the principles on which it rests, they are absolutely correct to argue that if the left is serious about solving fundamental social problems then we need to re-define and re-build our organizations. “Any strategy requires an active social force, mobilised into a collective formation, acting upon the world. But while putting a counter-hegemonic strategy into practice will require the use of power, the left has been both overwhelmed by and systematically averse to the use of power.”(*Inventing the Future*, p. 155). The left has been reduced to a series of protests without a unifying program. Facebook postings and trying to censor opponents’ views on university campuses is not enough.

Our weakness is in stark contrast to the Right. In the 1960s, the Right seemed to have been completely defeated by the new social movements. They retreated, for a time, built think tanks and strategized about how to build a counter-movement, and— most importantly— they did it. The neo-liberal counter-revolution was the result.

But neoliberalism is just one way of managing capitalism. One part of that strategy— free trade— has engendered resistance amongst one section of the ruling class, represented by Trump in the United States and the Brexit faction in the UK. Their critiques of free trade are not the same as critiques of capitalism (which was still exploitative and alienating and oppressive in nationalist-Keynesian times). Nevertheless, if there is going to be an official movement against existing trade agreements, that is one opening that the left could exploit as a space in which to begin the long task of re-building. If Trump opens the door to renegotiate NAFTA, for example, the Canadian and American and Mexican working classes need to step in, together, and articulate a trade policy that actually works for working people.

Except: we know that is not going to happen. Mexican workers were the primary target of Trump's racist demagoguery and his promises to repatriate American manufacturing jobs will, at least in the short term, bind a large section of private sector union leaders and their members to that aspect of his agenda. Yet, already the betrayal is setting in. The Trump boast that he saved 1000 American jobs at [Carrier](#) air conditioning is already being undermined by the usual reality (for workers) of layoffs.

Trump will be inaugurated today and the world will keep turning, but the task of the left will press upon us with more insistence. The task is long term, and involves ideological and political work towards building [new types of socialist parties](#). Ideologically, we need to develop a program that resonates with workers and oppressed groups, that, at a minimum: a) coherently articulates how problems of class, race, gender, sexuality, can be addressed by a unified left; b) spells out a credible economic alternative to free market capitalism, which begins with; c) mundane issues like progressive taxation and re-funding public institutions and works up to; d) more fundamental changes like democratizing work and radically shortening the working day; and e) brings Greens into the fold by explicating a new vision of the relationship between human beings and the biosphere and a new set of life-affirmative values to replace the values of world-destructive ego-centric greed.

Politically, the task involves coming up with a coherent account of a) how a new socialist party can work within, in order to b) transform the existing institutions of liberal-democracy; that c) spells out a coherent socialist interpretation of the values and limitations of civil and human rights; that d) re-thinks the historical antipathy for the left to political pluralism, and which; e) exorcises the romantic ghost of insurrectionary politics and revolution as a one off cataclysmic overthrow of power. These tasks will require patience, long-term, [deep-organizing](#) in unions and social movements, a willingness to re-think politics in light of fundamental values, but above all, an end to in-fighting and sloganeering in favour of working together in solidarity.

How Do You Like The End of the Enlightenment Now?

Originally Posted February 22, 2017

Hoist, Own, Petard.

In his seminal essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault inaugurated— unwittingly, perhaps— a link between radical politics and the critique of truth. Following Nietzsche, for whom truth is always relative to a perspective (the spider's truth is not the human being's truth, the master's truth is not that of the slave), Foucault argued that what passes as true at any given moment is a function of the exclusion of other possibilities, not correspondence between statement and state of affairs. "Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare, humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination. The nature of these rules allows violence to be inflicted on violence and the resurgence of new forces that are sufficiently strong to dominate those in power ... The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them."(p. 151) There is no doubt that Nietzsche has identified a real historical tendency, and that this tendency calls into question any facile identification of "that which happens" with "Progress," and "Progress" with "Truth."

The linkage between the train of historical events, progress, and truth was the product of the Enlightenment critique of superstition and prejudice. As a philosophy of history, it culminates in the work of Hegel. If we read Marx as a materialist critic of Hegel who sought to make his dialectical understanding consistent with the actual events of history (as opposed to the stylized set-pieces of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and *Philosophy of History*) we can see his work as a development, rather than a repudiation, of the principle that the truth is opposed to the partial, the prejudicial, the perspectival, and that it will (at least help to) set us free. Indeed, because Marx works within this framework (as opposed to a proto-Nietzschean genealogy) that radical critics and activists were enjoined to reject his work as part of the problem by post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers who dominated critical thought from the 1970's to the 1990's.

That period taught that truth was the enemy of freedom, that knowledge was constituted by power for the sole end of disciplining the masses and ensuring compliant behaviour; that scientific objectivity was in reality a normalizing gaze directed against the outsider (the "Other"), and that freedom, to the extent that the term should be used, was to be found in fragments, in momentary bursts of transgression.

No doubt, as a criticism of positivism (the belief that science was the only legitimate means of understanding the world and that only that which can be quantified and measured is true), bureaucratic and administrative power, and techno-science in the service of money and imperialism these arguments opened up a new terrain of insight into the epistemic structure of

oppression. Nevertheless, many suspected, and rightly, that an ironic fate lay in store for a politics that sought to break the connection between freedom and truth. (See my *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*). For if all knowledge is really a power/knowledge complex, then it follows that critical thought is just another form of power (as indeed Nietzsche says it is) and therefore not legitimate on the grounds that it brings hidden realities to light. If the problem is objective truth, i.e., if truths are made objective by power but are not objective in themselves, then it follows that opposition movements not only do not have truth on their side, they should not *want* truth on their side, because truth is the ally of disciplinary power.

We are now reaping the ironic effects of this critique of truth. While I agree with little else that Jodi Dean has to say about political strategy, she is surely correct in this insight, drawn even before the advent of The Trump Show: “the prominence of politically active Christian fundamentalists, Fox News, and the orchestrations of Bush advisor Karl Rove all demonstrate the triumph of postmodernism. These guys take social construction— packaging, marketing, and representation— absolutely seriously. They put it to work.”(*Democracy and Other Neo-Liberal Fantasies*, p. 7). Trump’s universe of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’ adds the crucial dimensions of playfulness and theatre to the thesis of the social construction of truth and reality. What Trump et.al., understand, which the postmodern left never fully appreciated, is that if power and knowledge coincide, then those with power can use it to de-legitimate opposition forces, who find their claims: about poverty, or racism, or climate change— dismissed as the self-interested product of contemptuous elitist expert opinion. If objective truth is always the product power, and power itself seizes this argument to attack its opponents, what grounds are left for a response?

The Truth Shall Still (Help) Set Us Free

Donald Trump is the very apotheosis of postmodern values. He transgresses the norms of the American Presidency, he is playful and ironic, he mocks, jokes and is sarcastic; he collapses the distinctions between public and private, paints scientific consensus as an elite formation and its critics as bold (transgressive?) outsiders. He is openly contemptuous of the ‘establishment’ horrified by his refusal to play by the rules. At the same, time he is an old school bigot and xenophobe, an opponent of everything the postmodern left stood for: toleration, the free proliferation of differences, an experimental approach to life, playful rejection of fixed identities and binary oppositions. That Trump is the logically consistent outcome of the politics implied by the critique of objective truth tells us that the problem was not truth, but power. That is, the argument that power and knowledge *always* formed a complex, that speaking truth depended upon the power to exclude other possibilities that could *equally well* be true if they had power on their side, was politically naive. It failed to see how this argument could (and now is) used to undercut the authority of claims about how reality is oppressive, on a dangerous environmental arc, undemocratic, and so on.

The Enlightenment conception of truth was always broader than natural science and more open to difference than its critics thought. (See my [Re-Thinking Enlightenment Universalism in the Age of Right Wing Atavism](#)). Its essential political claim was that one could discern a trajectory in history towards making political power accountable to demonstrable facts. Does the king really rule by the grace of god? Prove it. Is European civilization superior to other

civilizations? Prove it. The truth shall set us free not because it is the ally of power, but rather because it demands that power be made accountable to something that is not just another power, but is impartial between all political possibilities: the facts of the matter. The hope was to discover means of peaceful social transformation, or to provide absolute legitimacy for revolution when those in power would not yield to the demonstrated facts (that their regimes were corrupt and collapsing).

We must avoid a naive realism or kowtow to natural science as omni-explanatory, especially as regards what is ethically and politically true. The goals of history are not to be discovered by reducing action to behaviour and behaviour to our genetic code. If we want to understand human history we need to understand *human* history, not Bonobo hordes. At the same time, there are material foundations to truth claims in history that political struggles must appeal to for their justification. These facts concern the structures of deprivation that people have faced and face: in their struggles is the proof that deprivation is real and harmful. The values worth fighting for are found in the facts of life, but the facts of human life are not abstractly natural, but also social, cultural, and political.

History records the successes of this general understanding of the linkage between political struggle, justice, and demonstrated truth about the harms of deprivation. Civil, political, and social rights, including the rights of sexual, gendered, racial, and ethnic minorities; the democratization of politics and social life, unions, increasing material equality, anti-imperialism, de-colonization, environmental legislation... Every one of these victories turned on empirical-historical-political *proofs* that a given group of people was really suffering; that a given chemical really was destroying animal or human life; that an economic reform that shifted money from profits to public investment really did alleviate poverty; that blacks and women really could do anything white men could do; that the practices of a given society were in logical conflict with its principles... In comparison, what have been the achievements of the postmodern left?

The response that their criticisms have been taken over and twisted by the right wing is no defense. Return to the quotation from Foucault above. Taking things over and twisting them is just what the powerful do. Trump is unassailable to his supporters just because they do not make the comparison between what he says and what is demonstrably the case in material reality. *They fail to discipline their thoughts against reality.* And: they love the show.

Here is a final bit of demonstrable historical reality: the subaltern have fared better when they did not play games but demanded that the powerful justify their wealth and authority against the facts of the matter. When combined with organized mass movement, *disciplined* behind a democratically decided program, focused on long-term structural changes rather than spectacle and media attention, they have won. The achievements of democratic forces, of feminism, the civil rights movement, the union movement, the gay and lesbian liberation movement, First Nations' movements, the disabled rights movement and global anti-colonial struggles from the American Revolution onward are the facts that prove my point.

Re-Thinking Enlightenment Internationalism in the Age of Right-Wing Atavism

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The election of Donald Trump has renewed attention to the problem of the conflict between national belonging and international obligation. Two particular questions have dominated the debate: whether free trade deals have served the interests of workers and what obligations nation states owe to refugees, political and economic, and immigrants, documented or undocumented. Something called “globalism” has appeared as a target of criticism but, like its contrary “communitarianism,” it is too generic a term to lead the debate in useful directions. It demonizes “the global” without distinguishing between different types of global value system. Just as there can be life-valuable and life-destructive forms of community, so too can there be life-valuable and life-destructive forms of international and global interaction and interconnection. Critical judgement requires that we always distinguish between the two, always rejecting the life-destructive in favour of the life-valuable.

The life-destructive form of global interaction we can call by the name “imperialism.” It can take many forms, but always involves the subordination of economically and militarily weaker countries to the economic and political interests of the ruling system of more powerful countries, whether that subordination is exercised through direct colonial domination or via debt and economic dependence.

The life-valuable version we can call “internationalism.” It traces its history back to the struggle against European colonialism in the 18th century. The unfortunately and unjustly maligned universalism of the Enlightenment was the foundation for a philosophical and practical solidarity between progressives in Europe and black and indigenous victims of colonialism in Africa and the Americas. We would do well at this point in history to remind ourselves of the origins of the idea of international solidarity as a political litmus test to expose the phony progressivism of Trump and his ilk’s critique of ‘globalism.’

A critique of Enlightenment universalism as an ‘essentialist’ imposition of European norms on the kaleidoscope of culturally diverse humanity was a staple of the post-modern philosophy of the 1970’s to the 1990’s. The legion of criticisms directed against the *philosophes* rarely engaged in the textual work of close reading that these ‘deconstructive’ critics nevertheless claimed to practice. That is, they never looked beyond the slogans of the era (liberté, égalité, fraternité, the rights of *man*) to examine in detail exactly what the most politically advanced Enlightenment figures actually had to say about *the struggles* of colonized people against European rule. In their practical and philosophical expressions of solidarity they argued that humanity was on the side of the victims of colonialism, and not so-called European “civilization.” They cut through the rhetoric of Europe’s “civilizing mission” in the non-white world and courageously exposed it for what it was: inhuman subordination and domination rooted in racism on the one hand and greed on the other. Let us take just two examples to illustrate the point.

The first is from Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique de progrès de l'esprit humaine*. While he does indeed see European philosophy and science as main sources of progress, he is careful to note the contradiction: while these were internally progressive in so far as they undermined the legitimacy of the Church and monarchical power, externally they either ignored or helped to legitimate colonial rule. But their ideological use was in fact the very opposite of their truth, which is to *free* ideas of humanity, equality, freedom, and reason from their identification with one particular culture and instead establish them on a truly universal foundation from which a critical understanding of the value of any particular form of life—including the European—can be developed. Hence, against his own European culture he argues:

Les philosophes des diverse nations embrassent, dans leurs méditations, les intérêts de l'humanité entière sans distinction des pays, de race ou de secte, formaient, malgré la différence de leurs opinions speculatives, une phalange fortement unie contre toutes les erreurs, contre toutes les genres de tyrannie. Animé par le sentiment d'une philanthropie universelle, ils combattaient l'injustice, lorsque, étrangère à leur patrie, elle ne pouvait les atteindre; ils la combattaient encore lorsque leur patrie même qui s'en rendait coupable envers d'autres peuples, ils s'élevaient en Europe contre les crimes dont l'avidité souille les rivages de l'Amérique, de l'Afrique, ou de l'Asie. Les philosophes de l'Angleterre et de la France s'honoraient de prendre le nom, de remplir les devoirs d'amis, de ces mêmes Noirs que leurs stupide tyrans dédaignaient de compter au nombre des hommes. (pp. 230-231)

(The philosophers of diverse nations embraced, in their reflections, the interests of humanity as whole, without distinction of country, race, or religion. They formed, despite the differences of their speculative positions, a strong, united phalanx against all forms of errors, against all types of tyranny. Animated by a spirit of universal love for humanity, they fought injustice outside of their own countries when it was lacking, and they combated it even more, when it was their country that was guilty of being its cause. They rose up, in Europe, against the crimes of greed that soiled the coasts of America, Africa, and Asia. The philosophers of England and France were proud to take the name of, to fulfill the duties of friendship towards, these same blacks whom their stupid tyrants disdained to count as human beings).

It would be a gross misreading of this argument to think that when Condorcet says that the philosophers of England and France were proud to “take the name” of the blacks of Africa and America that they were usurping the voice of the victims of colonialism and slavery. On the contrary, he is saying that they have listened to the voices of the oppressed and are responding by attacking the very European powers dominating them. This is an expansion of the idea of humanity beyond its racist enclosure to white European reality.

Two centuries later, in his classic essay *Discours sur la colonialisme*, Aimé Césaire would echo Condorcet and expose the contradiction between “civilization” and colonialism: “Et je dis que de la colonisation à la civilisation, la distance est infinie; que, de toutes les expéditions colonial ... on ne saurait reussir une seule valeur humaine.” (p. 10) (“And I say that between colonization and civilization the distance is infinite; that in all the colonial expeditions one will never find the realization of a single human value.” From Condorcet to Césaire the consistent foundation of the critique of colonialism has been to expose the way in which it constructs the

colonized person as inhuman. The struggle against it therefore is a struggle through which colonized people prove their humanity to those who would deny it. Franz Fanon made essentially the same point in *Wretched of the Earth*.

As powerful a statement of solidarity as Condorcet's is, he does not examine in any detail the material forces underlying colonial domination, nor call for its revolutionary overthrow. That task is taken up by the Abbé Raynal in his *Histoire politique et philosophique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*. Whether, as some maintain, the history was actually written by Diderot or by Raynal, the text is a classic of anti-colonialist criticism. It exposes the nonsense of viewing European expansion as the spread of "civilization." It was, on the contrary, a most uncivilized, violent subordination of non-European peoples, their lands and life-resources, to the economic interests of the European ruling classes:

Et vous, vous, pour avoir de l'or vous avez franchi les mers. Pour avoir de l'or, vous avez envahi les contrées. Pour avoir de l'or, vous en avez massacré la plus grande partie des habitants. Pour avoir de l'or, vous avez précipité dans les entrailles de la terre ceux que vos poignards avoient épargnés. Pour avoir de l'or, vous avez introduit sur la terre le commerce infâme de l'homme & l'esclavage. Pour avoir de l'or, vous renouvez tous les jours les mêmes crimes.(p.558)

(And you, you, for the sake of gold have crossed the seas. For the sake of gold, you have invaded countries and massacred most of their inhabitants. For the sake of gold you have buried in the ground those that your daggers have spared. For the sake of gold, you have introduced onto the earth the infamous trafficking of people and slavery. For the sake of gold you have repeated these crimes, day after day).

Raynal not only exposed the inhumanity of the colonial project, he called for its overcoming— not by an act of European *noblesse oblige*, but through anti-colonial revolution. As C.L.R. James notes in his magisterial *The Black Jacobins*, Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slave who would lead the world's first successful anti-colonial revolution against France, was inspired to take up arms after reading Raynal's call for revolt. Inspired by European philosophy against European practice, L'Ouverture's armies would, over more than a decade of struggle, defeat, in succession, French, Spanish, and English armies and establish what is today Haiti as the first post-colonial, independent nation.

Through their success, the slave army of San Domingo proved a point made by Kant (perhaps a surprising source of justification of anti-colonial revolution). Nevertheless, against those who maintained that only some groups of human beings are capable of self-government, Kant affirmed the power of political self-determination as anchored in the universal rational capacities of humanity, thus exposing once again the racist and ideological function of the arguments that denied those capacities to some groups: "I cannot admit the expression, used by even intelligent men: A certain people ...

is not yet ripe for freedom; the bondsmen of a landed proprietor are not yet ripe for freedom; and thus men in general are not yet ripe for freedom of belief.

According to such a presupposition freedom will never arrive; for we cannot yet ripen to this freedom unless we are already set free— we must be free to use

our faculties purposively in freedom [and] we never ripen to freedom except through our own efforts, which we can make only when we are free.” (Quoted in Arendt, *Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 48).

The political agency that led the revolution was indigenous, but the ideas according to which the slaves under L'Ouverture organized and legitimated their struggle were imported from France. Which proves: not that French Revolutionaries were being culturally imperialist in asserting the rights of man, but that the rights of man were powerful tools in the struggle against imperialism, and thus universal in a materially effective way far beyond what could have been the intentions of their French authors.

What is the lesson for today? It is that there is a difference between trade deals that open borders for capital but keep them locked for the human victims of capital and genuine international solidarity between workers and the oppressed. Trump and his fellow travellers like Nigel Farage have effectively played on the fears of some segments of the white working class in the United States and Britain. They have promised greater economic security by repudiating and repealing trade deals, and that is all well and good, to the extent that those trade deals serve only capital's interests. But capital's interests can be served in nationalistic ways too. Working class supporters of Trump need to ask him if he will work to repeal the reams of anti-worker and anti-union legislation that has so compromised American workers' ability to fight back. I think we know what the answer to that question will be.

At the same time, what has most worried people— and rightly so— is not the critique of NAFTA or the TPP, but the demonization of non-whites and immigrants. They have buttressed the economic argument through full-throat fulminations against immigrants and foreigners which call to mind, even if they do not exactly repeat, the blood and soil atavism of the worst moments of human history.

Against their racist fear mongering opponents need to affirm the revolutionary anti-colonialism that was first expressed by the most politically advanced thinkers of the Enlightenment. Working people advance within nations when conditions between nations are most ripe for successful struggles. We might think that the pre-NAFTA, pre-WTO world was a Golden Age for workers. It was not. But there were real increases in working class living standards between 1945 and 1973. Some of those gains can be explained by the rapid growth of productivity during those years. But productivity gains can just as easily be consumed by capital as profit as paid out in wages. Hence, the other side of the explanation is that capital was willing to share a higher percentage of profit as wages because there was the ideological need to legitimate capitalism in the face of what looked like a real communist alternative.

