

Thinkings I (2011-2012)



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Preface: Philosophy and Fun

Horkheimer: “A Theory that has ceased to have any connection with practice is art. What we need to respond to is the question of whether we are doing philosophy as pure construct.”

Adorno: “If I had a choice between construct and the stockroom [i.e., philosophy as pulling down pre-formed ideas and mechanically mapping them onto reality] I would always choose the construct. To think thoughts because it is fun seems more dignified.” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *A New Manifesto*, p. 100.

Must there be such a sharp antithesis between the fun of thinking philosophically and the practical implications of that which is thought? I mean by “fun” the experience one has when extrinsic rewards and sanctions are set aside and one engages in an activity for its own sake. Think of the meaning of the common expression, “let’s just play for fun.” When one plays for fun one does not keep score, there are no winners or losers, no glory or shame. But playing for fun does not presuppose or imply that the players do not play hard. When we play for fun how we play is determined by the nature of the game, not by what we gain by winning or suffer by losing. If the “game” is philosophical thinking, and philosophical thinking is determined by its engagement with the problem of *truth in the world*, then playing it for fun must have real life implications (even if not immediately or mechanically). Philosophical thinking for fun is philosophical thinking determined by the nature of philosophical thinking, not academic reward or sanction. As such, it is a precondition of philosophy’s being critical that it be practiced for fun, since if it is not practiced for fun, it is practiced not for its own sake—engagement with the problem of truth in the world— but for the sake of rewards (tenure, promotion, prizes, etc.,) extrinsic to it.

Perhaps this sounds like a very serious understanding of fun, the sort of fun only a philosopher could have. But I do not think that it is. The everyday connotations of “fun”- easy laughing good times- is a consequence of the “serious” interpretation above. We feel those easy laughing good times *because* the external pressures in which we are usually trapped are relaxed for a moment. We feel free and loose in our thoughts, movements, and expressions, but we still attend to and try to fully develop their content. The thinking of the thoughts, moving of the movements, and expressing the expressions as deeply, skillfully, and passionately as we are able *is* the fun.

When I began this website a year ago my stated intention was to free my philosophical thinking from the temporal and formal limitations of standard academic writing. As this experiment has proceeded I have come to realize that what I was seeking was an experience of philosophical thinking as fun. But the fun lies in the *work* of creating articulations of ideas that try to engage readers’ critical faculties without necessarily following the conventions of academic philosophy (but not willfully violating them either). The fun lay in letting loose the power of open-ended

questions, fragmentary fictions, imagined dialogues, sarcasm, irreverence, profanity, and evocative rather than argumentative constructions.

My friend and colleague Stephen Pender once described his teaching practice to me as an invitation to his students to think along with him. We might contrast this pedagogy with an authoritarian drive to make students think as one thinks. The beauty (and terror) of an invitation is that it can be accepted or rejected- the power is in the hands of the invitee. But when it is accepted it is enjoyed all the more, because one joins together in a collective activity just because one has chosen to do so, not because one has been enticed by rewards or brow-beaten by sanctions. There is no resentment, no bitterness, no wishing things otherwise than one has chosen them to be. If one accepts the invitation to think along with someone else, then the end product becomes a co-creation, and the activity fun because undertaken for its own sake and not because someone or something forced you into it.

The posts that comprise the first year's content of this website were invitations to readers to think along with me- about politics and social organization, about the meaning of core human experiences, about the value of life-activity and the disvalue of the structures in which it is confined and damaged, about art, and work, and creativity. Their value (for me) lies less in the conclusions they suggest and more in the open, exploratory, and experimental means through which they problems and ideas were examined from different and perhaps not always consistent perspectives. In all cases the posts were written in response to problems that presented themselves to me or ideas that arose in me spontaneously. I never once posed to myself the question: what should I write about this week about? I will continue this project as long as I do not have to write in response to such a question.

While the various interventions and evocations that compromise the first year of posts arose as a response to definite political events or ideas that arose within me in unrepeatable contexts, I also hope that they contain something of more permanent philosophical value. In order to see whether or not such is the case, I have decided to collect them together and re-arrange them thematically. This collection is itself an experiment, to see what will live outside of and what dies along with the initial context of writing. What dies along with the initial context is mere artifact, a very minor entry in the catalogue of a museum of ideas. What interests me is that which, if anything, continues to live. I have called the collection *Thinkings I* in order to emphasize that the goal here is not to document that which has already been accomplished (the objectification of thoughts in electronic form) but the intellectual activity that created them and which continues (or so I hope) to course through them, making them worth reading even when the problem that initially stirred them into being has lost its relevance. The *I* in the title implies that future years will see new collections added. That implication will be realized so long as what I am doing does not become formulaic, that ideas I feel are worth exploring continue to arise spontaneously, my finitely creative mind remains capable of inventing novel ways of exploring those ideas, and readers keep reading and commenting.