In no small part communism appeared as a real alternative because of the many anti-colonial uprisings supported (even if for cynical reasons) by the Soviet Union and China. The democratic vitality of these revolutions was not in their funding source but in the agency of the oppressed which sustained them and led them to victory. Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution (to take only one example, most *a propos* today) had many internal political limitations, but he was not hated by Western rulers because of the abominable way his party treated gays and lesbians or their refusal to allow the formation of free trade unions. He was hated because, over

fifty years, he defied their arrogance and was an unfailing supporter, ideologically and materially, of people fighting racism and colonialism, from Angola (where 25 000 Cuban troops fought against the apartheid-backed forces of Jonas Savimbi), to Venezuela today.

One could thus say, with some truth, that American, Canadian, and European workers owe a debt to the revolutionaries of the Third World whose heroic struggles sowed the seeds of doubt in Western ruling classes about the stability of the international system.

This history, the history of international solidarity, is the one that needs to be recovered today. The left will not revive, nor the shared life-interests of workers be served, by retreating into localized particularisms. The interests of the colonized, the displaced, and those in search of refuge, are human interests. That is the lesson the Trumpites need to be taught.

Alternative Facts: Humanitarian Edition

Originally Posted April 10, 2017

Goose

The election of Donald Trump has created a new sport: catch the President lying. To try to cover up one of his lies: that he drew more people to his inauguration than Obama, his press secretary, Sean Spicer, argued that there were “alternative facts” to explain the clear photographic evidence that there was far fewer people for Trump than Obama. Much mocking and hilarity ensued on CNN.

Most of the Democratic establishment and the academic liberal left in the United States piled on. Forgotten of course was a long standing critique of the mainstream media (anyone remember *Manufacturing Consent*?) that demonstrated, in precise analytical and empirical detail, how the media works with “official sources” to construct ideological narratives and present them as established, unquestioned fact. My point is not that Spicer was correct in the particular case: there are no grounds for doubting there were more people at Obama’s inauguration than Trump’s. The issue is rather that the chest thumping about how sacred the media is to a democracy forgets that a now silenced critical tradition once exposed the way in which the corporate-owned media were impediments to democracy.

There was also once a mass anti-imperialist, anti-war movement in the United States. That too has disappeared in favour of right-wing conservative isolationism on the one hand and moralistic liberal interventionism on the other. The former are at least consistent with their principles; the latter live in a land of their own illusions; a liberal fantasy realm of alternative facts supporting policies that have failed and are causing far more damage to Arab and African lives than Trump’s stupidity around his inauguration has.

For three months the Democratic party and its fellow-travellers have been madly leaping on any bandwagon banging an anti-Trump line. He is anti-woman and anti-immigrant and anti-worker; he colluded with Russia, he stole the election, he lies, lies, lies. And then: redemption:

A reading from the Gospel of Nikki Haley: Blessed are the Tomhawk missile launchers, for they shall inhabit the kingdom of human rights.

Not Gander

For weeks we have been hearing of the need for an independent investigation of the links between the Trump camp and Russia. The principle at work: interested parties cannot conduct impartial investigations. Therefore, impartial investigators are needed for politically contentious problems.

That applies to Washington, when Democratic interests are at stake. In Syria, new rules, as Bill Maher would say. In Syria, the conclusion that Assad ordered the strike and that the Russian

counter-narrative is false is asserted as necessarily true with *no evidence cited*. A typical example was Neil MacFarquhar, writing in the *New York Times*: “Even as the US condemned Assad for gassing his own citizens and held Russia partly responsible ... the Kremlin kept denying that Syria had any such capability.” (Reprinted in *The Toronto Star*, Sunday, April 9th, p. A2). Or consider the open revisionism of this explanation of the origins of ISIS by another *New York Times* writer, [Thomas Friedman](#): “ISIS was the deformed creature created by the pincer movement — Russia, Iran, Assad, and Hezbollah in Syria on one flank and pro-Iranian Syria militias on the other.” Friedman’s position is truly astounding alternative fact in contradiction to known reality: ISIS is the direct product of collapse of al Qaeda in Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq was organized to fight the American invasion and its leader was radicalised in an American prison camp.

A Chomskian critique might point out the way in which these accounts always position the American narrative as authoritative, without ever explicitly saying so, and opposed positions always as self-interested responses, without ever explicitly saying so. MacFarquhar’s article, for example, implies that the Russians have *raisons d’etat* that explain their support for Assad, while the Americans, ever righteous, have none. A serious critique might go on to suggest that the present American government has an enormous interest in play: deflecting congressional attention away from alleged connections between the Trump campaign and Russia. It might further contend that a government that is complicit in the [starvation of Yemeni children](#) is probably not losing sleep about Syrian children (especially since it is trying to ban any Syrians from entering the United States). It might even go so far as to point out eerie similarities between the Russian claim that Assad’s jets inadvertently caused the chemical leak by bombing a weapons dump controlled by rebels, and the United States’ allied Iraqi government’s explanation that the US planes that caused mass civilian deaths in Mosul had hit an [ISIS truck bomb](#).

Those are the sort of questions that a “free press” which provides vital services to democracy might ask and the sorts of counter-arguments they might bring to bear on complex, politically charged incidents. That would indeed be useful and democratic, but there was little in evidence, only the by now typical boasting, breast-beating, and bleating of the sheep following the trajectory of US missiles. All of a sudden, politicians who lose no sleep over the piles of bodies that lay at their doorstep are moved for “moral” reasons to kill yet more people. Right.

I am not making moralistic arguments to counter moralistic arguments with which I disagree. I wish there were amongst politicians principled stances against chemical weapons, and every other kind of weapon; a principled stance in favour of treating human beings as intrinsically valuable and not just tools of geo-political strategy; a principled stance in favour of politics as real problem solving in the shared life-interest and not the private advantage of one ruling group over and against others, with everyone else treated as collateral damage.

I take my stand against the Trump response on the basis of a simple demonstrable truth: killing, whether justified or not, does not bring the unjustly killed back to life. Taking that truth as my foundation, I next ask: But is there evidence to support the claim that sometimes violence is necessary to counter worse violence. The answer is: yes, of course, in some cases such evidence is exists. So the final question is: is it justified in this case?

A genuinely popular-democratic resistance to Assad and ISIS would surely be justified in an armed struggle to free Syria of both. Trump will prove no friend to a genuine popular democratic resistance. His interests are not their interests. His interests are in isolating Iran and distracting people from the congressional hearings at home. To reiterate: he is enabling the starvation of Yemeni children, and no one who does that is really moved by feelings for the lives of children.

But let us not count children's tears but stay within the circle of evidence. Assume that Trump really was motivated by love for the Syrians he does not want in his country. Is his response likely to succeed in ending the civil war? Let us examine the demonstrated results of US intervention in the Middle East since 2001. Afghanistan: on-going civil war. Iraq: on-going civil war. Yemen: on-going civil war. Libya: on-going civil war. In the face of this evidence the only conclusion consistent with the facts is that deeper US involvement in Syria will only exacerbate and not solve the on going civil war there.

The war in Syria will end through politics or not at all. A negotiated political solution cannot happen until the many sides to the conflict: ISIS, al Qaeda, the Syrian government, the Kurds, the array of secular rebel forces feel weak enough to have to make compromises and a deal. So long as each has its enablers: the Saudis, the Americans, and the Russians, none will feel weak enough to have to concede. And the war will go on. And people will keep dying, whether of sarin, or bullets, or bombs.

Tangled Web

Posted on April 2, 2017

The dynamic nature of capitalism makes it impossible to predict, in any straightforward and simple way, the shape its contradictions will take. The dynamism continually unsettles the composition of the working class, but it also unsettles the political allegiances of the ruling class. This unsettling effect helps to explain in part the extraordinarily fractured state of official politics in the United States at the moment.

As technology develops, old industries are threatened while new ones are engendered. From an abstract systems perspective there is no problem so long as profits overall rise and employment overall remains within politically acceptable limits. However, from a concrete human perspective a dying industry kills your profits (if you are the owner) and your livelihood (if you are the worker). Since in real life it takes time and money to adjust and adapt to changing circumstances, a system in rough equilibrium overall can still damage individuals who own or work in uncompetitive industries.

Let us take an example much in the news. According to the most recent report of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are a total of [53 420](#) people employed in the coal mining industry in the United States, and the number is [shrinking](#). By contrast, in 2013 there were [143 000 people](#) working in the solar energy field in the United States, and that figure represented a 20% increase over the previous year. The (somewhat vaguely defined) field of “renewable energy” as a whole employed well over [3 million](#) Americans in 2015. If we judge solely by the numbers the advice to coal miners is clear: your industry is dying. You need to leave Kentucky or West Virginia and move to California and work in a clean energy industry.

The human reality is much more complex. People are tied to places for a complex set of reasons: economic, cultural, familial. It costs money to move. Moving can be tremendously alienating. Home has a psychological and aesthetic value to some people that cannot just be dismissed. Family ties and responsibilities (caring for elderly relatives or children) keep people tied to a place. Add to these challenges the fact that jobs in clean energy projects tend to demand higher levels of education than jobs in the extraction industries and we can start to see why overall equilibrium in a system can mask profound regional and local variation. If those who are dying cannot reach those who are thriving (because they are too poor to move, or are too wed, culturally, to a place, or lack the education and are too old or sick to retrain) then their plight remains a political problem, even if, in the abstract, in a system that is growing overall, it is not an economic problem.

There was much derision directed towards Trump’s executive order that rolled back the Obama era’s legacy of environmental protection and incentives for clean energy. No doubt, the derision is richly deserved. But effective political criticism has to try to comprehend why a seemingly irrational policy choice was made. Trump was not elected by Californians who make fuel cells, he was elected by (amongst others) Kentucky coal miners and unemployed steelworkers in

Pennsylvania. They voted for him because he promised to restore their industries. The executive order was a tangible sign to them that he intends to keep his promise.

If we think of the executive order in the context of the numbers cited above, we can see that historical trends almost guarantee that it will be unsuccessful. Capitalism depends upon technological developments opening up dynamic new sources of profitability. Clean energy is attracting more and more capital, not because the health of the environment is recognized as an intrinsic and instrumental life-value, but because technological change is making them more viable and profitable. Trying to revive the coal industry in this environment is like trying to protect the manual typesetting industry in the age of desk top publishing. There are some boutique mechanical presses in the world, but as an industry manual typesetting is dead.

That does not mean that those who lost their jobs did not suffer or that their elimination is justifiable by the increase in employment opportunities in the new industry. The problem with the abstract economic analysis of labour market dynamics is that workers are reduced to numbers: if there are 3 jobs lost here and 10 created over there, then the system is judged good. And, in one sense, it is, for the 10 people working, *but not for the 3 people not working*. But their pain is not recognized by econometric equations, which is why we need politics. Democratic politics is the opportunity for numbers to become people again and tell their stories, express their interests, and mobilize around their demands.

Whatever legitimate criticisms there are to make about Trump (and they are legion) he gave the appearance of responding to these stories and these concerns. He has thus successfully exploited a division that runs through the American working class and the American ruling class, between those that are working in the remnants of nineteenth century industries like coal and those that pushing the scientific and cultural boundaries of American life. The older industries tend to be more rooted to specific places (you cannot relocate a mine) and they thus tend to foster strong local identities and attachments. For peculiarly American reason they also foster the most virulent strains of nationalism, which Trump has also been able to exploit.

Capitalism is technologically dynamic, but not every *capitalist* is. If they can keep the old industry they own alive with government support they will do so, even if they decry government interference as ‘socialist’ in all other cases not affecting them. While “progressive” capitalists (i.e., those who rely on high skilled foreign labour or hope to get subsidies for green energy research) have come out against Trump’s travel ban and executive orders around environmental protection, those still wed to older industries are happy to support both.

This political split is sowing unprecedented conflict in the American ruling class. It seems bent right now on tearing itself in two (and not just along Republican-Democrat lines). If this conflict is to be effectively exploited then the American left needs to coalesce around *understanding* what the political strategy is behind Trump’s agenda, grasping it in the context of the overall state of social and economic forces, and articulating an agenda that addresses the real concerns of workers still dependent on uncompetitive industries: re-training, a geographically more equitable distribution of subsidies for investment in new clean industries, and worker involvement in local economic transformation for those who are in a position to

leave or change careers; pensions, retirement incentives, adequate health care, and other social supports for those who cannot leave or retrain.

These concrete policies need to be underwritten by respect for people and their work histories. Coal miners did not make coal environmentally destructive. The dignity of their work as human labour needs to be acknowledged and their interests— including their attachments to their communities— need to be taken into account. Abstract social forces are incapable of doing either, so we need politics to recognize and respond. From on high it is clear that Trump and his coterie of millionaires will not ultimately serve the interests of the historically displaced, but democratic politics has to be at work on the ground. If the people who are most damaged by dying industries believe that Trump will help them, and no one else is there to contest it, then he will be able to maintain his hegemony, even in the face of chaos, scandal, and failure.

Democracy, Competence, and Expertise

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The theme of [incompetence](#) has emerged as a [major critique](#) of the [Trump regime](#). In the spirit of sneering scientific good fun, some [opponents](#) have argued that Trump is an instance of the “Dunning-Kruger” effect: the principle that some people are so stupid or incompetent that they cannot recognize how stupid or incompetent they are. To which I am sure the Donald would reply: “I was smart enough to get elected.” And, indeed, he was.

His imagined retort brings me to the salient political issue. It is not how smart or stupid Donald Trump is, but the problem of the relationship between democratic self-governance, competence, and expertise. Does democratic self-governance require the sort of intelligence and competence that we associate with technical expertise, or does it demand a different sort of intelligence and competence that is more widely distributed.? If the former is true, then we should stop talking about democracy, because it would be—at least in contemporary conditions of high social complexity—impossible.

The American Dream is no doubt an ideological cliché, but one of its central planks: that anyone can be President, rests on a deep legacy of democratic anti-elitism. Not everyone can be King, and not everyone can win a Noble Prize, but anyone can be elected by their fellow citizens as leader. It is a necessary condition of democratic rule that the various political offices have no job qualifications other than being a citizen. The underlying assumption is that political intelligence is widely distributed, rooted in life-experience within democratic societies, and not the private property of an aristocratic elite.

It is true that some people may lack this democratic political intelligence. Donald Trump does. There is no evidence in his performance thus far that he is capable of listening, weighing evidence, understanding the difference in perspective between the historically oppressed and the historically advantaged, making a principled rather than partisan case, understanding the social implications of democratic society, or confronting obstacles to the realization of those principles. These are some of the key elements of democratic political intelligence. They are not the subject of classes in political science, they are products of generations of political action: struggle, organization, mobilization, whose ultimate source is “the people” themselves, i.e., the majority who for much of human history have found themselves the voiceless subjects of some form of elite power.

When Donald Trump is criticized for incompetence, he is not being criticized for lacking this sort of democratic political intelligence. Rather he is attacked for lack of understanding of the technical expertise of governing. That is why you hear him denounced for “not playing by the rules.” Whose rules? The rules of technocratic bureaucratic experts who safeguard the normalcy of the system, who ensure that there are no fundamental social changes just because governments change, who ensure that the wars go on even though President’s come and go. This expertise *is* cultivated in political science class and law school; it is knowledge of “statecraft,” monetary policy, logistics, diplomacy, and public relations. It is, in general, the expert knowledge of

machine-operators. The question that democrats have to ask themselves is: should we think of society as a machine such that running it should really be left in the hands of the expert operators?

Most of the time the question is not posed because most governments understand that they are really subordinate to the machine and the machine operators, and are careful to play by the rules (and the number one rule is to repeat how free and democratic society is even when it is obvious that 'the people' have almost zero influence on how it runs regardless of the government they elect). If Trump can be accused of incompetence, it is because of the clumsy and oafish way he has exposed this underlying contradiction. He has had the audacity to criticize and attack elements of the bureaucracy (including the normally sacrosanct police and intelligence services). In general, democrats should applaud such criticism rather than become the champions of cops and spies. Support for the critique of the machine does not, of course, entail support for the content of the Trump program, which is reactionary and regressive on every score.

But if democracy means that the people rule, and one of the ways that the people rule is through elections, and we agree that there is no special training demanded by the task of understanding the issues of the day, but that ordinary experience and argument can be our guide to political learning, then we must reject the idea that governing requires technical expertise. Running nuclear power stations requires engineering degrees; collectively deciding whether we should subtract nuclear power from our energy mix does not. Flying a B-2 bomber requires fearsome technical skills; criticizing the death and mayhem those skills cause demands only the ability to pay attention and bear witness to what one sees. The engineer and the pilot have technical skills that few others have; understanding the implications of what that technical expertise creates does not demand any expertise beyond the shared human capacity to observe, pay attention, reflect, think through, and argue.

If it really is true that society has become too complicated to be understood by "ordinary people" then we need to drop the charade that we are living in a democratic society. But who could it be the case that people really cannot understand how the complex results of social forces impact their lives. Politics is not about machinery, it is about how that machinery impacts our lives. Unless we want to say that people are too stupid to speak for themselves and must be spoken for by experts who know what is best, then we have to insist on a strict separation of political and technical intelligence, and demand that the former rule the later, no matter how complicated life gets. If it gets too complicated for democratic self-governance, then it, and not self-governance, needs to yield.

Labour and Democracy

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Two recent labour events re-emphasized for me the continuing relevance of unions to the on-going (and threatened) project of building democratic societies. On May Day, I attended the Workers' Roundtable, sponsored by the Windsor-Essex local of the Ontario Secondary School Teacher's Federation. On the weekend of May 5th and 6th, I was a delegate to the Spring Council of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT).

The Workers' Roundtable brought together several dozen labour leaders, rank and file members, and community activists to share information on key issues and the current state of struggle. The good news: there remain main hundreds of unionists and community leaders who understand that the core problem of Canadian society is the private ownership and control of universally needed life-resources. Moreover, they are up to the challenge of fighting back against the manifestations of that structural problem. Whether the issue is pervasive feminized and racialized poverty, the erosion of investment in public goods, the loss of autonomy of institutions of higher learning, lack of access to housing, the privatization of public goods and services, loss of freedom to determine our own life-projects to corporate culture and values made compulsory for the entire society, there are unions and community groups fighting back.

That is the good news, but it is also the bad news. We are fighting *back*. We are either trying to hang on to the shrinking fruits of old struggles, or demanding just the most basic services and goods (health care and housing). We are not advancing a coherent, unified, positive vision of a democratic society, because we do not have one as a movement. Indeed, it is difficult to say that there is a labour *movement* at the moment. There are unions, and they have their local battles. There are unions that have developed provincial and national struggles and projects (the Ontario Public Service Employees Union [OPSEU](#) and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers [CUPW](#), for example). But there is no political unity expressed in a common program that asserts a transformational set of demands. Nor is there any political entity capable of either contesting for power or pushing the government of the day to change course. There was no representative of the NDP at the meeting (which, given the current state of both provincial and federal parties, was a good thing).

More troubling was the absence of young activists. There was enough salt and pepper hair to season a week's worth of dinners at every restaurant in Windsor. The union movement—indeed, any future left movement—is going to have to find ways to make itself relevant to young workers (and creating a Facebook group is not going to cut it). So long as established unions continue to sell out young workers at the bargaining table, agreeing to two-tier wage structures and giving up defined benefit pensions for new hires, there is no chance of replenishing the cadres of activists. Failure to cultivate a new generation of leaders and militants will ultimately hit young workers hardest: the free wheeling anarchism of life on line is fun, but the grey conformity of workplace authoritarianism and precarious labour remains a material reality that cannot be clicked away.

It cannot be clicked away, but it can be changed through concerted and long term effort. The last forty years of political failure seems to contradict this conclusion, but we need to take a longer view. Two hundred years ago, women lacked the vote, blacks were enslaved in the United States, and unions did not exist. Benevolent space aliens did not descend from the heavens to sort our problems out: self-educated and self-active people joined together to build movements that engaged the energies and imaginations of millions, and the ruling class was forced to yield on issue after issue.

What early feminists and labour activists and abolitionists had which the current left lacks was a positive and unified vision of the society they wanted to create. They were *for* women's suffrage and *for* equal pay for equal work, and *for* legal equality for blacks and *for* the rights of working people to help shape their work lives, and *for* the right to express opinions that shocked polite society. More importantly, these particular demands were unified by a vision of democratic equality and freedom as self-realization that allowed joint efforts between liberal and radical interpretations of those values. Mass solidarity was the key to building movements of such a scale that they could not be ignored.

Solidarity around a unified project did not mean that there were no differences. It did mean that those differences became the soil for productive political argument and constructive political problem solving. Too often the default position today amongst activists who see themselves as progressive is to censor, ban, and shun whatever does not accord with their particular vision of the appropriate. Faux outrage and taking childish offense to everything is not the sort of liberatory vision that will inspire people to fight. No one has a right to not be offended. Belief that such rights exists is reactionary and repressive, and stems from the exact same fearful attitude that drives xenophobia: what is different as wrong, make it go away. Intelligent and creative people are soon turned off by narrow-minded dogmatism and they flee from politics as they would any suffocatingly conformist system.

But transformational politics at its best is creative and exuberant and tolerant of different interpretations of the organizing values and principles. To be sure, there has to be agreement on the principles and values and a willingness to discipline oneself to decisions once democratically made, but that sort of political discipline after full and free debate is the opposite of the censorious moralism that too often passes for critique today. However, this moralism will not be overcome by equally abstract criticism, but only around concrete demands that people can be won over to as the concrete goals of a revitalized movement. From the side of unions, that means freeing ourselves from a defensive and economic posture and renewing union struggle as a struggle for key elements of a democratic society.

What does that mean? It means that since work-life remains central to our existence, incessant predictions of a "jobless future" notwithstanding, the governance and organization of our workplaces remains an essential political problem. We do not live in a democratic society if most of our active lives are spent in despotic institutions in which we must do what we are told and discarded like trash when it is no longer profitable to exploit our labour power.. The real value of unions, more important than the economic benefits that they bring, is their political value: by enabling workers to bargain collectively, they advance— imperfectly to be sure— the democratic principle that all affected by a decision should participate in the process of decision-

making. Underlying collective bargaining as its deep justifying ground is the idea of worker's control over the firms for which they work.

The CAUT Council served as a reminder that the idea of workers' control is not utopian but in many ways describes academic labour. For more than fifty years the CAUT has been the democratic voice of Canadian academics and a powerful ally of academics around the world struggling against authoritarian violence. Too often, in our own practice) tenured academics treat the extensive rights that we enjoy to determine the pace and content of their own work as walls separating us from society, elevating us as a professional elite above the more mundane concerns of lesser workers. This attitude cuts us off from other workers, as it does from two key truths about the origins and value of these rights: 1) they do not stem from our exalted intellects, but were won in struggle, and 2) they stand as examples of workers control of labour that we should promote as a model for other workers to achieve, and whose struggle we should support.

Through peer review we evaluate the quality of each others' work and decide all-important matters like tenure and promotion. Collectively, academics decide the priorities of their departments and, where they have majorities on Senate's and analogous institutions, can determine the policies that regulate teaching, research, and service. More importantly, workers' control in the university works: people who understand the demands of the job and its social value work together to ensure that the policies that govern the institution serve the values that define it: the production and dissemination of knowledge in all spheres of human inquiry (scientific, social and humanistic, artistic).

Of course, this picture is idealized. The real academy contains all the fault lines of the society within which it exists. It is class divided: tenured academics represent a shrinking share of the total faculty complement. Contract academic staff lack the same rights as tenured academics, and are often treated as servants by tenured stream colleagues. Sexism and racism also plague the academy, as every other institution. There are professional jealousies and monstrous self-importance. However, these are not arguments for the destruction of academic freedom, departmental autonomy, collegial self-governance, and academic control over academic life. Rather, they are calls to make practice adequate to principle and to fight for academic freedom as a social good and not an abstract individual right. The only way to do that is through collective action organized through faculty unions.

The external forces forces that have undermined full-time tenure appointments, that seek to subordinate the values of free inquiry, criticism, and truth, to marketability, fashion, and servitude to government demands cannot be resisted if we think that we are so important as individual researchers we will never be targeted. The threats to academic freedom and campus democracy require a collective response, and a collective response with the right and power to strike if necessary in support of the protection of these values. At the CAUT council we were reminded that the most recent Canadian academic labour dispute at the University of Manitoba had nothing to do with money (because the provincial government imposed a wage freeze) but with whether the criteria that decide tenure and promotion would continue to be grounded in peer expertise, or be subordinated to quantitative metrics that cannot in principle disclose the quality of the work. These struggles may seem arcane to those outside the academy, they may seem to

be about protecting archaic privileges, but they are really about protecting zones of workers control that must serve as models for other workers.

Complete workers' control over production and the complete democratization of social life cannot be achieved by unions alone. Capitalist competition generates global forces that workers bargaining in individual workplaces cannot hope to control. Only vast and deep transformations of economic life can subordinate those forces to democratic deliberation. Life-capital (the natural wealth and social relationships and practices that sustain life and enable its flourishing) would have to be freed from private ownership; the priority governing economic production would have to become need-satisfaction and not private profit; and complex procedures for deciding macro-economic objectives that coherently integrated the local, regional, national, and global levels would have to develop. Stating these requirements baldly makes them sound impossible, but if we add the crucial dimension of time they seem less utopian. If we think of change over an open ended historical continuum rather than that result of a one off insurrection, our chances of success seem much less remote. Spending time discussing and arguing with committed labour activists willing to devote their time to the struggle sustains my hope— which often dwindles to near nothing— that progress is possible.

Anti-BDS BS

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There are easy ways to oppose social problems and then there are real ways to oppose social problems. The easy way, typical of politicians in liberal democracies, is to oppose the problem in abstraction from its causes. Social inequality is paradigmatic: politicians all come to office promising to end it in one way or another (either by unfettering the market or better regulating it) but no one ever provides an account of its causes. They oppose themselves to the *idea* of social inequality while ignoring the reality. If they opposed themselves to the reality they would have to oppose themselves to the causes, and if they opposed themselves to the causes they would have to confront the very powerful people who control society's resources and productive enterprises and operate them according to economic principles that cause social inequality.

The problem of Palestinian statehood is analogous to the problem of social inequality. Most Canadian politicians support it as an idea, but refuse to confront the reality that the two-state solution is becoming more and more impossible because of on-going Israeli occupation and expanding settlements. There are now [570 000 Israeli settlers](#) living in occupied Palestine. Unsurprisingly, as in the case of social inequality, verbal support for an abstract idea fails to address the causes, and so the problem persists and gets worse.

The touchstones of real opposition are whether one is willing to name the cause of the problem and willing to support the struggles of victims through meaningful acts of solidarity. When oppressed people organize a movement and call for international supporters to adopt its demands, then real allies adopt those demands and do what they can in their own contexts to ensure their realization. The main thrust of the Palestinian movement for self-determination is directed towards a two-state solution, and its primary international dimension is the call for Boycott of, Divestment from, and Sanctions against Israel so long as it continues to occupy Palestine. Those are the terms set by the movement of the oppressed themselves. Anyone who is a genuine supporter of Palestinian self-determination must support those demands and, outside Israel, that means supporting the [BDS movement](#).

When the African National Congress called for a boycott of South Africa, millions of supporters around the world heeded the call. *There was no progressive cover for anyone who did not support this international call for solidarity.* Anyone who opposed the boycott and supported the South African state was obviously and manifestly a supporter of apartheid and thus obviously and manifestly a racist. I cannot think of a single instance of anyone who claimed to favour self-determination for black South African's simultaneously worrying that the ANC's call for a boycott was anti-white.

In 2016, by contrast, the world abounds with faux progressives who claim on the one hand to support the right of Palestinians to self-determination and at the same time maintain that there are no legitimate means for them to *act* on this principle. If self-determination should come, it will only be by an act of Israeli *noblesse oblige*. If Palestinians *fight* for their right to self-determination, they are called terrorists. If they demand a boycott via voluntary and peaceful

means, they are accused of fomenting anti-Semitism. There are only two practical poles in politics: violent resistance and non-violent resistance. If both are judged illegitimate by people who nevertheless claim to support self-determination, then the reality is that the oppressed are deprived of any *means* of realizing the principle.

Anyone who claims to support a principle but rejects the legitimacy of any and all means of realizing it is not a supporter of the principle. In the case of the Palestinians, Canadian politicians who pontificate in the abstract about statehood but denounce all means of getting there they do not support self-determination. The very term *self*-determination entails that it cannot be granted by an outside force but only achieved through the group's own efforts.

This issue has become increasingly pressing in Canada. In February, the vast majority of [Justin's Trudeau's](#) caucus voted in favour of a Conservative motion condemning the BDS movement. While Trudeau's government is trying to position itself as responsive to First nation's demands at home, abroad it is abandoning the Palestinians as they struggle against structurally similar political forces squeezing them into tinier and tinier zones of control. In the summer, Trudeau's Ontario cousins did help to defeat a motion brought by failed Conservative candidate for premier Tim Hudak to make BDS movements illegal. However, in its wake premier [Kathleen Wynne](#) (then on a trade mission to Israel) promised to pass a 'non-divisive' anti-BDS motion in the near future. [Elizabeth May](#), leader of the Canadian Green Party, has put herself into a similar situation. May has threatened to resign unless Green Party members reverse their support for a motion they recently passed in support of the BDS movement. All three leaders would no doubt support *the principle* of self-determination, but the truth of principles is practice, and in terms of practice, that means supporting the Palestinian *movement* for self-determination, which none of them do.

The hope that problems can be resolved without divisive movements is mystificatory magic thinking. On a divisive issue any motion *against* one side *must* must be divisive, just because it divides along the different sides of the dispute, and thus separates supporters and opponents. The truth, therefore, is that behind the narcotic language of inclusiveness and non-divisiveness there is always an attack on those who fall on the other side of the issue (who can then be attacked for being divisive)!

The attack takes the form of an effective denial of the right to self-determination of (in this case) the Palestinians. Self-determination is a recognized human right— indeed, for colonized people denied a state of their own, the most important right. As the Kenyan political philosopher and critic of a Euro-centric liberal understanding of human rights Makau Matua argues, “the most fundamental of all human rights is that of self-determination and ... no other right overrides it. Without this fundamental group or individual right no other human right could be secured, since the group would be unable to determine for its individual members under what political, social, cultural, economic, and legal order they would live.”(p. 108) To deny people the right to self-determination is, at the deepest level, to refuse to recognize their humanity: their capacity to shape their conditions of life and the values that will guide their collective existence on the basis of their own interpretation of their history.

Now if it should be rejoined that a movement for Palestinian statehood is an existential threat to Israel, the only cogent response is to deride it for the red herring that it is. In the current state of affairs, who is unable to exercise their right to self-determination, the Israeli state, or the Palestinian people who daily watch the Israeli government colonize more of their land? Who controls water and electricity provision to the occupied territories? Who imposes collective punishment, arbitrary detention, torture, and extra-judicial killings on people resisting the illegal occupation of their traditional lands? Who has just signed an arms deal worth [38 billion](#) dollars over ten years? Who has nuclear weapons? It is abundantly clear who is the existential threat to whom and who has *carte blanche* from the so-called “international community” to continue its colonization of Palestinian land.

At a minimum, therefore, anyone who believes in the principle of self-determination must be in solidarity with Palestinian demands to boycott Israeli firms working on colonized lands, and to impose sanctions on analogy with the principle that supported sanctions on South Africa during the apartheid years. If those sanctions were not anti-white, but anti-racist, then sanctions against Israel are not anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish, but anti-colonial.

When Europeans first arrived on the lands of the First Nations and decided to stay, they needed some justification for displacing the people living there and appropriating their lands. The principle was called *terra nullis*: empty land. In the face of undeniable evidence to the contrary, the European settlers simply declared that— in effect- there were no people here, and proceeded to put that principle into practice. The way in which the principle of *terra nullis* denied the humanity of the people of the First Nations is overt, and no one who claims to support their current struggles for self-determination would be at all reticent about admitting the racist denial of the humanity of the peoples of the First Nations that the principle presupposed. But Israeli settlement activity presupposes the very same principle, and yet, in Canada and around the world of official politics: silence, but a silence that speaks, a silence that says: “we do not recognize the humanity of the Palestinian people.”

Fractals of Violence

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Fractal geometry studies the ways in which certain natural structures appear to replicate the same pattern at different scales. For example, the branching pattern that shapes the tree as a whole is replicated in the branching pattern of its major limbs, and the branching pattern of its major limbs is replicated in the smaller branches that grow out from them. We can observe an analogous phenomenon in the world of political violence. As fractal geometry helped mathematicians model irregularity in nature, so too can a close attention to scale help us understand the seemingly random and irrational nature of political violence today.

We live in a violent world: a banality if ever there was one. But what does it mean to say that we live in a violent world? The world is multi-scalar. There are global organizations and interactions, national states which are composed of formal and informal regions, cities, neighbourhoods, households, and individuals. In order to understand what the term violent world means, we have to examine the world at each of these scales. "The world" is an abstraction which contains these different scales as subsets, but we cannot understand violence—save in a politically ineffective moralistic way— if we think abstractly. We have to see how a global pattern is replicated in the smaller scales from the global and international down to the individual if we are to understand the meaning of "violent world" in any politically efficacious way.

To see the self-replicating structure of a tree we have to learn to follow its lines of branching with our eye. To understand the self-replicating structure of violence, we have to learn to follow the lines of political division and opposition. Wherever one finds violence one will always find a line of force that divides a potential whole (humanity, citizens, etc.) into opposed parties. One party has, if not a monopoly on the means of violence (as Weber said of the state) a much higher capacity to impose its will by physical force, if decides to so use it. The powerful nation state that unleashes its superior armed forces on a weaker adversary, the city that unleashes its police force against strikers, the gang that controls the streets of a neighbourhood, or the man who rapes a woman behind the wall of his house are all enacting the same sort of social script at a different scale. The party that resorts to violence defines its interests in opposition to the interests of the target victim and decides that its interests alone count. Since the other is constructed either as having no interests of its own, or the wrong sorts of interests, or "better off" if it would adopt the interests of the stronger as its own interests, violence is seen not only as functionally legitimate, but normatively sound, the right thing to do.

In this way the violent agent can override sympathetic-empathetic fellow feeling that, when operative, produce powerful psychic bulwarks against violent assault on others. We only feel sorry for that which we care about and we only care about that which we think either a) has legitimate interests that must be respected, or b) appears as an entity onto which we can project legitimate interests (as we do when we invest inanimate objects like works of art with intrinsic value that we then act so as to respect). When people, acting as individuals or officers of some

collective, deny or disregard the legitimacy of the opposed interests of others, they free themselves from the psychic bulwarks against violence and target their opponent for destruction.

Let us now examine the other side of this relationship. Human beings, as Hegel knew, are subjects and not passive objects of nature and social power. When they are treated as objects, they eventually resist. This resistance to power takes the form of counter-power: if someone tries to destroy me, I try to destroy him, *not for the sake of removing the threat but for the sake of proving to the person who would reduce me to an object of his interests that I am a subject with my own interests, a free and not a dependent being*. Hegel was interested in the underlying dynamics and the conceptual form of struggle, not its political realities. Hence, he treats every fundamental struggle as a struggle to the death, with no attention paid to the crucial issue of legitimation of the struggle. Hence, he missed an essential imbalance in the discourses through which violence is justified: the powerful not only have superior physical power on their hands, but superior communicative power (control over the means of communication) and will use this to legitimate their own violence *and* demonize the violence of resistance. In the real world of violence, the violence of the group or person with superior physical power (economic, political, and military) is always affirmed, the counter-violence of the victim is always demonized.

But not only demonized. The primary tactic of de-legitimizing the counter-violence of the victims is to invert the real causal order: the victim, i.e., the *effect* of the objectifying violence of ruling powers, is made the cause of their own objectification and targeting for violent assault. The rape victim is made to appear as the cause of the rape, the anti-imperialist movement is made the cause of imperialist violence, and so on.

Take the recent example of the killings of police officers in Dallas. As soon as that happened the focus of the corporate media shifted from a discussion of the long history of police violence against blacks in America to black violence against police. Although it is not metaphysically possible for an event which occurred later in time (the killing of the police officers) to provide the grounds for an event which happened prior in time (the police killings in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis) the media make it sound as if the fact that five police officers were murdered *in response to the police killings* somehow retroactively legitimated those police killings in Baton Rouge and Minneapolis.

This inversion makes the general pattern and causal texture of violence in the world invisible, and ensures that we remain trapped in revenge cycles. Instead of understanding how general patterns of violence (colonial, racial, sexual, etc) are replicated at the scale of the individual as responses to their objectification and demonization, the individual as such is posited as the cause of violence which must be 'dealt with' by more intense violence. The shootings of police result in more intensive and aggressive policing, terrorist attacks result in more ferocious military assaults. Both tactics ensure that the cycle will continue, because the systematic causes are not addressed.

Let us test this proposition on the international scale. Has the "War on Terror" that began in 2001 with the invasion of Afghanistan stopped terrorism? Not only has it not, it has actually caused it to spread to areas in which it was formerly absent, most notably, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. What is the common element linking these states to the growth of

terrorism? Destablizing western intervention. To point to destabilizing western intervention as the cause does not retroactively confer legitimacy on the autocratic rulers of those nations; it *does* condemn regime change imposed by neo-imperialist powers pursuing their own political and economic interest as incapable of creating stability and justice for local populations. The collapse of central authority in the absence of unified pan-social democratic movements led to civil war and civil war to the creation of uncontrolled spaces where groups like Daesh were able to organize. The application of ever increasing military force only exacerbates this problem, which means that it will not disappear even if Daesh is rooted from Raqqa and Mosul.

Even if this argument is true, it does not lead to the more hopeful political conclusions that twentieth century criticisms of colonialism generated. One wonders what sort of victory or concession would satisfy a group like Daesh. Consolidation of its territory? But its odiously repressive politics would mean that it would exist in a state of permanent conflict with the local population, and never be accepted (as anti-colonial movements were) as the legitimate expression of the popular-democratic and national will. Once the American invasion had been finally repulsed, Viet Nam ceased to be at war with the United States and it set about he task of reconstructing its society. So too with the post-colonial revolutionary regimes of Africa. There was a coherent *and politically and economically progressive goal* which, once achieved, ended the formal hostilities between the parties.

It is difficult to understand Daesh along these lines. At the same time, the Western means of dealing with it: insect metaphors and vows to exterminate it— ensure that it can portray itself as the victim of imperialist violence and continue to recruit on that basis disaffected and racially and ethnically marginalized youth. The global pattern replicates itself fractally at the individual level; individual acts of violence like in Istanbul give fresh impetus to the global pattern, and the sad bloody spectacle goes on and on.

What is absent here that was present in the twentieth century is a coherent democratic-nationalist alternative as the vehicle for a constructive anti-imperialist politics. We can say the same thing in the domestic American case (although here perhaps Black Lives Matter can evolve into the overarching political movement that has been absent since the end of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement of the 1950's and 1960's). The only alternative to fractal replication of violence is constructive political movements that justify themselves by their success in building democratic alternatives as opposed to wantonly destructive acts that achieve nothing more than to bring down the ever more fearsome wrath of arms.

Clearly that sort of constructive politics (which we saw in the Arab Spring before the United States conspired with the Egyptian secret police to end it) can develop only over the long term. And it is this long term that keeps the prophets of armed destruction and policing in charge of policy. It is too easy for politicians to stand in front of the latest pile of bodies and declaim against the barbarians who caused it and promise revenge. But revenge for Paris did not prevent Istanbul, and revenge for Istanbul will not prevent the next attack. By all means, let us favour pragmatism over utopianism. But pragmatism demands that the solution actually work. Avenging individual violence with social and political violence simply has not worked.

What it has done and continues to do is to legitimate an arms race in which state power always emerges on top. This arms race has led to the militarization of policing and the mechanistic autonomization of the military. These interrelated developments have reduced the capacity for effective political resistance. One cannot build barricades against drones and you cannot negotiate with [bomb-wielding robo-cops](#). There is no insurgency that can hope to succeed against the awesome killing power of the world's most advanced military systems: the inability of America to win its wars in the Middle East has not meant the people of the Middle East have won. Instead, they suffer day after day of life-destruction. There will be political solutions to these conflicts or none at all. If the shared life-interest is to prevail, new democratic political organizations with a coherent positive vision for transformation must emerge in these long-suffering states as in the black neighbourhoods and cities of America.

And Popper Thought Marxism Was Unscientific

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The Austrian philosopher of science Karl Popper famously argued that Marxism was not a science because the laws of history that it claims to discover are not falsifiable. For example, Marx argued that capitalist crises would be recurrent and ultimately unsolvable, because the rate of profit tended to fall as capitalism matured. While there is evidence to support that claim about the cyclical nature of crises and the falling rate of profit, their links to revolutionary political changes— the real crux of the theory, since Marxism is a revolutionary theory— are ideological. If the last crisis did not do capitalism in, then there is no inconsistency, within Marxist theory, to shift the time frame, and so on, *ad infinitum*, endlessly delaying the moment when the theory could be empirically tested and falsified. But a theory that cannot in principle be falsified is not, according to Popper's definition, a science, but ideology, an attempt to *make* the world become something on the basis of (spurious) claims about what it is.