Section I: Interventions

What Would be Lost, if We Lost Philosophy?

Originally Published September 22nd, 2011

Based on my talk at the Humanities Research Group's Philosopher's Cafe, Sept, 12th, Phog Lounge, Windsor. Thanks to the Director of the HRG, Dr. Antonio Rossini for the invitation, and the small but thoughtful and vigorous group of interlocutors and interrogators who participated.

'Philosophy' in my title does not refer to the academic discipline, but to the critical and creative exercise of intellect governed by an underlying and overriding commitment to:

Thinking problems through to their ultimate foundations;

Regardless of prevailing fashions or political, scientific, or socio-cultural opposition;

According to a time-frame determined by the complexity of the problem (which may and ordinarily does exceed the span of the individual thinker's life);

For the sake of understanding and contributing to the solution of the problem and not for any extrinsic reward (money, reputation, etc).

"Philosophy" in this sense crosses all disciplinary boundaries and informs all serious cognitive and imaginative-creative engagement with the world. As such, it cannot be limited to the organization of intellectual labour in academic philosophy departments. Many people who are employed in academic philosophy departments are not philosophical, while many people who are philosophical have nothing to do with academic philosophy departments. Thus, the potential 'loss' of philosophy that concerns me is not the loss of academic philosophy departments, real and troubling as those losses are, but the loss of the underlying intellectual dispositions and commitments that sustain a philosophical engagement with the world more generally.

The loss of academic philosophy departments is an effect and not a cause of the loss of philosophy, and the loss of philosophy is a consequence of the destruction of the intellectual and temporal habitat in which alone it can flourish. This habitat loss in turn is a result of the way in which time and the content of experience is determined under the ever more absolute rule of money-value over human culture and life-activity.

Considered in abstraction from the social forces that structure and determine it, time is, for human beings, an open matrix of possibility for different actions. The concrete experience of time, and thus the concrete experience of our own activity, depends upon the forces and value system that determine the temporal organization of a society. The temporal organization of a capitalist society is determined by the ruling system-value: the maximization of money-profits

for the appropriating class. It is this drive to accumulate ever more money-profit that is in large part responsible for the dizzying time compression that is taken to be the hallmark of the experience of modernity (see for example Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*). It is no accident that Berman chose Marx's famous phrase from the *Communist Manifesto* as the title of his book, for it was money that drove— and continues to drive— the technical revolutions which have and continue to revolutionize the experience of time.

The temporal organization imposed on human life by the money-value system turns time from an open matrix of possibility for action into closed structures of work and consumption routines in which the demand is always to produce or consume more quickly. Assembly lines are speeded up, people are expected to be universally available through electronic means to bosses and customers, fast food restaurants are designed to make it uncomfortable to sit in them for more than twenty minutes. This money-driven acceleration of work and consumption generates pervasive effects throughout the culture—the joy of anticipation, patience, the ability to pay attention, the capacity to savour experience, tend to disappear from public life. As a consequence, vocations and professions which require patience and the ability to pay sustained attention to flows of ideas and experiences are threatened with extinction. It is the steadily intensifying capture of ever more human practices by capitalistically closed routines that is the cause of the loss of the social habitat necessary for philosophy.

Philosophy is a commitment to thinking through problems for as long as it takes to think them through without regard for prevailing orthodoxy or external rewards. It requires patience in the pursuit of insights whose arrival is not subject to external guarantee. Thus, what would be lost if we lost philosophy is first of all the inner discipline required to follow an idea wherever it might lead one's thinking. Developing this discipline presupposes both a certain form of courage and a certain capacity to discriminate.

Courage: to risk ultimate failure in one's own pursuit of understanding and achievement in the field to which one has given oneself over. The philosophical disposition is one that embarks on its path without any guarantee that one's labours will not be in vain. This sort of courage is the willingness to always "fail again, fail better," as Beckett says in "Nohow On."

Discrimination: the ability to distinguish between ideas and problems worth following and those which are not. In this sense discrimination is a certain form of taste or judgment, and it would also be lost if philosophy were lost. This form of taste is to be distinguished from connoisseurship, which rarely rises above the level of snobbish commentary on the quality of consumer products. I mean rather the ability to distinguish between ideas and problems that are worth devoting one's life to, because they are of ultimate value— truth, beauty, freedom, — and those which merely bog us down in the mire of commodity cycles and maintaining order.