Popper's arguments always troubled some Marxists more than others. Marxists like me, who were moved more by the vision of human potentiality that opens up beyond the horizon of capitalist alienation were untroubled by his arguments, because it always seemed clear that Marxism was an ethical-political conception of a way of human life and not a scientific proof of the causal mechanism by which human history would move there. That said, elements of Marx's theory, like the definition of classes in terms of their relationship to the means of production, or the labour theory of value, are certainly empirically verifiable or falsifiable social scientific theories that can be debated independently of any active allegiance to a revolutionary movement, so Popper's argument is true in relation to the overall project, but seems false in relation to at least some of the parts.

Still, whatever truth there is in his critique of the scientificity of Marxism would apply in equal measure to orthodox economics, which trumpets its scientific *bona fides* as grounds for heeding its advice, but whose ideological agenda is obvious. If Marxism aims to undermine the legitimacy of the capitalist system, orthodox economics aims to support its legitimacy.

A case in point is a recent article by [Chris Sarlo](#), a Senior Fellow at the [Fraser Institute](#) and a professor of economics at Nipissing University in North Bay. Sarlo's argument is that recent claims about rising inequality are "overblown." He supports this conclusion on the basis of two interrelated claims: 1) income is not the best measure of inequality, because b) "some people can consume substantially more than their income by borrowing or by receiving gifts. Others consume much less than their income if they save a significant portion or if they pay down debt." Reading this claim as a meaningful response to the social implications of income inequality tests the limits of the principle of charitable interpretation. It is really just changing the subject so as to draw our attention away from the problem, not providing a solution to it.

In no way– and *obviously in no way*– does it call into question the mass of long term statistical evidence that shows deeply problematic– from the perspective of democracy– rising inequality within rich nations like Canada (which is Sarlo’s focus) and much less that between the Global North and the Global South. It does not do so for this simple reason: whatever inequalities we find at the level of income will be replicated at the level of credit markets and savings (called “investment,” when rich people do it).

Is Sarlo to have us believe that social problems caused by rising income inequality (including [worse health outcomes](#) for those on the lower income scales and the undermining of the social basis of equal value of democratic citizenship rights) are solved because working people can borrow a hundred thousand dollars to buy a house, while a rich person could borrow 10 million? Clearly, the credit worthiness of individuals is a factor in their access to credit markets, and their worthiness is going to be determined by their income and net worth. How, then, is socially meaningful inequality mitigated by credit? The higher your networth, the more debt you can take on and carry.

Moreover, the implications of indebtedness is affected by income inequality. Donald Trump can declare a loss of 900 million dollars, and carry on his lavish, buffoonish life. Meanwhile, working people caught up in the sub-prime mortgage crisis lost their homes when their payments re-set to levels they could not afford. Prior to the on-set of the crisis one could have said: the net worth of new home owners went up and this increase mitigated the tendency towards inequality. But then it all collapsed in a house of cards and broken dreams and foreclosures, and income inequality is the reason why. The rich can pay their debts (or pay someone to have them endlessly restructured so they can delay paying them) as well as carry much higher debt loads. So– let me be gentle– it is at least unclear how shifting the focus as Sarlo suggests we do uncovers evidence that socially meaningful inequality is not rising spectacularly, and not threatening (if it has not already undermined) the cohesiveness of existing liberal-capitalist states.

Sarlo would respond that if we do shift our focus from income to consumption, we find much less growth in inequality:

If consumption is a better reflection of a household’s standard of living, what can we say about the degree of inequality of those living standards over time? A new Fraser Institute study examines the inequality of consumption in Canada over the period 1969 to 2009 (the last year of available data). After adjusting for household size, which has changed quite dramatically over the past four decades, the study finds that consumption inequality has barely changed since 1969. Using a popular measure, inequality of consumption is up only three per cent in 40 years.

But this can be attributed to other factors which do not support the overall thrust of Sarlo’s argument. If household sizes remain more or less the same, prices go down for some (low-end luxuries) and the demand of rich households for consumables does not massively exceed those of poor households of the same size, then the rate of growth of consumer spending in rich and poor households could remain more or less constant over the decades, as the study claims to find. But this proves nothing substantial about the egalitarian nature of our societies. Rich people just have a lot more money to do other things with than spend it on consumer goods. What they in

fact do with it is *invest it to make more money for themselves*, while working people must work for wages that have been stagnant for 40 years.

What is really going on in here is an attempt to blow smoke in the eyes of people who are worried that the legitimacy of capitalism is being undermined by rising inequality. This worry received new impetus from Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty First Century*. The book proved beyond a shadow of a statistical doubt that the sort of inequality a democratic society needs to worry about has been rising steadily since the 1970s. The issue is not income in the abstract (if we did nothing with money but pile it up in a room it would not matter how much money anyone made). But we do not: we use money to purchase that which we need, and—crucially— in capitalism, to buy other people's labour: income is really power over other people. Hence, rising income inequality means rising inequality in the relative power of those who live off of their (increasingly valuable) capital as opposed to those who try to live off of their (stagnant or falling) wages.

Picketty's conclusion is stark for those who believe that the liberal-capitalist form of social organization is just: "When the rate of return on capital significantly exceeds the growth rate of the economy (...as is likely to be the case in the twenty-first century) then it logically follows that inherited wealth grows faster than output and income ... Under such conditions, it is almost inevitable that inherited wealth will dominate wealth amassed from a life-time of labour ... and the concentration of capital will attain extremely high levels— levels potentially incompatible with the meritocratic values and principles of social justice fundamental to modern democratic societies."(p.26) Keeping our eyes from focussing upon the Potemkin village built out of platitudes about equal opportunity and the long run justice of capitalism is the entire function of arguments like Sarlo's. Democratic societies are supposed to be self-governing, and the mechanism of self-government is decisions freely arrived at through the deliberation of equals. If a small group lives off their investments and controls the labour of those who must find work, then that sort of deliberative self-determination is impossible, and its invocation as a justifying value a sham.

Peter Singer Loses His Grip

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In an obscure article translated by Walter Kaufmann, (“Who Thinks Abstractly”) Hegel responds to charges that philosophy is a form of “abstract” thinking. His response is to demonstrate that it is not philosophers who think abstractly, but the general public when they cast around for simplistic explanations for complex problems. To think abstractly is not to think in terms of general principles or universal causes, but rather to ignore both in favour of surface explanations that pick out (abstract) an empirical feature of a situation and posit it as the cause. Hegel gives the example of a murderer. For the abstract thinker, a murderer is nothing more than a person who murders. The complex history of events and experiences that combined to produce the murderer are ignored. Thus, abstract thought is unhistorical: it cannot explain how a given situation came to be or how it could be changed. Moreover, it is not interested in how things came to be; it is happy with its surface explanations.

Sadly, it is not only the general public that thinks abstractly in this sense. Philosophers are, contra Hegel, often guilty as well. A recent case in point is the ever-controversial Peter Singer. In a story reported in the [Jakarta Chronicle](#), he is quoted as saying that if smart young people want to save the world, then they should become investment bankers. No worries about their obscenely high salaries, “if they are able to live modestly and give a lot away, they can save many lives.” Well perhaps, but what about the lives they ruin by providing the funds for “investments” that destroy landscapes, indigenous ways of life, public goods and services; their collusion with autocrats against unions, social movements, and indigenous cultures; their blind infatuation with money above all else?

Singer’s error is to abstract the issue of charitable giving from the more complex reality of what is valued in the global economy and what is selected for investment. For Singer it is simply a matter of what you do with your money once you have it, not how you get your money in the first place, or the overarching economic system that determines the relative pay scales of different occupations.

Singer’s argument is analogous to claiming that if you want to save lives then you should stock up on poison and its antidote, administer the poison to people, and then the antidote, just before they die. At the very least, that is a pretty roundabout way of saving lives.

The worst aspect of the argument is that it leads to the morally odious conclusion that those who make money speculating on currencies, stripping public services by privatizing them, working with governments to drive down wages and eliminate benefits, raid pension plans and condemn the young to a life of precarious servitude actually do more good (if they give away some of the income that they derive from destroying lives) than poorly paid workers: nurses, support care workers, teachers in most of the world, whose labour is actually and directly life-serving.

I am not a long-standing critic of Peter Singer's work. His contribution to animal ethics is path-breaking, his commitment to life-protective universal global ethical principles is one I share (although not his utilitarian interpretation of that ethic). I think he has been unfairly criticized by disabled rights activists who have interpreted thought experiments designed to sensitize us to the suffering of animals as hateful attacks on the disabled. But I have long worried that his focus on charity as the means of solving the problems of poverty and oppression was politically incoherent, and the comment quoted above seems to bear my concern out. (See for example *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, p. 195).

The first problem with charity is that it operates in a political, economic, and social vacuum. As I argued above, it fails to ask how the money that the charitable donor deigns to redistribute was acquired. The second problem is that it smacks of *noblesse oblige*: the fortunate (usually, white Western) donor, media in tow, appears in the midst of the huddled masses of the Global South and distributes manna. Bellies are fed for a day, but true freedom from poverty- freedom that can only come from collective struggle against the private ownership of life-resources and their exploitation for money-value that accumulates in private (and mostly Western) hands- is impeded. Real freedom from poverty requires the expropriation of the investment banks and turning them to the truly democratic and life-serving purposes of investment in universally accessible public infrastructure and goods.

In other places (*One World*, for example) Singer has sounded a more critical tone towards global capitalism, but he has always pulled back from calling for collective action in support of an alternative value system in favour of abstract calls for charity. Individualistic solutions to social problems, ethics in abstraction from social philosophy, and structural analysis of the global economy result, in this case, in an obscene inversion of values: the destroyers of life appear as its servants, its real servants, the mostly indigenous poor of the world, appear as helpless beggars awaiting salvation.

Perhaps Singer would rejoin that not every business venture is life-destructive. If every one were, then capitalism would have long ago killed off the species. Fair enough. But it is obvious that all investments in capitalism are *contradictory* (and many are outright destructive of indigenous lives and life-ways). Every investment depends on the exploitation and alienation of labour, and the *overwhelming* direction of economic "development" in the past forty years has been against collective protections for working people and in favour of privatization and precarity. Investment banks line up the funds for all of these projects.

Perhaps he would further rejoin that need is immediate and social transformation is a long-term project, if it is even possible. Again, there is some truth here. However, it is a practical truth that any number of politicians or UN bureaucrats or Western do-gooders can make. The world does not need philosophers to state the obvious. If there is any public value at all to philosophy it is that it stands somewhat above the day to day fray, *not* so that it can ponder the heavens "in abstraction" from real life, but so that the deep underlying principles that regulate everyday life can be made the object of reflection and criticism to the extent warranted by the state of peoples lives. Philosophy that panders to the given in the way that Singer does in this case contradicts its vocation- which in many other respects Singer has upheld to the highest degree- to make the

hard, the non-obvious, argument that takes us *beyond* where we are now to a place it would be better *for all* to be.

Place

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From a reductionist standpoint, humans are just organisms that occupy space for a very brief moment of cosmic time; our life-activity mere survival and reproduction; our sensory relationships with the world focused only threat avoidance, mate finding, and energy consumption. While there is nothing in this account which is, strictly speaking, untrue, it could apply to any organism in nature, and thus fails to capture that which is distinctively human about our embodied being.

Essential and definitive of *human* embodied being is an affective-interpretive-aesthetic relationship with the spaces we inhabit. Human beings do of course depend on nature like all other life, and thus, we, like all living things, live in environments. But we do not just subsist, we create worlds of meaning through the aesthetic and emotional work of interpreting the places in which we live. Human beings not only occupy spaces in so far as we are bodies, we form emotional-aesthetic attachments to *places* of significance.

One might be tempted to posit some sort of “spirit” to places, an excess beyond the material features of environments, to explain their significance, but I think that this move is unnecessary. Human beings have brains that, in social relationships with each other, develop languages, and languages, over millennia, have developed beyond instrumental signalling devices, through metaphor, symbolization, and allegory, to create a reality of meaning that is fully of this world, although not explicable in terms of the elements and forces of physics. The meaning-world is still material, in so far as its emergence can be explained in terms of the practices and capacities of embodied beings, but not understandable in reductionist terms. The “poetics of space” (Gaston Bachelard) emerge from our felt attachments to places as differentially important to us as individuals because they are the contexts in which we form our identity. My home does not feel the same to me as your home, one lake is just a body of water, the other where I learned to swim; one streetscape I can walk down with indifference, the other contains a bookshop in which, as a student, I first started to feel a true intellectual calling. The geographer Edward Casey calls these spaces in which our identity is formed “place-worlds.” “Places come into us lastingly” he writes, “once having been in a particular place for any considerable time— or even briefly, if our experience there has been intense— we are forever marked by that place, which lingers in us indefinitely.” (“Between Geography and Philosophy: What Does it Mean to be in the Place-World, p.688.”)

Talk of the relationship between places of significance and identity raises very serious political dangers- the “blood and soil” atavism that I discussed in my last post and the pernicious, racist doctrine of “ethnic pluralism” (which says that every culture is valid in itself but that they should all stay in their traditional homelands and not “mix”). Now, this sort of racist appropriation of place would not be possible if we did not have an affective-interpretive relationship with places. People can be whipped up into a frenzy to defend “their place” from others because they do in fact feel powerful attachments to it. The way to combat this problem is not to appeal to a rootless cosmopolitanism that is indifferent to the differential significance of

places for people, but to disconnect what in the racist and ethno-pluralist discourse is essentially connected: meaningful space to nation and nation to *exclusive ownership and control over places*.

In order to disrupt the pathological implications of these connections, the first thing we need to understand is that nations are not places. Modern (post-French Revolution) nations are ideas, “imagined communities” in Benedict Anderson’s phrase, identities produced by abstraction from differences, not natural kinds; slogans that can be used to mobilize some subset of the total number of people in a geographic-legal construction against enemy-formations that purportedly threaten the integrity of the in-group by violating borders or occupying space not rightly theirs.

Of course, history does know of the violent displacement of people- not every threat is constructed or ideological. At the same time, not every important aspect of human identity is political. The personal is political, yes, but not every single aspect of the person. We become concrete individuals through our actions in concrete, discrete, and specific places. As opposed to an abstraction like “nation,” always constructed in relation to a history that exceeds the individual, places are always bound by the individual’s experiential field and linked to a personal history. A meaningful place never exceeds what can be comprised by a singular and individual experience: “Joe Lake seen from my uncle’s dock,” not “Northern Ontario.”

It is true that the people that occupy and relate to these places can be captured under higher level abstractions. Today, almost every place, as a matter of geo-legal fact, is included in some national political space. But what makes the place significant is one’s own connection to it, a connection which does not exclude anyone else from having similar or different identity-shaping experiences. Nationalist discourse works in large part by saying: “we have something special that no one else has.” It becomes dangerous when it constructs non-nationals as threats to this special in-group possession. But the places in which identity-shaping experiences develop are personal, not exclusive. You can stand beside me and look at Joe Lake from my uncle’s dock, and it does not matter what your national identity is. Maybe you do not feel about the view as I do: it does not matter, you are free to interpret it as you like. Maybe you prefer a different landscape: all to the good, it is no threat to my feeling deeply at home in this one.

The meaningful texture of identity-forming experience occurs at a different scale than nationalist abstraction: concrete felt presence, not abstract thought. Through on-going acts of self-interpretation, multiple, innumerable place-worlds are built up out of the material geography of the planet. These are not idealizations but concrete doublings of the physical space: what an embodied, thinking, feeling, language-using bio-social being creates as it builds an identity for itself. Without these place-worlds human life would revert towards the animal: habitat distinguished by raw physical differences (climate, food supply, etc), but lacking meaning. Cities would be like ant colonies without the “storied streets” that draw people to them and make them feel part of some grander creation.

Now, it might seem as though the personal connection between place and meaning turns the public private and in effect establishes a property relation over the meaning of places. This conclusion would be wrong. Property relations depend upon legal-political constructions; the meaning of places depend upon our creative-interpretive powers and our need to find or create

meaning in our natural and social environments. Meaning is not my property even if I create it since the whole point of creating it is to share it, not to own it. My identity, constructed through self-interpretations, interactions, and feelings in diverse place-worlds does not exclude anyone else's identity as illegitimate. One's own interpretations of a place are never normative for everyone else. There are an open and unlimited number of interpretations of place-world's possible: their accumulation obeys the law of abundance (more for everyone) and not scarcity (I take mine and you fend for yourself).

What matters to the production of meaning in place-worlds is attention to the material details of the place and the feelings that they arouse. The places can be anywhere: the production of meaning is not parochial and the sense of our individual identity is not nostalgic: where there is life and attention there is development of identity. It is not a static and abstract self-consciousness opposed to a chaos of empirical details. The empirical is not chaotic, it is made sense of by attending to the real contours of places.

Since identities are formed to be shared, we can say that places- which are the contexts in which identities are created in an on-going fashion- are one crucial material condition of friendship. In an on-line world we are apt to forget about the importance of shared place-worlds for the formation of friendships. Here, two points are significant. Friends share over-lapping place worlds, the place-worlds which they experienced together and on that basis forged the friendship. But they are also the occasions for sharing the differences that friendship also depends upon: no one's experience of a place world is exactly like that of any other. Friendship is non-instrumental sharing of the self as a materially particular person with another materially particular person. The physical distinction and difference between the friends is crossed by the stories of shared-place worlds that link their distinct life-histories.

Whereas private property depends upon you not having what I have, (which means, in conditions of unequal distribution, poverty for some as a direct consequence of wealth for others) the sharing of the experiences that we create through our interpretations of meaningful places enrich us all as meaning-needing beings. The interpretation of a place-world is not the same as the domination of space. The construction of a concrete, particular identity is no threat to the construction of other concrete identities. Rather, the differences between our personal identities, forged in the place-worlds we have inhabited, is a condition of there being anything important to share with others, and thus one foundation for the construction of a world of human wealth in which it is worth living.

The Wish to be a Red Indian

Originally Posted February 1, 2017

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone.

(Franz Kafka, "The Wish to be a Red Indian" *Meditations*, 1904-1912)

Kafka's meditation is a brilliant evocation of untrammelled natural freedom and a model of poetic brevity. It is not a documentary record of "Red Indian" life but the expression of a need to occupy open spaces. The drama plays out not on the Great Plains but in Kafka's head, in his room in the Jewish Quarter of Prague (which is everything the Great Plains are not: cramped, twisty streets, confined, bustling). Kafka's wish is to be unfettered, to be free from everything constructed and mechanical (the rider needs no reins or spurs; by the end even the horse itself is dissipating into pure motion). The wish is perhaps not to be some particular other, but, to become one with space and time, pure forward motion.

In that respect it goes beyond the typical sort of European fantasy projection that has informed, since Jacques Cartier kidnapped **Dom Agaya and Taignoagny** from Hochelaga and took them to France, the European construction of the native as "noble savage." Kafka's wish clearly trades on some of this construction, but also dissolves it into the pure freedom of movement. It is not the ritual, or the dress (there is no description of the rider at all) or the cosmology that elicits the wish, but rather the space (and thus the freedom to move through it), that summons Kafka's imagination.

Deadly irony, then that Kafka was writing this "meditation" at time when that very freedom of movement towards the endless horizon of the Plains had been robbed from their original inhabitants. After the Indian Wars in the United States and the Northwest Rebellion in Canada, after the destruction of bison herds that were the foundation of the Prairie economy, on those plains and in the cities that colonialism created, a more prosaic reality ruled and rules still: the reality of displacement, marginalization, racist hatred, poverty, and, violence. But also: a history of resilience and creativity, political struggle and demands for redress and social transformation, and also calls for solidarity, not separation, and self-change on the part of the descendants of the European colonizers who have (unequally of course) materially benefited so much from colonization.

An important step towards recognition of the reality of Canadian colonial history and a new political relationship with the people of the First Nations was the report of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#). One of the demands that it made was for a re-thinking of the teaching of Canadian history in particular and educational curricula in general, at all levels, to incorporate indigenous knowledges. I think this demand is valuable for three reasons: 1) it will present a more comprehensive, and therefore, truer account of how Canada came to be; 2) by

presenting a truer account of our history, it will give people the knowledge that they need to overcome the racist stereotypes that still dominate too many white Canadians' images of people of the First Nations; and 3) it will contest the myth of the 'noble savage' naturally at one with nature, and remind people that First Nations' communities always were and are human cultures with complex symbolic structures and thoughtful relationships to the environment and each other.

Still, as important as the task of re-thinking our history and reforming our curricula is, I worry that it is becoming abstracted from the deeper structural changes a full reconciliation with First Nations communities will require. Let me give you an example to illustrate my concern.

Recently, I was asked by a former student to write a letter of support for an academic position for which he had applied. I noticed an addition to the usual boiler plate about commitment to equity. The relevant section of the ad reads that the successful candidate will have a "demonstrated understanding of the ways in which equity, indigenous knowledge, and sustainability are fundamental to the student experience, to innovative scholarship ...". While there is nothing objectionable in itself about this requirement, I could not shake feeling supremely bothered by it.

On the one hand, there is the usual institutional hypocrisy of these requirements. At the same time as all universities insist upon equity and sustainability, they trip over themselves to attract private funding, often from corporations who could care less about either, and all of which, no matter what their internal culture, drive the capitalist system and its exploitative, alienating, and habitat destroying effects on people, other species, and the environment generally.

But there was something especially irksome about the inclusion of "indigenous knowledge." It is not that I think, as someone who lives within the self-enclosed world of the academy, that historically oppressed people have no business demanding that curricula change to include their previously excluded realities. Curricula should always be changing to ensure ever more comprehensive scope of coverage and understanding. If universities want to be at the forefront of progressive social change (and they should) then academics have a responsibility to rethink what they are teaching and find ways to include the excluded. To be sure, academics must be in charge of these developments so that the changes are made in a way that coheres with the disciplinary traditions and methods that students still need to know, but the demand itself is legitimate and in keeping with the vocation of the university to make available to students the totality of human knowledge in its on-going development.

So what bugged me? The first problem is that the very idea of "indigenous knowledge" as a generic universal seems to me to be the product of a European perspective. Indigenous people are not "indigenous," save in contrast to settlers and their descendants. In their own communities— which would be the ground and source of their knowledge— they are Cree, or Iroquois, or Dene, or Inuit. Clearly, no one who is not from those communities is going to understand, from the inside, the details, the nuances, and especially the *meaning* of their specific worldviews. The abstraction "indigenous knowledge" thus negates the nature of indigenous knowledge, which is not generic, but always specific to actual indigenous communities.

(Is this not true also of “Europe?” In a sense it is, but its scientific-philosophical outlook has always been cosmopolitan and universalizing. It is true that we can identify general differences between French, English, and German philosophy, for example, but most of these philosophers would also identify with a pan-European philosophical project. That point would apply with even greater truth to the sciences).

The abstract generality of the requirement leads directly to the second thing about it that bugged me. I have worked in universities for 20 years and studied in them for 10 before that. First Nations people and their historical knowledges are underrepresented everywhere. It is overwhelmingly likely that none of the people who wrote this ad were members of any First Nation. Who, then, is fit to adjudicate the extent to which any applicant (most of whom almost certainly will be white), is or is not well enough versed in “indigenous knowledge” to incorporate it in to their teaching practice? Is this not a case of the colonizer (even if unwittingly) defining for the colonized the very knowledges that define them?

But then I think: surely the implications of my being irked are absurd. One does not have to *be* a woman to understand that curricula have to include women’s perspectives. Thus, by analogy, one does not have to *be* a member of a First Nation in order to understand the need to include First Nations’ perspectives. I suppose there is some truth here. Understanding the value of a perspective is different from sharing or living that perspective.

Still, it seems true that with some forms of understanding, inhabiting the perspective is part of what it really means to understand it. I could read about the cosmology of the Iroquois, for example, even talk with elders about it, and I am sure I could learn to explain it, but if I did not grow up relating to the universe through that cosmology, I would not say that I understood it. Is the “indigenous knowledge” my learning to explain it, or is it the living the life from within the set of beliefs? I would say the later.

So I suppose that what is bothering me here is the (probably) unintentional presentation of ‘indigenous knowledge’ as something that non-indigenous academics can just “pick up” and mechanically build into their curriculum and that the mechanical addition makes us white academics satisfied that we have incorporated “indigenous knowledge.” That is not enough, of course, any more than it would have been enough for male academics to be satisfied that they had included women’s perspectives had they just grafted a “feminism unit” on to their courses, but otherwise failed to hire women. If there is to be a genuine incorporation of indigenous knowledge into the academy, then the academy is going to have to invest seriously in First Nations’ scholars. In the same way that the academy has been transformed (and the project is not yet complete) by feminism, which could not transform disciplines until there was a critical mass of female academics, so too the organic incorporation of the perspectives and knowledges and life-ways of the various First Nations can only be accomplished by similarly transforming the composition of the professoriate and student body.

Just as conservatives prophesied that feminism would destroy academic integrity and rigor, so too will conservatives rail against “indigenization.” But just as feminism brought new perspectives to bear on traditional subjects, expanding their scope, not destroying them, so too will the knowledge of different indigenous communities expand but not destroy existing

disciplines. But that means having indigenous scholars across disciplines, and not only in Indigenous Studies programs, all of whom can cross traditions in the academy, speaking in their own voice within and against the voice of the disciplines in which they work.

Of course, that too is only a partial step in transforming the colonial history of the country. The bigger issues concern land claims, honouring the treaties, and working out some means of systematically compensating the peoples of the First Nations for the material losses colonialism imposed upon them.

Indigenous Knowledge and Intercultural Dialogue

Originally Posted February 12, 2017

My previous post concerned some qualms I have about the ways in which Canadian universities are advertising positions asking for applicants to demonstrate how they will incorporate “indigenous knowledge” into their courses. As I was finishing that post, I received an email from Bruce Ferguson, an Algonquin philosophy student. He was writing me as part of an independent project he had undertaken to canvas Canadian philosophers about their understanding of and disposition towards indigenous philosophy. The serendipity was spooky. I told him about the post I just happened to have been working on, and he took the time to post a long thoughtful comment. It can be found in its original form in the comments section of that post. Since Bruce’s whole point in writing the philosophical community was to start a dialogue, I tried to respond at length to his substantive points. With Bruce’s permission, I have reproduced his original intervention and my responses (in italics).

White people can’t teach indigenous philosophy! What?

Posted on February 4, 2017 by maqua2017

BACKGROUND

I recently started a research project that concerned itself with the clear lack of strategies and plans in which philosophy departments across Canada interact with Indigenous Traditional Knowledge, contemporary Indigenous Thought and ideas about how to systematically study the system of Indigenous thought and then the stupid question of whether indigenous thought “qualifies” as philosophy.

This “stupid question” is often also asked of eastern philosophy. If you were to make the comparison, I think you would find, with few exceptions, (Brock in St. Catherines and the University of Hawaii do take “comparative” philosophy seriously) that Eastern Philosophy is generally treated as religion or spirituality. Indigenous thought likewise (and also African philosophy). Since the beliefs are often not expressed in propositional form, but as overarching world views, they are often not taken seriously as philosophy, because not articulated as arguments. But of course much of the most important Western philosophy also uses allegory, myth, and metaphor to communicate overarching world views: Plato, most importantly, the long complex histories of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic philosophy, many ecological and eco-feminist philosophies (which often derive inspiration and content from indigenous knowledge); Nietzsche and existentialist thought).

I literally sent emails to every philosopher I could find listed in a philosophy department website of the post-secondary institutions listed by the Canadian Philosophy Association. While receiving encouragement and thoughts, observations and so forth from professors I noticed an emerging set of themes; self-disqualifying statements, lack of time statements, a few guarded

statements of disinterest but mostly (and shockingly) a political sensitivity – privileging the idea that only indigenous people can teach indigenous thought – a trend that I do not agree with and will argue as misplaced and unnecessary.

I think there are two issues with the disavowal of ability. The innocuous one and one that is true, is that most of us have no education in indigenous thought, either as regards its content or its form (the importance and veracity of oral traditions, how to interpret myths, what to make of the integration of what from a scientific perspective are totally distinct realms of material structure—lands and waters—and symbolic-meaningful cultural systems). If there is such a thing as indigenous knowledges- and I think there is- it has a different structure than western philosophy and science which are, in the main, literalist, written, empirical-logical, and falsifiable or refutable. The second, and more problematic, might be—and I emphasise might- a polite way of saying: I know what I know and I do not want to bother learning, or trying to learn, anything fundamentally different.

In addition to misplaced political sensitivity is the problem of workload and priorities. Philosophers engaged in academia are very busy ensuring their responsibilities to the department are met, they are engaged with students at the level of teaching philosophy and forming “next generation philosophers”. Administration, evaluating students, career and academic interests and priorities all work towards philosophers who are too busy to do philosophy because of a demanding education system. We non-academic types “get it”.

EMERGING PARADIGM

Now here’s the emerging paradigm; Non-indigenous teachers cannot teach indigenous knowledge. – a statement I consider to be pure political and academic rhetoric.

I would repeat my two points above. I think that you are right in one sense, but not in the other. In principle non-indigenous scholars can learn and teach indigenous knowledges, I agree, but that would require much learning on our part (and maybe learning such a we are not used to—from elders not from books). It is/would be a big challenge.

So, why would I be against this well meaning and emerging paradigm? Simply because it is misleading, it indirectly validates the other side of the intellectual colonization coin. So let me get into explaining my thoughts on this.

I sense that this kind of political statement is influenced by the indigenous struggle for equality in Canada as well as the development and articulation of indigenous scholars in the sciences and social sciences. The territories of the humanities [philosophy] as a discipline versus the emerging territories of Indigenous studies all coming into conflict with one another and making for a politically sensitive environment that distracts from the role of teaching, learning and developing. I think both disciplines are too focused on themselves and ought to consider interdisciplinary approaches as a balanced way to explore indigenous philosophy not to appropriate the philosophy but to develop some anchor of understanding that is qualified by relational statements such as “to the best of my experiential knowledge, cultural ability and limits within my life” and this is also true for me as an indigenous person. I can only make limited truth claims

that relate to my own experience and shared experiences I have with my group in the human species. Beyond that, the possibilities of meta-analysis of emerging knowledge due to approaches such as ethno-philosophy can then reach beyond socio-cultural and experiential limits I sense (but am not certain of).

I think these points are well-made. In work I did more than a decade ago (Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference) I was interested in exploring the common values beneath the different cultural systems in which people live and interpret their lives. I focused on different groups in struggle (both within and outside the Global North) and abstracted the common themes that emerged. The overwhelming commonality was that all asserted a right to self-determination and focused on some underlying shared conditions of achieving this goal (control over land and resources, economic forces and political institutions). I claimed that these underlying conditions framed a core set of human needs (which I have explored in more detail in later work) and thus a core humanity, expressed different in different times and places. Despite the differences, cross-cultural understanding and political solidarity is possible, because we can each interpret the other from the shared perspective of needs and conditions of self-determination. Nevertheless (and I probably did not emphasise this aspect enough in the early work), cultural differences are real, and globally enriching, to the extent that they do not depend upon the oppression and domination of others. The condition of realizing this value is intercultural dialogue and mutual learning, from a framework of equality (as I think you are also suggesting).

MISPLACED SENSITIVITY

The misplaced sensitivity held by non-indigenous philosophers in this regard (often encouraged by political rhetoric of indigenous academics who are forging out boundaries to protect their discipline(s) which are often an inter-disciplinary approach with all subjects indigenous) is that it puts a strangle hold on gathering and sharing knowledge; it is an indirect silencer of free speech and thinking, it is a dangerous precedent for a nation that values freedom. One professor – in response to my emails – wrote back to me indicating a great interest in promoting and supporting indigenous philosophy in the academy; she discussed this with her indigenous colleagues but was told that her areas of study do not intersect in any way with indigenous philosophy and she could not be of help! How do these indigenous professors/teachers know this, how can they make this as a truth claim? The apparent messaging of these indigenous professors does nothing more than to promote the other side of the intellectual colonization picture. (And I am aware that I am responding to what I heard as a secondary source I have not heard this directly, so this statement is in no way judgemental of those indigenous academics – I treat this as a scenario or thought experiment).

This point raises an important underlying philosophical problem about solidarity: what if the type of solidarity demanded by the historically oppressed group is passive; i.e., letting the oppressed have their space to find and articulate their voice. I have no problem with this approach in the sense that one of the key aspects of oppression is loss of voice, not being able to speak in your own voice, and one of the things that non-indigenous members of the academy need to do is to make sure that our efforts to create space for indigenous scholars do not substitute for their efforts and voices. Well-meaning attempts to broaden perspectives can reasonably be seen

as appropriating voice if they are not combined with serious institutional efforts to change the composition of the professoriate. I think that criticisms of solidarity can go too far, as when some members of oppressed groups argue that it is impossible to understand reality from their perspective and that the only solution is separation of some sort or other (some radical feminists in the 1960's made this argument, the Nations of Islam make similar arguments vis-à-vis relationships between white and black America. I take it from your position you would reject separatism, but I think the more limited demand for passive solidarity: (Let us speak our own voice!!) must be respected by non-Indigenous academics, at least until the composition of the academy has changed more fully).

However, if certain academics believe in what I like to refer to as an academic ghetto of inherent rights to a monopoly on certain discipline then what is the danger here? Nothing less than strangling knowledge! How do we know what intersects with what? The apparent statements from the indigenous scholars imply to me that they have either bought into traditional western divisions of knowledge; perhaps they do not see the validity in promoting a holistic and inter-disciplinary approach that much better reflects an indigenous methodology in gathering knowledge. The approach that is inclusion of all in the creation of ways of understanding what everyone is thinking within our limited ability as humans. Whatever the reason is, I would argue that it is wrong to promote the idea that only indigenous professors can teach indigenous philosophy.

Possibly, but might they not also be saying that prior to a productive inter-cultural dialogue, indigenous thinkers need time and space to think and talk amongst themselves. Is the division permanent, or a precondition that can one day be dropped once conditions of equality (material, institutional, etc.,) have been achieved?

Saying that though, there is no excuse for the academies to avoid hiring indigenous scholars because it is precisely that socio-cultural and experiential knowledge that helps a teacher delve further into the subject of indigenous thought, bringing it home as it were. It is an indigenous professor that can bring the non-native student deeper into an indigenous experience. I don't think the majority of professionally trained philosophers would disagree with that.

I think this argument is dead on. Real equality of voice and inter-cultural learning requires the presence of members of indigenous nations in the academy (just as the transformation of scholarship that feminism has produced and is producing required the presence of women).

UNNECESSARY

The position promoting "indigenous only" professors to teach indigenous philosophy is not just a power grab for resources, it is an inauthentic and unnecessary condition for philosophy departments to be avoiding the taking on "indigenous philosophy. Are indigenous academics prepared to live the consequences of this separatist position? If only indigenous peoples can teach indigenous philosophy, then does it follow that only western people (white) can teach western philosophy? I don't think so; in fact, the other danger that comes in this statement is one of indoctrination and not education.

A very important point. Certainly it would undermine the deep value of including other voices if those voices were then limited to speaking only what the existing authorities are prepared to hear: the indigenous thought in some sort of ‘authentic’ expression, but not interventions on his this thought re-contextualises and forces a re-thinking of the authoritative tradition. It would also rule out—as you note- indigenous scholars teaching whatever they happen to want or have expertise in, and that would be just another form of suffocating confinement and exclusions. The Argentinian-Mexican philosophy Enrique Dussel has some important things to say about what the western philosophical canon looks like when viewed from the perspective of the Global South.

In the 80’s I was asked by my anthropology professor what was it about me that made me “Indian” (the terms we used back in the day). I could not think of anything that “made” me Indian as I thought everyone else thought like me, I was not sensitive to my own reality. When I told the professor that I did not know, he proceeded with a litany of observations he had about me that was particularly native (if one can anthropologically define “nativeness”). Anyways, he said, how I wrote my papers, how I participated in groups, how I treated others, how I respectfully challenge the establishment of the 80s and so forth gave me away as aboriginal. Go figure.

An additional danger to education by the assertion that “only indigenous philosophers can teach indigenous philosophy” is the lack of a third and “objective” party that can look at indigenous knowledge from a non-indigenous perspective. So, as an indigenous person, there are two take away points for us to consider with regards to the separatist position stated above; (1) Am I not qualified to teach western philosophy because I do not come from the cultural and scientific roots of that philosophy and (2) what are the costs to my intellectual development by not experiencing objective and third party, western and eastern philosophical input into class discussions, thinking and so forth. Indigenous people must avoid intellectual ghetto’s where we only hear our side of the story. Indoctrination via university education has gone on far too long in the academic establishment and the issue of indigenous academia brings an opportunity to deconstruct that bias for academic indoctrination for community based involvement in the development of knowledge.

I think that your idea of knowledge networks helps avoid these dangers. Networks interconnect different elements each of which, in becoming part of the network, influences the whole, without losing its unique and particular function. In the case of knowledge networks, since that which is brought into networked connection are reflective individuals, any genuine network would promote learning and change in all the parties. I suppose that if indigenous thought is to remain living it cannot simply about the past and present, but will also grow and develop, in complex and critical interaction with European and North American traditions and disciplines. Those traditions too can learn about their own partiality and blind-spots through real dialogue with indigenous thought, but also, learn something new about the world it sometimes claims to have already mastered. Beyond mutual learning, one can see the possibility of new forms of hybrid thought develop which (perhaps) eventually grow beyond their particularist cultural origins towards a new human comprehensiveness.

RESPECT AND HONOR – NOT POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Philosophy and indigenous philosophy should no longer be the sphere of the lone western white male academic, the rest of us have arrived, we want to be taken seriously and we want our ideas analyzed and critiqued from all angles and that includes western bodies of knowledge, scientific scrutiny and so forth. The critique forces us as indigenous philosopher-thinkers to dig deeper into our arguments, find ways in which we can validate our arguments in the face of western and eastern academia.

I think this point is very well put. It is the utmost disrespect to not engage with it critically and to respectfully question it: for the sake of deeper understanding. We spare children the full force of criticism because if we clip their wings to early they will cease to grow. But dialogue between mature cultures and people has to involve criticism, just because no perspective or theory is fully adequate or comprehensive. The key is to make sure that there is institutional equality (which means that indigenous thought is respected as a complex symbolic mediation of the natural and social world and not some feel good new-agey 'spirituality' that white people can drape themselves in to feel better about themselves.

Finally, non-indigenous professors should adopt the idea that they can teach indigenous philosophy in the sense of explaining what they understand the key concepts to be, they can adapt indigenous metaphysical claims (like they adapt other claims from western academic sources) to make their arguments, they can facilitate and challenge indigenous students to dig deeper and look harder through introducing native students to non-native thought and that includes eastern philosophy as well.

This is an important challenge to us all. I think that if we can learn to teach Greek metaphysics (which was articulated in cultural world very different from our own) we can learn to teach indigenous thought in the way that you suggest. I would add that pushing ourselves (white academics) to expand our courses to include indigenous philosophy cannot be seen as sufficient, but only one part of a broader struggle to make the academy more reflective of the cultural etc., complexity of the country. In philosophy that means learning about Eastern and Islamic philosophy as much as it means learning about indigenous thought. And, to reiterate, it also means allowing indigenous scholars to develop whatever expertise they want to develop as scholars. I think your final two paragraphs sum matters up in an appropriately philosophical way, so I leave them as the final words (but not absolutely final, of course.

I have come to the belief that the nature of the societal trend called “political correctness” has no place in philosophy, it is in the nature of political correctness enforced by political pressure and legal mechanism to silence thought in society and therefore is dangerous. No matter who the source (and many of our people are benefiting by the politics of political correctness) we ought to see the danger of the politically correct theme within the emerging paradigm of “only indigenous people can teach indigenous thought”, which is a very dangerous road to travel.

Finally, non-indigenous professors are quite correct in understanding the limits imposed upon them by not being indigenous with regards to teaching indigenous philosophy; they can't teach it as an indigenous professor can BUT they can offer things the indigenous professor cannot offer,

critique, analysis, challenging our people to think deeper and argue better, these are gifts the non-indigenous teacher can bring to us and I say 'bring it on!' Please let's replace political correctness with academic integrity, old fashion courteousness and above all respect in it's full academic expression.

Silence, Deafening

Originally Posted June 8, 2017

In a stunning example of blindness to ironic truth, the [White House](#) responded to the ISIS attack in Tehran by claiming that the Iranians had it coming:

We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times. We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote.

The White House statement was an outlier in terms of the degree of its hypocrisy and ignorance of the truth it actually asserts. More common were tepid, pro forma statements about how deplorable the attacks were. Mostly, the ISIS attack in the Iranian capital was ignored in the West. The indifference of the “leaders of the free world” to the loss of Muslim lives resounded in the silence. Perhaps the denizens of Tehran should start an “Iranian Lives Matter” movement.