But above all what would be lost if we lost philosophy is the experience of time as an open matrix of possibilities. It may sound paradoxical to equate the experience of time as free with the act of giving oneself over to and following ideas where they lead, but paradoxical or not, that is the nature of the experience of time as free. For in allowing one's thoughts to be led by the structure of the problem, one is also liberating oneself from routines and externally imposed structurations of time. One can never tell what fruit, if any, a day's, a week's, a

month's, a lifetime's concentrations, exertions, explorations, revisions, will bear. Hence the need for the courage I referred to above.

If there is to be any success one must be free to follow where the thoughts lead, which means being free to always change one's context of thinking. One cannot think or create where one is not free to go for a walk, to discuss the matter with someone else, to set everything aside for the sake of tangential research, or to just stop for a moment, a day, a week to allow new insights to rush in from unanticipated quarters.

This form of philosophical labour is strictly incompatible with the artificially structured "work days" of most capitalist industries and institutions which, though having nothing really to do with the manufacture of commodities or the sale of services, are facing increasing pressure to restructure themselves as if they were identical to such industries.

Thus, nothing more or less is at stake in the potential loss of philosophy than the loss of an experience of time as free. And since all life plays out within time, the loss of the possibility of experiencing time as free is tantamount to the loss of the possibility of free activity, and thus the intrinsic life-value of the exercise of mind free from the limits of given personal and cultural contexts and pay-off systems in open-ended inquiries into questions of ultimate worth.

Craze-y for Philosophy

Originally Published June 27th 2011

Opportunities for serious public philosophical argument and debate are rare. It should therefore be gratifying for philosophers, and especially political philosophers, to read that at least one person in Tokyo was willing to pay 500\$ for a ticket to a lecture by Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel. As Thomas Friedman reports in his New York Times column on June 26th, 2011, “few philosophers are compared to rock stars or TV celebrities, but that’s the kind of popularity Michael Sandel enjoys in Japan. His popularity derives from the decision of a Japanese TV station to translate episodes of Sandel’s successful 2009 PBS series, which in turn derived from his popular “Justice” course at Harvard.

That a political philosopher has seized the public imagination in this way, in particular a philosopher willing to expose the tyranny of bottom-line, money-value thinking to public scrutiny, should remind everyone that philosophy, despite its often suffocating self-enclosure in academic robes, is in essence a public practice of reflection on the principles according to which we live, and on those according to which we might live, were we committed to resolving the deep problems that beset our world. To excite people to the point that they are willing to pay 500\$ for tickets that were initially free and distributed via lottery reminds all those who (not as cleverly as they think) dismiss philosophy as idle speculation that it remains central to intelligent individual and social life. Individual and social intelligence are both impossible if people are unwilling to open themselves to each other in processes of collective reflection and self-criticism. At the same time, I worry—philosophically—that an exchange of the ivory tower for the hockey arena will, far from reinvigorating philosophy, undermine its life-value as a practice of public intelligence.

My worry here is general and not directed specifically against anything Sandel himself has done. If it is true that his lectures have sparked a “philosophy craze” in Japan, then philosophers have to inquire whether there is not an important opposition between the value of philosophy and the value of the object of a “craze.” Think of some of those objects: hula hoops, pet rocks, elephant jeans. The pop culture craze is essentially a paradox: the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the value of material content and specificity (i.e., that which distinguishes the object from other objects). On the one hand, the craze is menacingly specific: violent door crashing tumult engendered in people desperate to acquire the object of stimulated desire. Some specific thing is elevated through marketing techniques to take on the appearance of being a vital necessity. It would appear to the impartial but culturally uninformed observer that there is an essential connection between the specific nature of the craze-object and the life or well-being of the people who demand it.

At the same time, the craze-object is absolutely general, and this for two reasons. First, a singularity could never become the object of a craze, since there can be a craze only when a

generalized demand for a mass producible object has been stimulated. Second, demand-stimulation can succeed in relation *to any mass producible object whatsoever*. Thus, from this side, the specific material content and structure of the object is without value. The same frenzied demand is stimulated for ever different objects with only this in common: none ever have any important contribution to make to the maintenance or development of life-capacities.

Philosophy— which does maintain and develop the important life-capacities of individual and collective self-criticism and commitment to reason and truth in individual and collective life— is thus different in kind from the object of the consumer craze. Yet— and here is the danger— if people desire philosophy only as a craze-object, then it follows that the specific material content and structure of philosophy— its vocational commitment to empirical adequacy, logical rigour, and life-value in its analyses, arguments, and conclusions— will be lost. Acquiring the object of a craze is easy, assuming one has the money to pay the asking price. Practicing philosophy, either for a living, or, more importantly, as a way of life, is always difficult.