If it is any consolation to the Iranians, at least the silence was honest. We have to be careful to never conflate the predicable Old Testament weeping and gnashing of teeth after each terrorist outrage with genuine concern for human life. If Western leaders were concerned for human life, they would undertake the difficult, but necessary, task of admitting that their “war on terror” is not only a failure, but the cause of the ever more desperate and random assaults on Western cities. (To his credit, [Jeremy Corbyn](#) has vowed to end British participation should he win the July 6th election, but has spent most of his time criticizing Theresa May for cutting the size of the police force).

Despite the fact that all evidence points to American and allied intervention in the Middle East and North Africa as the cause of terrorism, the Western response is the same: more macho posturing, more threats to kill even more people in the Middle East and North Africa, more demands to weaken civil rights and for greater repressive and totalitarian powers— i.e., attacks on the very “freedoms” the terrorists are supposed to hate.

What is this evidence? It does not derive from Marxist critics of imperialism, but the testimony of the organizers and the perpetrators of attacks themselves and the insights of former Western intelligence services. Read [the letter](#) that 9/11 organizer Khalid Sheikh Mohammed wrote to Obama. It articulates quite precisely their motives, which have nothing to do with hating “our freedoms” and everything to do with resisting our interventions in their countries. Or read the astute analysis of 9/11 by former CIA officer Chalmers Johnson, who attributed it to [“blowback”](#) from those same interventions. (Some perpetrators of the [Manchester attack](#) had links to both anti-Gadaffi militant groups and British intelligence services—Britain’s own version of blowback),

Unless we conclude that Johnson is a terrorist sympathizer or enabler, the fact that he arrives at the same explanation that Mohammed would give more than a decade later should be sufficient to prove that the letter is not mere propaganda. If you want to know why someone does something, the best place to start is to ask. Of course, one has to think critically, and not just take explanations at face value. In this case, the subjective explanation matches well the objective facts on the ground: The Middle East has been the plaything of major powers since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire; its people treated as pawns, as collateral damage, as savages, as victims, as objects of occupation, fear, and pity.

So when the White House points the finger at Iran as the cause of its troubles with ISIS, one wants to laugh at the chutzpah of the claim. How many foreign bases does Iran have? How many carrier strike groups off the coast of America? Has it killed millions of people in the West? It does support Hezbollah: an indigenous Shi'ite resistance that help to end the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. (If Canada somehow occupied fifty miles of American land, would they not fight to expel the invaders?) And Iran does support Assad. But don't Western leaders sing the choral hymn of "unqualified support" for allies all the time?

Pieties aside, the current ruling group in the Western world knows that the War on Terror is good for business- 110 billion dollars good if you are America, which just signed an arms deal with the most reactionary government in the region- and perhaps on the planet- Saudi Arabia. Or 32.7 billion dollars good (the projected Canadian military budget in 2027- a 70 per cent increase over 2017- in the new Liberal plan for Canada's military) Both are chump change compared to the plans of Blackwater founder [Eric Prince](#). He has proposed to occupy Afghanistan with a private army that pays for and enriches itself by seizing and selling the natural wealth of the occupied nation.

So the when the next terrorist attack happens and we hear the platitudes about barbarous them and freedom loving us remember how the leaders some of us elect really treat the people of the Middle East. They define who is and who is not a member of their historical communities (people who support America are Afghans, the Taliban are not) and as expendable in the hundreds of thousands for Western geo-strategic and economic interests. When life-value is indexed in this way to support for one's oppressor, it is not life that is being valued, but servitude: Middle Eastern life is good to the extent that it serves Western interests. Otherwise, it may be liquidated with impunity.

In moral reality, life is valuable because it is the fundamental condition of experience, activity, and relationship. It is not as an "Iranian" or a "Londoner" that one is the potential subject of experience, activity, and relationship, but as a socially self-conscious human being connected to the world of nature and others through their senses, their bodies, their thoughts. To value life is first of all to value this embodied potential for experience, activity, and relationship. Great political crimes follow our shared humanity's parcelization into political identities judged good or bad, valuable or expendable, relative to one's willingness to serve the ruling powers.

III: Readings

Readings: Carlo Fanelli: Megacity Malaise: Neoliberalism, Public Services, and Labour in Toronto

Originally Posted June 5, 2016

Carlo Fanelli, *Megacity Malaise: Neoliberalism, Public Services, and Labour in Toronto*, Fernwood Books, 2016.

Although the basic driver of capitalist society is easy enough to understand, its system-need to turn money-capital into more money-capital manifests itself as a series of intersecting contradictions: political, economic, social, and cultural. These contradictions affect different regions of the globe and different groups of people differently. In Guangzhou, China, the destruction of the industrial working class of Southern Ontario and the US mid-West is experienced as the birth of an industrial working class, with all the pain and promise that process entailed in the West one hundred and fifty years ago. In the world's ever larger megacities, the loss of manufacturing has been off-set by the explosion of finance and cultural industries as the main drivers of capital accumulation. Cities too small to act as a magnet for finance capital and cultural industry monster-spectacle are left desperate and dependent.

The contradictions of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalist urbanization provide the socio-economic frame for Carlo Fanelli's political analysis of labour struggles against austerity in Toronto. While a mid-sized city by global standards, Toronto is by far the dominant city of Canada, with a metropolitan population bigger than Montreal and Vancouver combined. As the mass culture and financial centre of Canada, Toronto is a global city which sees itself (and not incorrectly) as a key competitor with New York and London. In the contemporary world, international capitalist competition increasingly plays out as competition between major cities. Finance capitalists and the captains of the culture industries are the winners, peripheral cities and workers across sectors are the losers. Yet, as Fanelli shows, despite being obviously the victims, workers, and especially unionized workers, are blamed as the cause of their own demise.

Fanelli is uniquely positioned to both explain the socio-economic context of labour struggles against austerity and critique the limitations of their existing forms. As a working class child and adolescent growing up in Rexdale he learned first hand the range and the importance of the public services the city offered. After having benefited from those services growing up, he later helped to provide them, working for many years for the City of Toronto in different capacities. During his career he was also an activist member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79—the largest union of municipal workers in the country. He is also a political economist with a gift— due to his not having forgotten his working class background—

for bringing complex economic problems down to their real world implications for working people. Although the book focuses on Toronto, the lessons he draws are of general significance to Canadian public sector workers.

The book is admirably concise, managing in 100 pages to provide a brief constitutional history of the status of cities in Canada, the global socio-economic causes of neo-liberalism and the austerity agenda, the local contours of those causes as they have shaped the political agenda of Ontario and Toronto over the past twenty years, an ethnography of two pivotal CUPE strikes in Toronto, a critique of the political limitations of the CUPE Toronto leadership, an affirmation of the public sector as a counter-weight to capitalist market forces, and general ideas about how that counter-weight can be used as a platform for the development of renewed union radicalism and anti-capitalist mobilisation. Despite the number of foci, the book reads as a unified whole. Theoretical claims are empirically substantiated. There is no extraneous detail, but the reader wanting more fine-grained content is always pointed to the primary sources. The book needs to be part of any conversation around the political re-birth of the union movement and the re-invention of the Canadian left. In that regard it could usefully be read alongside of Alan Sear's *The Next New Left*.

Fanelli begins with a cogent explanation of the causes of the austerity agenda in Toronto. These causes are both general and specific. The general cause is the global reign of neo-liberal orthodoxy, according to which unions and the public sector have undermined the competitive dynamism of capitalism and slowed economic growth. Hence the goal of neo-liberal policy has been to weaken unions and privatize public services. The tactic is the same everywhere: first tax cuts create a revenue crisis, which leads to service cuts, which are blamed on workers high salaries and secure pensions, which are used to demonize workers, eroding public support for job security and living wages at the same time as it increases popular support for state-led attacks on public sector workers. "This is a recurring feature of neo-liberal administration in which tax cuts are first used to degrade the quality and breadth of the service provided, which governments then invoke as justification for "tightening spending." When this fails ... this manipulative strategy is then used to justify privatization." (p. 41) Fanelli explains the logic of manufactured crisis clearly, substantiates his analysis with concrete examples from Toronto, and avoids repeating at length the historical development of neo-liberalism already well-analysed in works like Harvey's *Neo-Liberalism: A Brief History*.

The specific cause of the austerity agenda is the constitutional status of cities in Canada. Fanelli weaves his way through the relevant constitutional arcana to explain the core problem: According to the British North America Act (1867) and the Constitution Act (1982), cities are the creatures of the provinces with very little room for independent fiscal maneuvering. Overwhelmingly, cities rely on property taxes to raise the revenue they need to pay for public services. Property taxes, are, however, regressive: if home value rise property taxes will rise, but there is no guarantee that wages will rise in lockstep with property taxes. In booming real estate markets working people, whose wages have been suppressed over the last three decades, can find themselves with a growing tax bill— and moved by the resentment higher taxes and more or less fixed incomes to set out looking for scapegoats.(p.33) Right-wing politicians are happy to point them in the direction of public sector workers grazing by the side of the road.

These general and specific causes have combined with a series of disastrous (for cities) provincial decisions, beginning with that of the hard-right government of Mike Harris (1995-2003) to download significant new costs to cities (public housing, social assistance ...), without any corresponding increase in their ability to borrow or otherwise raise revenue in new ways. Although a right-wing ideologue of the most objectionable sort, Harris was simply mimicking what his supposedly progressive federal Liberal counterpart, Jean Chretien, through the agency of then-finance Minister Paul Martin, was doing to “solve” the deficit crisis: download costs to the provinces. Martin set in motion a vortex of downloading at the bottom of which is the political unit least able to fiscally cope— cities. Since most of the services that people depend upon for the day to day quality of their lives are delivered and paid for at the municipal level, the overburdening of city budgets by these newly imposed costs was felt in a very real way, especially by the poorest and most vulnerable: fewer services, higher user fees, and more encouragement from politicians for them to take their anger out on the workers who deliver the services.

Toronto city governments from the reign of clown the first Mel “Bad Boy” Lastman to clown the second Rob “Real Bad Boy” Ford have claimed that Toronto faces a spending crisis. But professional audits have revealed that the city is and has been very well-managed from a spending perspective.(p.26) The real problem, as Fanelli demonstrates, is “a revenue crisis rooted in the constitutional constraints of municipal government and public policies of the neo-liberal era.”(p.3) However, failure to recognize the truth of the political economic situation has led the public to support, to various degrees of intensity in different periods, the overall program of “competitive austerity” successive governments have recommended. Fanelli refers to Greg Albo to explain competitive austerity as a set of policies which makes “labour markets more flexible, enhances managerial prerogatives, reduces government services that act as a drain on competition, shedding public assets and weakening labour laws and employment standards, aiming to turn the state into a series of internally competitive markets.” (p. 28) The program of competitive austerity can only be realized through the defeat of organized labour, since the entire point of organized labour is to shield workers from the life-destructive effects that unregulated market forces generate by pushing down real wages. If competitive pressure increases, then the power of unions must proportionally decrease. Hence we would expect a period of competitive austerity to be a period of class struggle in the form of public sector unions trying to preserve past gains against cost cutting municipal governments. That is exactly what we find in Toronto. Its CUPE locals (79 and 416) have been involved in work stoppages in 2000, 2002, 2009, and 2012. The results, as Fanelli explains, have not been catastrophic for CUPE, but they have been defeats.

The most important contribution the book makes is its political analysis of these strikes and the lessons for the future development of the union movement. Fanelli is fair (and not out of loyalty to his CUPE brothers and sisters). The bargaining situation for all unions in the context of competitive austerity is extremely difficult. Anyone who thinks sloganeering or sideline invocations of the need for militancy can overcome these objective barriers to success simply has not been involved in union politics for the past thirty years. There are reasons why concessions have been made: the increased mobility of capital has put workers in competition with each other, internationally, nationally, provincially, and between cities. While public services are not subject to relocation in the same way a car factory is, private sector dynamics, as Albo noted,

have been replicated in the public sector, weakening unions' bargaining strength. At the same time, legislative changes (making the use of scabs easier, declaring more and more workers "essential" in order to strip them of their right to strike) have coalesced with competitive pressures to objectively weaken the labour movement. The objective forces have subjective implications: workers feel beaten down, targeted, worried about job security, and thus defensive. Mobilizing militant action in this context is extremely difficult.

Difficult as it is, it is also necessary (if the competitive austerity agenda and, beyond that, capitalism itself are to be eventually overcome). Fanelli acknowledges the challenges, but he also (hopefully, not naively) teases out the possibilities for union renewal in the unique role public sector work plays in a capitalist economy. As Fanelli notes right at the outset, public sector work satisfies real human needs, and in so doing, improves the lives of those who access those services. These needs run the gamut from basic physical needs like health care when sick to socio-cultural needs like engaging in organized play and education. Thus, the first step in recreating a fighting, progressive, and democratic trade union movement is for public sector workers to connect the life-value of the services to the workers who provide those services: "The public provision of goods and services, well-managed in a way that fosters sustainable development and social justice initiatives, and which is accountable to the community, significantly improves standards of living ... It is necessary to ensure that the public at large understands this through community engagement initiatives led by unions." (p. 86). "Sustainable development," "social justice" and "accountability" all need to be more clearly defined, but the general point that Fanelli makes is sound: the public sector constitutes a counter-logic to the money to more money sequence of value that determines the capitalist economy. Its *principle* is: satisfy human needs regardless of ability to pay because good human lives demand need-satisfaction.

Of course, this principle exists in tension with the driving force of money-capital accumulation in capitalism. Fanelli acknowledges this fact: "Public services address real needs and result from previous rounds of class struggle, but they also address the need of the capitalist state to reproduce class society."(p. 83). Moreover, public sector workers can often also stand in relations of power over and against the communities they serve, often in racialized and sexist formations (welfare case workers vis-a-vis their clients, for example). Overcoming the later contradiction requires building alliances and coalitions with communities, while the former requires defending, extending, and democratising public services; a reverse process of publicization against the privatizing agenda that has dominated over the past thirty years. That campaign requires militancy, and militancy requires education and member mobilization. "Considering the concerted attacks against labour, should unions wish to regain their once prominent role in the pursuit of social justice and workplace democracy, they will need to take the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back ... This requires a radicalized perspective that seeks to develop both alternative policies and an alternative politics rooted in class-oriented unionism."(p. 61) It should be added: it will also take a new layer of younger leadership educated in the history of militant trade unionism while attentive to contemporary realities and open to and capable of inventing creative responses appropriate to the twenty-first century. One worries (or I do anyway) that the culture of expressive virtual individualism works against the emergence of such a leadership layer.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish and ahistorical to simply abandon the union movement as a potentially transformative movement while it still organizes millions of workers (and especially the public sector union movement, where union density is far higher than in the private sector and where the services the workers provide must be fixed in local space). As long as there is a union movement, it needs spurs to reinvention such as Fanelli has written. Still, arguments like Fanelli's are always subject to the objection that despite their forward-looking rhetoric they are rear-guard actions whose conditions of historical possibility have passed. The only sound response to the objection is practical success, for which the author cannot be held responsible, since success will require contributions from thousands of people acting politically over open-ended time-frames.

At the level of argument, Fanelli's set of reform principles: coalition building, community engagement, internal democratization, and member education steered by the goal of preserving public services and extending the logic of public provision are sound and what one would expect. There is one blind spot that is worth mentioning. In Fanelli's version of cities, what makes them great is the range and depth of public services available to citizens. I agree without reservation, but would venture to add that the cultural and intellectual dynamism of great cities needs to be included. Fanelli is largely silent on the cultural wealth of Toronto: its bands, performances, public talks; its eccentrics, artists, and folk heroes, its neighbourhoods, galleries, universities, clubs, restaurants, and book stores; its magnificent cultural, intellectual, and sexual diversity. Unlike David Harvey (whom he cites) Fanelli's version of the "right to the city" is largely confined to affordable housing, transit and other (vital, vitally important, no doubt) basic human needs.(p.78).

But human beings are creatures of mind and imagination too. The right to the city must also include the right to access the extraordinary cultural (and intercultural) dynamism of the world's great cities. Often times the barriers here are not financial, but cultural: the snobbery and closed-mindedness of cultural elites who often (although not always) function as gate-keepers to these institutions and events. Working people are often made to feel as though they lack the "symbolic capital" to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu, to take advantage of cutting-edge art and thought that cities incubate and nurture. And that is wrong, for art and thought are not the preserve of financial and cultural elites but should be open to everyone. The left needs to extend its historical commitment to egalitarianism beyond access to the requisites of life to the requisites of a liberated mind and imagination.

The modern city is certainly a creature of capital, but it is also a creature of human labour and human imagination. Great cities have long been attractors of genius and eccentricity and spaces where difference can be protected from bigotry by force of concentrated numbers of the like-minded and tolerant and experimental. Cities are contradictory spaces just because they concentrate in a relatively small geographical space the most inventive and forward-looking human beings with the most brutal indignities that capital can inflict. The struggle for the city must be a struggle to overcome the structural causes of those dignities, but also a struggle to open the horizons of working people to the creative and intellectual wealth that already exists. Beyond opening up access to what already exists, a re-vivified struggle for the right to the city must also be a struggle to widen and deepen that wealth by enabling people to live as

subjects of their own activity and not objects of money-capital. Fanelli has written a short but important intervention into the debate over the shapes that that struggle should to take.

Readings: Enrique Dussel: Towards an Unknown Marx

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Enrique Dussel's *Toward and Unknown Marx (2001)* is a pathbreaking interpretation of the ethical foundations of Marxism. In it he brings together the principles of his liberation theology with a careful and original reading of Marx's Manuscripts of 1861-63. The Argentinian philosopher (who has lived and worked in Mexico since the 1970's after being hounded from Argentina by right-wing death squads) is a philosopher of enormous scope and erudition but who is less well known than he should be amongst social and political philosophers in the Global North. He traverses the history of Western philosophy with rare depth, but situates its key ethical insights as developments of older traditions of thought that emerge first in Egypt. (See his *The Ethics of Liberation in an the of Globalization and Exclusion*). The unifying principle of this ancient tradition (which reappears in the Old and New testaments and is implicit in the older life-ways and practices of indigenous communities) is the absolute value of human life— a value regularly denied by hierarchical and exploitative forms of social organization from the Pharaonic Egypt to our own day.

The book in question here is a commentary on Marx's relatively little known (outside circles of Marx scholarship) manuscripts of 1861-1863. These were written after *The Grundrisse* (where Marx began to work out the arguments that became *Capital*) and are, in Dussel's apt interpretation, a laboratory in which Marx further develops and tests his concepts against the theories of leading bourgeois political economists. They are the source of a set of books often published under the title *Theories of Surplus Value*, as well as the material from which Engels assembled *Capital Volume Three*. They are also a wealth of methodological and philosophical comments, and it is here that their main interest lies for Dussel, the philosopher of liberation.

Dussel defends the thesis that these manuscripts help to prove that the fundamental category of Marx's critique of political economy is the 'exteriority' of living labour. He means that for Marx living labour, the real human beings who make up the economy, are not ever just personifications or functions of its motive forces. Capitalism subsumes these living, hoping, loving, and struggling people and tries to reduce them to nothing more than exploited objects, but it can never fully succeed. The foundation of Marx's critique of capitalism is these living beings— their needs, their deprivations, their talents, their goals, their struggles. He contends that understanding the meaning of the exteriority of workers

with respect to the 'totality' of capital is the *conditio sine qua non* for the total comprehension of Marx's discourse. From this moment on, I shall refer on many occasions to the 'living labour'; it will become the obligatory realm of all his argument and the radical place, beyond the 'bourgeois perspective'. Not to understand the absolute position (the only real absolute in the totality of Marx's thought and the ethical rule of all of his ethical judgments) living labour, of the actuality of the labourer's corporeality, or in other words, the person or subjectivity of the labourer, will lead bourgeois economics (and its philosophies as 'philosophies of domination') to fall into

necessary hermeneutical mistakes. The truth of Marx's analysis rests on and departs from the 'real reality (wirkliche Wirklichkeit)' of the Other different from capital; the living labour as actuality, as creator of value or source of all human wealth in general, not only capitalist."(p.8).

This is a bold thesis. I think that it is correct (and textually well-substantiated by Dussel). At the same time, it leads him to insist upon a unified meaning of Marx's work that perhaps covers over some methodological tensions that must be understood if certain problems in the subsequent development of Marxism are to be fully explained.

Before discussing the tensions let us first pause to appreciate the deep philosophical insight into Marx's work that Dussel achieved. His fundamental claim had been touched upon in different ways in all the humanist readings of Marx that emerged in the wake of the discovery of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, and especially that of Marcuse's early understanding of those manuscripts' significance. In fact, he notes the contribution of Marcuse. (p.xxxii) *Towards an Unknown Marx* is unique in that he articulates the argument that human life and its fundamental needs constitute the ethical core of Marxism with his previous work in liberation theology. He thus broadens the perspective of liberation beyond the interests of the working class to connect with the interests of the exploited peasants and indigenous peoples of the world. He thus achieves a wider universality than is typical in Marxist literature because, from his perspective, peasants and indigenous people are not extras added on to an essentially working class movement, but form one body with workers of exploited and need-deprived humanity— victims of capitalism who all have the same interest in transforming it.

If the world still needs proof that Marx never abandoned his early ethical arguments and the key idea of alienation, Dussel provides it. Consider this quotation that Dussel mines from the manuscripts: "The objective conditions of living labour appear as separate values, become independent as against living labour capacity as subjective being (Dasein) [...] What is reproduced and newly produced is not only the being (Dasein) of these objective conditions of living labour but their being as alien (Fremdes Dasein) to the worker, as independent values, i.e. values belonging to an alien subject, confronting this living labour capacity."(p.177) Althusser's "epistemological break" does not exist: Marx's work is an ethical critique of capitalism from beginning to end.

Exteriority is the through-line that establishes the continuity beneath such fundamental concepts as alienation and exploitation. "Marx performs the critique of all possible political-economic science starting from 'living labour' (as the most simple category; as the most abstract and real principle), and the critique of capital itself as effective reality (the 'development of its concept' from Marx's point of view, not only by the mediation of other texts, but starting from his own research, also from 'living labour'). Critique of the established, prevailing political economy, is destructive. Development and construction of his own discourse ... is affirmative. In both moments, 'living labour' is the generating starting point."(191) In sum, Marx, in Dussel's view, always begins from and returns to the ways in which capitalism damages the life-interests of real human beings. Socialism is not about releasing the growth of the forces of production from the "fetters" of capitalist relations of production, it is about liberating people from the violence and poverty of life under capitalism.

For Dussel, this point is not only central to Marx's politics, it is central to his materialism, which he calls "productive" rather than cosmological. Marx's materialism is not an abstract metaphysics based on the principle that only that which is physically measurable and quantifiable is real. "The person-nature relation is neither the first, concretely speaking, nor is it, according to Marx, the most important one. The person, always the person, is the critical starting point, as the condition of all objectified labour, of all materialized institution, of anything which is an effect of this labour (as capital itself and in totality)." (193) On the contrary, it begins from the primacy of social relations between human beings and not the abstract relationship between human beings and nature. "The essence of capital has a practical, moral (non-ethical) standing. The 'person-nature' relation is productive; the 'person-person' relationship is practical, moral (as the prevailing system) or ethical (as the other who 'interpellates' (appeals) from exteriority). For Marx there is no doubt, against naive materialism, the ethical relationship determines and concretely constitutes the productive relation." (202) While Dussel is right to argue that for Marx the ethical foundation of socialism lies in the value of the social bonds upon which the development of human life-capacities depends, there is more ambiguity here than Dussel allows for.

That ambiguity is best studied in *The German Ideology*, in which Marx maintains both a) that all life presupposes on-going connection with external nature, and b) that external nature ceases to exist at a certain point in the development of human productive power and intelligence. He chastises Feuerbach for arguing as if nature were something in itself apart from human labour. He would be right, if "nature" meant only those manifest forms of energy and matter that we can transform to suit our purposes. The landscape, flora and fauna, even now the genetic codes of some organisms are not purely "natural" i.e., not free of alternations born of human intentions and actions. But the forces of nature themselves- the strong and weak nuclear force, electromagnetism, the naturally occurring elements, the entire universe beyond the solar system (with the exception of the trajectory of Voyager and the electromagnetic radiation emanating from earth) are completely untouched by human labour and surely part of nature.

This point is not philosophical pedantry: a proper estimation of human power, dignity, and creativity must begin with a proper understanding of our original and enduring *dependence* on the natural world. Dussel does not deny our dependence, but I think he underestimates its ontological and ethical significance. Its ethical significance is central to the values of the indigenous peoples of the world from which he in other places learn so much. The value of nature is not only instrumental; respect for the earth as home and life-host sets the tone for all other relationships. If we think the earth is nothing but matter for us to use, we will extend that principle to our treatment of people. The history of colonialism suggests that there is much truth to this argument.

Dussel's interpretation of Marx could also be criticized on the grounds that it overestimates the unity of Marx's theoretical position. As we have seen, Dussel sees the exteriority of living labour as the throughline that unifies the whole of Marx's work into an ethical critique of capitalism. "Marx can measure ethically, or from human labour, the totality of categories and the capitalist economic reality, and, therefore, can make an ethical critique of it (if by 'ethical' is understood, correctly, the critique of the dominant and established structure of capitalism)." (p.

109) Others, starting with Gramsci and continuing into the present with the work of [Michael Lebowitz](#), accept that Marx is an ethical critic of capitalism, but argue that this criticism fades out in *Capital*. *Capital* is called “a critique of political economy,” but that which makes Marx a critic does not appear here (or only rarely): living working people struggling within capitalism to make their lives as good as can be. Instead we have endogenous laws of production working themselves out using people- who appear only as personifications of capital, as Marx himself says- as playthings.

Let us take the example of wages, a key touchstone of Lebowitz’s argument. In *Beyond Capital*, Lebowitz argues that what is missing from *Capital*’s understanding of wage rates is the organized fightback of workers to raise real wages. These struggles have been central to the determination of wages in capitalism, but Marx says nothing about them. That he is silent here gives the impression that Marx thinks that wages are simply functions of the dynamics of capital and cannot be affected by organized struggle. Of course, that is not the whole story, but it is *the whole story in Capital*. Hence the need for, in Lebowitz’s view, the unwritten “Political Economy of the Working Class.” Dussel looks at the same issue and sees the outlines for a work on wages (the political economy of the working class) but fails to appreciate, as Lebowitz does, the implications of its not having been written. “Hence, wages are the price of the value of labour capacity, strictly speaking, and consequently and improperly , the ‘price of labour’ (in truth, living labour cannot have a price, because it has no value). If we add to the foregoing other related moments (surplus value, variable capital, surplus labour and necessary time) (pp. 78ff.), we already have the fundamentals for a Marxist theory of wages, which here – as in *Capital* – was never developed as a separate part, but was studied (as rent, credit, etc.) as was required to clarify the ‘concept of capital’ in general, in abstract, in its essence.” (p.172) My point is that Dussel is not wrong to argue that Marx’s work is a unified totality of ethical critique, but perhaps fails to appreciate the methodological tension that exists between this critique and the abstract analyses of *Capital*. Those abstractions needed to be made in order to understand how capitalism functions, but their purpose is understanding, not critique, and they have been used to construct what Lebowitz criticizes as a technocratic and productivist understanding of socialism in which the key values of human need-satisfaction and self-emancipation play no role. Dussel’s aim is to rescue Marx’s criticisms from these inhuman conceptions of socialism, but his purposes would perhaps be better served if he noted the tensions that Lebowitz notes rather than subsume it in a grander unity.

Nothing in these criticism takes away from the ethical grandeur of the work (and the larger project of building an ethics of liberation within which it should be studied and evaluated). Living labour’, or more generally, living human beings, and their absolute claim to continue to live and live well that their existence as self-conscious subjects exerts is the universal, transhistorical foundation of all ethical principles. *Towards an Unknown Marx* thus re-situates Marx not as the last word of emancipatory theory, but as a moment of a longer and broader struggle. “Latin American Philosophy of Liberation has a lot to learn from Marx. Marx’s ‘science’ was the ‘Liberation Philosophy’ of living labour alienated in capital as wage labour in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. Today, the ‘Philosophy of Liberation’ must also be articulated with the science of the alienated living labour of classes, peripheral, under-developed peoples, of the so-called Third World struggling in national and popular processes of transformation against central and peripheral globalized capitalism,

at the beginning of the twenty-first century.”(204) The main fault line of that struggle today, Dussel makes clear here, is the Global South, where the majority of the most deeply violated human beings live. Here, he argues, Marxist class analysis must be combined with national liberation struggle against the structural dependency of countries in the Global South on the imperialist countries of the Global North.

His commentary ends with ideas to develop Marx's categories into a new theory of dependency that comprehends super-exploitation of the labour in the Global South contemporary global market conditions and the political fault lines of domination. “That is, dependency exists at an abstract, essential, or fundamental level, and it is the international social relation between bourgeoisies possessing total national capitals of different degrees of development. In the framework of competition, the less developed total national capital finds itself socially dominated (a relation between persons), and, in the final analysis, transfers surplus value (an essential formal moment) to the more developed capital, which realizes it as extraordinary profit.”(225) Capitalism is thus, in its very essence, according to Dussel, a system of domination which is incompatible with the fundamental conditions of universal life-support and development.

Dussel's work is rich and complex, technical and difficult to understand at first. It can profitably be read in connection with and contrast to John McMurtry's life-value onto-axiology, and my more modest efforts to read Marx through the frame of life-value. No understanding of political philosophy, and, more importantly, no comprehensive criticism of capitalism, is possible without addressing the core themes of Dussel's work.

Readings: Beyond Capital

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Michael Lebowitz's 1992 classic *Beyond Capital: Marx's Political Economy of the Working Class* established him as the most philosophically astute Marxist economist of his era. Lebowitz argues that there is a tension at the heart of Marx's work between the humanist values that ground his emancipatory vision of socialism and the mechanical scientism of *Capital*. Lebowitz does not argue that the analysis of the dynamics of capitalist society in *Capital* should be rejected but rather that it must be read as one element within the totality of Marx's work. What is absent from *Capital*, according to Lebowitz, is just what is central to Marx's work as a whole: the understanding of working people as subjects, as active creators of their own history, as agents of their own emancipation. In *Capital*, by contrast, it is the "laws of motion" of the capitalist economy that are the subjects, while people are treated as "but the personifications of the economic relations that exist between them." ([Capital](#), Volume 1, p.60). Consequently, both the politics and economics of *Capital* are one-sided.

Let us start with the economic problems. In Marx's presentation in *Capital*, the valorization process takes place as if workers were inert functions of the system of production. Wages and the rate of profit are determined as if working people and their struggles did not matter. Technically, the problem, according to Lebowitz, is that Marx assumed for the sake of his analysis that the amount of goods necessary to ensure the reproduction of labour-power was fixed. If it was fixed, then the money-value of labour could be assumed to be constant (the money-value of labour is determined by the amount of labour time it takes to earn the money equal to that bundle of necessities). "Marx's discussion in *Capital* take the constancy of that set of necessary means of subsistence as *given*. It is on that basis that we proceed to explore the production of surplus value." (p.16) This seemingly innocuous methodological assumption on Marx's part has profound political implications.

Marx's assumes for the sake of his understanding of the production of surplus value that the cost of labour is fixed. What this means is that the extent of workers' basic needs is assumed to be fixed. But this means that what we are dealing with are not real people and real societies in comparison with each other, but with an abstract methodological construction of a static theory-construct. In real life, and in real economies, according to Lebowitz, that which is physically necessary is subsumed beneath what is socially necessary. In the twenty-first century it is socially necessary to have access to computers, in the nineteenth it was not. Since people are not inert functions of system-dynamics but socially self-conscious agents who see and feel what is happening to the world around them, they organize and fight for higher wages so that they can access that which socially necessary to life in the society in which they live. Consequently, an adequate economic model must understand dynamic wages rates, and in order to understand dynamic wage rates, working class struggle must be taken into account.

Marx does not take workers' struggles for higher real wages into account in *Capital*. "In short, the existence of unfulfilled social needs underlies the worker's need for more money, her need for a higher wage. But, that, of course, involves a struggle for higher wages There is,

however, no discussion in *Capital* about the struggle for higher wages.”(p.30). Thus, what is missing from *Capital* is the political economy of the working class. The political economy of the working class would centre on the struggle over real wages as the social foundation of the quality of life that workers are actually able to live. *Capital* focuses exclusively on the political economy of capital: on the production of surplus value through the exploitation of labour. What it is missing is the economic impact of workers’ struggles against exploitation. Viewed from the side of workers as human beings, these struggles constitute a production process as well: not the production of money-capital, but the self-production of human beings as subjects: “what happens during free time is a process of production, a process in which the nature and the capability of the worker is altered. It is ‘time for the full production of the individual.’” (p.51). Marx does examine workers’ struggles for a shorter working day in *Capital*, but not the other side of that struggle: the struggle for higher real wages which is the essential condition, under capitalism, of people being able to realize themselves in the time they have outside of work. In sum, “there is a critical silence” in *Capital* Lebowitz argues, “which permits the appearance that, for the scientist, the only subject ... is capital, growing, transcending all barriers, developing—until, finally, it runs out of steam and is replaced by scientists with a more efficient machine.”(p.11). The problems with the economic analysis produce serious political problems, unless the arguments of *Capital* are situated within the whole of Marx’s work.

Like Gramsci before him, Lebowitz worries that *Capital* taken on its own implies a mechanical and necessary transition to socialism as a consequence of the inevitable breakdown of capitalism. [Gramsci](#) saw the Russian Revolution as a revolution against the “naturalism and positivism” of *Capital*, as an assertion of the creative power of human collective action against abstract conceptions of the “iron laws” of capitalist society. Lebowitz similarly worries that by ignoring struggles within capitalism for more free time and higher real wages, orthodox Marxists ignore those zones where workers are organized and actually fight.

Although he does not make this point explicit, I think it also follows from Lebowitz’ argument (and if I am right I think it is the most enduring philosophical-political contribution that it makes) that we need to conceive of the struggle for socialism not as an all or nothing battle leading to a revolutionary cataclysm, but as an open-ended process arranged along a continuum of better or worse lives for workers. These struggles occur in multiple spheres and are led by many different organizations as workers struggle to satisfy their multidimensional needs. Workers are human beings and human beings have needs. These needs and people’s ability to satisfy them are modified by people’s concrete identity. Lebowitz thus arrives at an expansive conception of class struggle as the multi-dimensional struggle of alienated, exploited, and oppressed human beings against capital as the systematic impediment separating them from the resources and institutions that they need. A struggle for schools is just as much a class struggle as a strike; a struggle against racial profiling or police violence is just as much a class struggle as the demand for higher wages, because workers are not generic tokens of a type but students and black and women and gay.

Lebowitz thus rejects any antithesis between what were called at the time “new social movements” (broadly, the struggles of the oppressed organized by identity and not class) and socialism: “A strategy calling for ‘external alliances’ between workers and new social actors takes as its starting point the theoretical reduction of workers to one-dimensional products of

capital. Rather than an inherent opposition between ‘new social movements’ and the struggle of workers as a class against capital, the former should be seen as expressing *other* needs of workers, and as the development of *new* organizing centres of of the working class, functioning ‘in the broad sense’ of its *complete emancipation.*’ (p.147). In other words, a properly organized left would coherently include the struggles of all oppressed people, not as optional add-ons, but as an internally unified expression of the complex ways in which capitalism impedes the satisfaction of the totality of human needs as they are actually experienced by real (i.e., differently identified) people.

If anyone needs proof of the failure of the North American left to reinvent itself in a practically effective way it is that the oppressed continue to organize (and effectively, for example, most recently, in the Black Lives Matter movement) outside of and apart from a still moribund labour movement and socialist left. Twenty five years on from Lebowitz, essentially the same arguments are being made on the left for internally unified struggles against multidimensional exploitation-alienation-oppression, still without effect. The problem, I believe, is not the theoretical incoherence of the proposal, but the legacy of defeat: the left simply has no credibility at this point to give people the confidence that they can put into practice that which they claim is theoretically possible.

Nevertheless, if we adopt Lebowitz’s (that is, Marx’s wholistic) conception of workers as human beings, and understand human beings (as I have argued elsewhere) as embodied, socially self-conscious agents, and embodied social self-conscious agents as requiring definite natural and social resources and relationships if they are to live and express themselves freely, and understand that people will always struggle *in different ways* to satisfy their needs, then short term failures of the left to produce a complete structural transformation of society are not fatal to the project.

Instead, the measuring stick of success should be the real conditions of workers lives: The question is not whether struggles are “revolutionary” in an insurrectionist sense, but whether they are demonstrably: a) democratizing the workplace, b) enabling workers to better satisfy their physical, socio-cultural, and temporal life-requirements, c) creating forms of non-alienated labour which enable the enjoyable expression of our talents and creativity, d) in forms which are sustainable over the open-ended future, and e) overcoming systemic structures of oppression and political violence, at the local, national, and international level? These are not all or nothing goals but can be more or less fully realized. *Cumulatively*, they are incompatible with the rule of capitalist market forces and money-value over human life. History suggests, however, that they cannot be realized at a single go. It also suggests (as Lebowitz discovered concretely while working with the Chavez government in Venezuela), that anything less than complete success leaves past gains vulnerable.

There is no solution to the precarity of gains: revolutionary leaders can be corrupted or undermined by events, reforms that leave the ruling class in power but improve lives can be rolled back. There is only vigilance and collective effort to keep the line moving in the right direction; no social or natural force guarantees total and permanent emancipation. Beneath stereotypes, class struggle is just the on-going efforts of working people in their concrete situations and identities fighting to reclaim as much time, space, and activity as possible from the

forces of alienation and exploitation. Twenty five years on, *Beyond Capital* continues to make that essential point with great clarity and humanity.

Lessons From History: Herbert Marcuse: “Murder is not a Political Weapon”

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The emergence of so-called “lone wolf attacks” purportedly inspired or directed by Daesh have become a new source of political anxiety within the Western security establishment. These attacks should also be of concern to and condemned by the anti-imperialist Left. First, contrary to its right-wing caricature, it is not a movement of unthinking ideologues and apologists for terror but human beings whose primary goal is the creation of the social conditions for human self-realization *everywhere*. Second, and following from the first, when the tactics of random terror are identified with anti-imperialist politics, they threaten its wider legitimacy. In order to protect that legitimacy and extend it more widely, these tactics must be criticized *from the left* in the name of a mass *democratic* and internationalist alternative to both imperialism and the terrorist response it engenders.

Human beings cannot think when they are afraid. By instilling fear, random terrorist attacks on civilian targets undermine the ability and desire of people in the West to think about the depth historical causes of terrorism. A more or less blind compliance with the military-security apparatus agenda follows. This agenda treats terrorism as an irrational phenomenon whose causes lie in the psychological pathology and demonic immorality of the perpetrators. No doubt there are psychotics and demons amongst the ranks of Daesh. But the question must be asked: how did they get so angry in the first place? The answer is not to be found in their individual family or life-history but in the history of Western imperialist intervention in the Middle East and Africa. The point is not that this history can explain any attack in particular, but rather that it contains the general causes of the emergence of anti-imperialist movements in the Middle East of which Daesh is a distorted expression.

Disagree? Let us review very briefly the origins of Al Qaeda and Daesh. Al Qaeda was largely the creation of the Cold War struggle between American and Soviet imperialism, armed by the United States to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan. Having successfully driven the Soviets out, they turned their forces against America in a classic case of what [Chalmers Johnson](#) called “blowback.” [Daesh](#) developed out of al Qaeda in Iraq; its leader Baghdadi radicalized in an American prison camp after the Second Gulf War, which was itself an attempt to use the toppling of Saddam Hussein to rebuild a compliant and supine Middle East. Psychotics attack anywhere at random in response to their own delusions. But there are no examples of terrorist violence not claimed in the name of a specific, identifiable, political grievance that is not delusional, even if the hopes for success by these means might be. Individual practitioners may or may not be violently psychotic; the politically important point is that the underlying causes of the emergence of a movement that allow those people to give expression to their revenge fantasies are evident, comprehensible, and explicable in historically clear and politically rational terms.

To say that the emergence of a terrorist movement is explicable in politically rational terms does not mean that the means adopted are rational or justified. On the contrary, they are self-undermining and in contradiction to the underlying human values that legitimate democratic resistance to imperialism. And that is why the anti-imperialist left should be concerned, politically, with criticizing these attacks: they make even more difficult the already herculean task of transforming global politics in the direction of self-determination for the people of the world and away from their subordination to capital and the military and political power that protects it.

This problem has arisen before. In the late 1960's and 1970's a wave of leftist terror attacks was perpetrated across Europe and North America in the (misguided) hope that they would create the conditions for working class revolution. The thought was that the state would have to become more and more repressive in response to the attacks, thus teaching workers its true nature, disabusing them of social democratic illusions that the state could be their ally, and thus causing them to become revolutionary. The state did become more repressive, but the workers were not moved to revolution. The terrorist cells were dismantled and the activists either jailed or killed.

One of the most succinct and incisive critiques of this wave of kidnappings, shootings, and bombings was an article written by [Herbert Marcuse](#) in 1977: "Murder is not a Political Weapon." In response to the attacks by the Red Army Faction and the Baader-Meinhof gang in then West Germany, Marcuse posed two questions: 1) did the attacks weaken capitalism; and 2) were they required by revolutionary morality. To both questions Marcuse answered in the negative. The same two questions could be asked today about the terrorist response to Western imperialism. The same negative answers hold, and for the same reasons that Marcuse gave in 1977.

To the first point, rather than advance any progressive agenda, terrorists fatally compromise it. They alienate potential supporters and they must be conspiratorial and secretive, making the construction of a democratic mass movement impossible. Their only effect is to strengthen the repressive power of their enemies. Terrorism, Marcuse argued "strengthens its [the state's] repressive potential without (and this is the decisive point) either engendering opposition to repression, or raising political consciousness." In the contemporary context, terrorism not only does not engender opposition to repression or raise political consciousness, it engenders *support* for repression at home and more extreme military violence in the Middle East and Africa. As for political consciousness, far from raising it, it drives it down to the most crass atavism and xenophobic Islamophobia. The strength of right wing populism in Europe and America is at least partly attributable to 9/11 and subsequent attacks. The biggest victims of these politically degenerate movements have been the very people the terrorists are claiming to liberate: the Muslims of the Middle East and Africa.

Marcuse also argued that terrorism was contrary to "revolutionary morality." While the term sounds out of place today, its underlying idea remains important. Socialist revolution was always justified in terms of freeing human life from the control of alienating, exploitative, and reified social powers so that instead of life being little more than service to money and its owners, it would become free self-realizing activity. Revolutionary morality was the set of values that follow from this steering principle. "Its goal— the liberated individual— must appear in

the means to achieve this goal. Revolutionary morality demands... open struggle, not conspiracy and sneak attacks. An open struggle is a class struggle.” His point is that liberation cannot be achieved by violence alone, because a violent struggle requires military discipline, hierarchical structures, and leaders who command and followers who obey. Revolutionaries schooled in that mode of struggle will not become people capable of democratic governance, because the principle of democratic governance is collective self-determination through full and free debate, not doing what the leadership commands be done. As we can see with abundant clarity from the areas that Daesh rules, democratic self-determination is not their aim. Hence, on this score too, the terrorist response to Western imperialism fails the test.

It is difficult to see beneath the sectarianism and factionalism that typifies Middle Eastern politics today any sort of class struggle. Still when we look at the root cause of the chaos: Western military intervention, the class interests that have been imposed upon the peoples of the Middle East are clear enough. Western intervention in the Middle East is a direct function of its economic and strategic value. If there were nothing there but Bedouin communities and dates, it would lack all strategic value. Oil— and control over it— is the *ultimate* (but not sole) driver. Political struggles can generate their own immanent reasons for continuing once they have begun. Amongst the most important are the fear that apparent weakness will embolden enemies and the belief (fatal to gamblers) of thinking that past losses can be made good by more strenuous application of the same strategy.

The anti-imperialists of the Daesh strip claim to be resisting Western violence, but kill mostly Muslims. What damage they do inflict on the West is— while horrific from the human perspective— of no consequence from the standpoint of social stability. No Western country will be destroyed by one-off terrorist attacks. Those attacks will promote more and more hatred of Muslims as an undifferentiated and demonized group and thus more and more support for the very military violence the terrorists are claiming to fight against. Marcuse’s 1977 conclusion rings as true of Daesh as it did of the Red Army faction: “Their methods are not those of liberation.”

Lessons From History II: Bernard Williams: What Hope For the Humanities?

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To hear influential people in politics, the media, business, and university administration tell the tale, the sole point of life is to find “jobs.” Even union leaders join the chorus, although they usually add the qualifier “good” jobs, but do not define “good” save in terms of wages and benefits. I can imagine a young couple laying in bed, amorous, hopeful for the future, looking at one another and saying: “Lets make a baby tonight, honey, so we can watch them grow up and find a job.” What passes for political argument today lionizes “the job creators” (even though they do not seem to create enough of them), and wise council for the young always instructs them to instrumentalize their entire life, including their education, so that everything they do and study helps them find a job. “Don’t post a picture on Instagram of you smoking a joint, it might hurt your chances of landing a job. Don’t waste your education on frivolous subjects, find out what employers want and study that, so that you can land a job.” This is the cultural narrative today that is creating an enrollment crisis in the humanities.

While the crisis is real, it is not the first time that the humanities have been in crisis. Writing at the end of the Thatcher nightmare, the great British philosopher Bernard Williams confronted problems similar to what humanists (classical scholars, historians, scholars and critics of literature, philosophers) are confronting today. Such is the similarity of the cultural narrative between 1987 and 2016 that, from reading the first sentence of his short essay (“What Hope for the Humanities?” *Essays and Reviews, 1959-2002*) it would be difficult to decide in what year he was writing: “It will be no news that Humanities Departments in UK universities are suffering from a lack of morale, lack of recruitment, and from pressures exerted by cuts in the past and more it seems, to come.”(p.267) (And come they did in the UK, in the form of devastating cuts to grants to students who chose to study the humanities).

In the face of historical and on-going cuts, the humanities required a defence then, and they require a defence now. But as William’s essay reminds us, it matters not just *that* they be defended from those who would chop them, but also *on what basis* that defence is mounted. One line of argument, which Williams dubs “The Leather Blotter” defense is easy and effective, as far as protecting the humanities *being taught* in some generic form for the sake of rounding out the education of (mostly privileged) people who will go on to do more serious things in business and science. “One style of defence of the Humanities says “the Humanities are cultivated in a civilized society.” The defence is put forward for a variety of motives, many of them excellent, and what it says is also, as a matter of fact, true. The trouble is that it can be too easily associated with some views that are very bad defences, because they effectively accept the luxury status of the Humanities. These assimilate the Humanities to aspects of expensively cultivated life, to such things as select outings with a well-behaved company and an adequate aesthetic content.” (p.268) These sort of defences are bad for three reasons.

The first, as Williams wittily implies, is that it reduces humanistic education to the spit and polish of white bourgeois finishing school, the rounding out that gentlemen (and now ladies) historically needed to acquire in order to be interesting dinner companions and give the appearance of all-round cultivation. In this version, the humanities are preserved, but only as a superficial sheen of aesthetic cultivation laid over an essentially commercial world view that governs social life and individual motivation.

The second, not fully unpacked by Williams but clearly implied by his critique of the Leather Blotter view, is that this sort of defence is class-bound and exclusionary. If all that the humanities cultivate is dining room patter, the ability to quote snippets of poetry, and voice semi-intelligent remarks at galleries or the theatre, they are useless for people who do not go to galleries or the theatre. Their study will be reserved for those who can pay to acquire a superficial survey of the canon. At the level of the university system one can imagine the humanities surviving in some form at the most expensive private universities and disappearing from smaller ones, which would hasten their decline to the status of technical institutes.

The third reason why this sort of defence is bad is because it does not defend robust social and institutional investment in thriving humanities departments within which *research* in the humanities takes place. “What has to be discussed first is *the pursuit of certain subjects*—the organised, funded, necessarily institutional pursuit of certain subjects, of certain kinds of knowledge.” (p.270) Few who criticize the humanities criticize their being taught in the Leather Blotter form. No, what they object to is *research* in the humanities, i.e., thriving humanities departments in which people study because they want to become philosophers or scholars of renaissance poetry. Since that research does not produce money-value for private appropriation (i.e., it has no economic value in a capitalist society), these critics conclude that the humanities have no value *at all*. And if the humanities have no value at all, there are no grounds for using public funds to support humanities departments. (For more on the relation between the teaching of the humanities and the crisis of academic labour, see Sami Siegelbaum’s fine essay [“Once More on the Crisis of the Humanities”](#)).

Now, there is something right in this argument: if some institution *has no value at all*, then it should not be the recipient of public funds. The question is: is money-value the only value that there is? The answer here is obviously “no.” A moment’s reflection on ordinary usage is sufficient to remind us that we regularly talk about aesthetic value, sentimental value, political value, moral value, nutritional value; the value of friendship, the value of family, the value of laughter. One could go on. Having established that there are many more kinds of value than economic value, the question is: what sort of value do the humanities create.

There are two sorts of answers that have some truth, but are not the primary forms of value that defenders of the humanities should focus upon. The first maintains that, contrary to their economic critics, the humanities do produce monetary value, and should therefore be supported for the same reasons as investment in mathematics and engineering is supported. While it is true that some work in the humanities can lead to the production of economic value, this defence is not the strongest, since it simply accepts what is in fact the primary cause of the crisis of the humanities: the belief that there is no other value than money-value. If supporters of the humanities rely on this argument alone, they will not be able to

protect all forms of scholarship in the humanities, but only those which can defend themselves at the court of money-value.

A second and closely related argument maintains that the humanities are instrumentally valuable because they teach “soft skills,” like communication and open-mindedness, which are useful on the job market. The term “soft skills” is (or should be) repugnant to anyone who works in the humanities. It connotes that there is no value to the actual subject matter studied in our disciplines, and that there are no demanding and rigorous methods whose mastery requires decades of devotion and effort; that all the humanities are good for (so it does not matter which you study) is the breezy acquisition of generic skills, which stand in invidious contrast to the “hard” skills of scientifically serious work. But as Hegel pointed out, the fact that you have the measure of your shoe in your foot does not mean that you know how to make your shoes. The idea that there is really nothing to the humanities save opinion and soft skills proves only the ignorance of the person who makes the claim.

Now, if it is true that there is more to life than jobs and wages, we must ask what perspective makes this truth apparent. Not an economic perspective (at least not an orthodox economic perspective) since it assumes that people are rationally self-interested and rationally self-interested people are bent exclusively on maximizing their money-holdings. Not from a natural scientific perspective, which (unless it smuggles in principles from philosophy) must treat human beings as material systems with no intrinsic value. It is only from the perspective of disciplines which study the ways in which human beings *treat and make their lives meaningful* that life has more value than as an instrument of money-value creation. And those disciplines are the humanities.

Hence, the real line of defence for humanistic scholarship and research has to run through the idea—unavoidable from a first person perspective but incompatible with natural scientific principles— that human life is meaningful. But meaningful how? The answer is not obvious, but demands reflection. But reflection on what? Not one’s own individual existence which, outside of socio-cultural context, is an abstraction. So what is left? Precisely the socio-cultural systems, in all of their institutional, political, symbolic, aesthetic, normative, and spiritual complexity in which human beings have *made* their existence meaningful by living, loving, struggling, fighting, building, destroying, and changing their worlds, *and* thinking about all of this while or after they do it.

But also: the methods, and methodological disputes that the attempt to study these systems, *not just as dead facts but living realities which meant something to those who lived in them*, demand and give rise to. And: the sorts of problems that arose in these socio-cultural wholes, and within the different specific domains of practice (art, etc..) of which they are composed, which is the dynamic element in history, creating the need and opportunity for change. And: the sorts of exclusions that given socio-cultural wholes and the specific domains of practice that compose them have imposed on the sub-altern and the heterodox. And: together, the possibility— but only the possibility— of not only determining, on the whole and in the specific fields of practice, the better and the worse, but insight into how we can go on today, correcting the worse and making it better, on the whole and in the specific.

In short, the value of the humanities comes down to two inter-related factors: complex historical understanding, and the possibility of social criticism. “The classic error of thoughtless conservatism,” Williams argues, “is to forget that what is old is merely what used to be new. One form it can take is to invest the traditional with a sacred quality, another, and at the present time more destructive form, is to forget that anything has a history at all, and to suppose that the social world simply consists of a set of given objects to be manipulated by go-getting common sense. No such views are likely to survive unchanged by the enquiries of a truthful and imaginative history.” (p. 273) To understand that we have a (political, cultural, social, aesthetic, moral, spiritual) history is to understand that human life is shaped and changed by human thought and practice. The belief that the forms of human life are timeless is the enemy of social criticism and change.

Natural laws may (in a sense) be timeless, but social laws are not. To understand them we need to pay attention to the play of opposing forces, to context, to belief, as much as to more basic material conditions in which these factors play out. There is no engineering or algorithmic solution to the crisis in Syria or global warming precisely because political beliefs and normative choices (that Sunni interests can only be protected in the Caliphate, for example, or that the *raison d’etre* of life is to consume as much as possible, without regard to the energy requirements) enter into the play of forces. No idea has ever been destroyed by mere force, but only defeated through arguments that change convictions. Arguments alone are never enough, but again, as Hegel said, the conceit that will not argue is inhuman and a primary impediment to political progress.

Is there any higher conceit today than that money decides the truth? And if there are no historians, philosophers, and students of literature to insist that in fact there are other and better human motivations, who will be left to make the case? And if there is no one left to make that case, what hope for concrete solutions to the problems humanity faces today? The crisis of the humanities is thus a crisis of the world that needs the humanities (to contribute the historical-critical self-understanding that *practical* solutions to the crisis requires) but cannot tolerate the underlying spirit of the answer they give, which is to affirm the creative and the imaginative over against the pecuniary and what merely serves the powerful.

Just as everyone has an interest in the fruits of natural scientific understanding of the physical world, so too everyone has an interest in the fruits of humanistic understanding (and criticism) of the social world. If that claim is true, then we need to vigorously defend humanistic research, and, as a vital part of that defence, the sort of university in which that research can be undertaken and taught. This sort of university is, as it was in 1987, under threat. That it survived is perhaps cause for hope that it can make it through again, but not without a fight.

Lessons From History III: Gadamer's Truth and Method

Posted on March 20, 2017

I have been teaching a graduate seminar (with my colleague Stephen Pender from the Department of English) on Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. How badly do universities (and society at large) need reminding of its central argument: thinking is an on-going collective project in which ideas, not individual subjects, (and certainly not provincial education bureaucrats) lead! To the number lover, the learning outcome checker, the metric man his argument will no doubt sound unintelligible, even irresponsible. "BUT THERE IS NO OUTCOME," they will shout! Precisely.

And truthfully, for there is no final outcome to any real process of thought. Where does science stop? Where does literature stop? Where does philosophy stop? Art? Our ordinary conversations? Friendship? The law?

"But, but, but, people need to be able to formulate well-formed sentences and draw inferences and analyze natural language expressions into their logical structures. They need to know how to test an hypothesis and write up a lab report. Above all they need to be able to prove to EMPLOYERS in the REAL WORLD that they have JOB READY SKILLS. Have a conversation on your own time. In school, prove to the TAX PAYER that something useful is being accomplished."

But there are different meanings of useful. A fork is useful, and who would argue against forks? But being able to point out to the lover of forks that one can also eat with chop sticks, that is a different type of useful. And being able to tease out the underlying principle— that what seems normative and unquestionable to an "us" is questionable to a "them" who are not necessarily wrong for being different— is also useful. And being able to go further, to draw the us's and them's into conversation (as opposed to war) so that each can explore in dialogue their differences (and perhaps discover commonalities), is more useful still, but not a mechanical result of applying a technique. That type of usefulness requires *understanding*.

Before one can learn anything, even the most mundane task, one has to pay attention and give oneself over to a process that one does not control. You cannot even tie your shoe just how you would like, but have to follow the sequence that the nature of laces demands. If you do that, then you will learn to tie your shoes, and then will be able to tie any set of laces you subsequently encounter.

When we leave the realm of shoe tying and the like (simple tasks that can be accomplished by following rules) for the problem of understanding the natural and social world and intervening in it politically, artistically, philosophically, or scientifically, a new problem emerges. At their highest levels (and it is at that level we should be studying them in university) these interventions are no longer a matter of following the rules, but either extending their application

to new domains, testing their efficacy and legitimacy, or inventing new rules entirely. Someone please explain to me what the rule is for inventing new rules.

There is none, but only intellectual preparation and the productive spontaneity into which the prepared mind inserts itself. The analytical and critical skills that everyone gets so fussed about are the ground work, the preparation that students require to start thinking for themselves, but real thinking for oneself is productive spontaneity, and it cannot be measured but only lived.

Gadamer helps us understand what living the productive spontaneity of thought means with his analysis of play, conversation, and the dialectic of question and answer. Drawing on Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Gadamer sees play as a form of activity in which, to achieve the desired outcome, the player must give themselves over to the game. The rules of the game define the parameters of playing, but they do not determine any particular move. Nor are moves determined imperiously by the players acting instrumentally as individuals. Play involves creative adaptation to the state of the game: the best players are not those who try to "force" the play but those who are able to "read it," i.e., see what the state of play at that moment in time permits and encourages as the best move. Players get caught up in the game; their creativity as players depends upon understanding the state of play at any given moment.

The value of play as a human activity is not measured by winning or losing, or individual statistics, but by the freedom we find in giving ourselves over to the process. Freedom from what? From the rule of narrow instrumentalism in our creative activity. Schiller was interested in play from the standpoint of understanding how art is made. He argued that the uniqueness of artistic production is that it is not dominated by a specific, determinate goal whose conditions of success can be specified in advance. A craftsman making a chair might work from blueprints and knows when the chair is finished. The painter, by contrast, must struggle with her medium: she might have an idea in mind when she starts out, but as the painting works itself out the original idea will evolve and develop. In this way artistic creation depends upon the creative mind and hand allowing themselves to adapt and respond to the work as it "plays out."

In Gadamer's view, play not only captures the process of artistic creation, it expresses the nature of thinking. In all genuine thinking, thinking through a problem or subject, the mind is not in control the way a driver drives a car but must give itself over to the investigation or conversation. The subject matter leads and where it will take people no one can say in advance. Thinking is inquiry, and inquiry must go where the ideas lead. "To conduct a conversation means to allow oneself to be conducted by the subject matter to which the partners in the dialogue are oriented. It requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other's opinion. Hence it is an art of testing. But the art of testing is the art of questioning. For we have seen to question means to lay open, to place in the open." (*Truth and Method*, 2nd Revised edition, p. 367). To lay in the open means to unsettle, and to unsettle is the condition of being receptive to different approaches living problems.

Hence, the problem with demanding a specific outcome as the sign of successful teaching is that it turns a process of opening the real to questioning into a closed system of technical competence. Of course, technical competence across a range of abilities is essential to all forms of human action: there is no question here of ignoring the importance of demonstrating

analytical and synthetic and critical abilities. What Gadamer helps us see, rather, is that at the highest level thinking is not 'for' anything else (economic gain, political conviction, etc.,) but is required for there to be any human society at all, i.e., any context in which this or that action, this or that competence, is of any value at all. If everything is tied down and exhausted by a technical competence whose only value is instrumental to some measurable purpose, then human life as a finite experience of being open, present, and active ceases to self-validate. In that way it loses not only its spontaneity, but also its essential freedom in relation to its own future, which, in order to really be a future, must unfold and not be programmable in advance.

A related argument can be made in response to the attempt to reduce the value of intellectual work to the quantity of publications and citations. The attempt to assess value independently of actually studying the work, as a function of an algorithm and not human understanding, is a species of madness only a bureaucrat or administrator could think valuable. It is a sign of the decadence of the culture that the people who think and create for a living are seduced by this category mistake and trip over themselves to boast about their numbers on some ranking or other as if that somehow validates their work. Will Noble Prizes now be awarded to the person with most citations each year, or the most sales, in the case of literature?

(If you are an academic and that sounds absurd, ask yourself why, and start defending peer review again).

In reality— if we can still risk the term— the quality of thought, whether scientific, philosophical, or artistic, is not a function of short term responses, but by the extent to which it identifies or overcomes problems that impede further thought and action. Often times the most penetrating thought and the most revolutionary discoveries and creations take time to break through the barriers of established conventions and hierarchies. To focus on some league rankings from the recent past cannot tell us anything about the future, which is where the value of creations prove themselves.

Of course, most of us are not unrecognized geniuses and most of us will fall short of ever being world-historical figures. Nevertheless, the quality of our thought is never a function of how many people read it or cite it, but a function of how perceptive, cogent, lucid, and, yes, useful it proves to be. In every case, quality thinking must demonstrate some degree of independence from the given. What distinguishes the derivative and banal from the worthwhile is that however vast or small the influence, worthwhile thought brings something new to light.

To do so, the thinker has to tap into the living spontaneity of thought as that force which frees us from servitude to the given. It is this spontaneity that Gadamer reminds us of, and it is this spontaneity that is under dire threat today.