These worries put the person who offered to pay 500\$ for the ticket to Sandel's lecture in a different light. To offer such a significant sum seems to imply that the person who offered it believed that he could acquire something of special value at the lecture— enlightenment, solutions to pressing matters of global concern, or the secret to happiness. Unfortunately, answers to those questions are not available at any price, but only through patient labour, over life-times and generations, across the continuum of human development, and not in an evening's work (or entertainment) in a sports arena. If we think that these answers can be purchased, then we might be craze-y, but that which we are craze-y for is not philosophy.

Notre Dame d’Atheisme

Originally Published February 6th 2012

There has been much proselytizing amongst the globe-trotting atheist set lately. The last several years are full with books by big names (Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens), hipster press stories about the atheist bus (at Christmas time no less!, *quelle scandale*), Hitchens’ death sparking a new round of books sales, and now Alain de Botton’s plan for atheist “temples” to secular virtues.

De Botton’s plan has provoked the expected reaction from the *doyen* of non-believers, Dawkins. He has protested—boringly—that atheists do not need temples. (We have the starry heavens above at which to marvel). Instead of temples, he says the money should be spent on secular, scientific schooling. He does not mention anything about aesthetic, emotional, or political education. Maybe those sensibilities just develop “naturally.”

This spat is so uninteresting that one can only imagine it hatched in the backrooms of publishing houses to generate discussion on the cocktail party circuit frequented by the well-heeled who once thought about becoming intellectuals, until they realized that a lot more money can be made doing other things but who still want to sound like they are philosophically attuned.

This merry band of atheists stroking each other’s egos and fattening each others’ royalty cheques is every bit as unbearable—because just as self-righteous—as the fundamentalist lunatics from whom they claim to be rescuing the world. As is obvious from the term, atheism, a-theism, i.e., not-theism- is not a set of positive beliefs. Atheism is not *any* set of definite beliefs. It is not a virtue, and does not necessarily lead to virtue. It is not a form of knowledge. It commits one to no positive set of values. It is the *rejection* of a belief in any sort of universal steering principle (God) guiding the universe in a definite direction. That rejection is certainly a liberation from illusion, but in itself it does not make you good or bad, clever or stupid, cultured or philistine. It is really not any more interesting a subject of conversation than why one is a Presbyterian.

But the new atheists tend to sell atheism as if it were *salvation and redemption* from irrational religion and its homicidal acolytes. All evils are traced back to the door of belief in things that are not empirically evident and not provable by scientific means. Train the kids in algebra and population genetics and there will be no more war. The ahistorical foolishness of such arguments predictably invites a rejoinder from the believers: the real mass murderers are the atheists.

No debate between atheists and believers is complete without the body bag debate. The Crusades! Stalin! The Inquisition! Mao! Global Jihad! Pol Pot! 9/11! ...

What gets lost in fixing one’s moral compass by the poles of identity “atheist” or “believer” are the multiple forms of value the things and creations of this world express at different scales of order, complexity, and function. Mathematical deductions can be examined for logical rigour, but the logical rigour can also be examined for elegance and simplicity. The entire field

of mathematics can be admired for its modeling power, but also as an extraordinary creation of the union of imagination and intellect even if it had no application to anything beyond itself.

The song is the formal arrangement of notes on the page, the artistry of the musicians, the sound waves causing the eardrum to vibrate, and also the mind seized by the melody, the emotions seized by the key and chord changes, the body seized by the rhythm, the memories it summons as it unfolds.

The rock is a complex lattice work of molecules, but its shimmering colour captures the child's imagination. It is also a dollar figure, a potential weapon, a paper weight, a curiosity for one's guests to discuss, the potential subject of poetry or painting.

The ultimate origination of things (Leibniz) is a problem, but is it really more important than the scales of value our multiple relationships with the things of the world establish? Zero sum debates between atheists and believers tend to predicate things being valuable on their ultimate origin, God, or nature. But then, isn't that the solution: God, or nature. For Spinoza, the terms were synonymous, but he phrased the synonymy in a delightfully ambiguous way. The atheist can naturalize God, the believer can deify nature, and both can get on with the more important business of valuing existence and things that exist, attending to human problems, and expanding the scope of life-affirmative relationships between people and between people and things:

“The free man only desires to join other men to him in friendship, not repaying their benefits with others reckoned as of like value, but guiding himself and others by the free decision of reason, and doing only such things as he knows to be of primary importance.” (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Proof to proposition 70, Part 4).

Now, friendship, like reason, is a creature of this world, and the things of primary importance must also be things of this world. Things of primary importance are things that sustain life, and no reasonable person can disagree (for if they did, they would soon cease to live, and therefore to be reasonable as well). Since the abstract answer to the question of how the things of this world originally came to be, by evolution or by God's will, does not sustain life, it is *not* a thing of primary importance. Nothing but abstract truth is riding on the outcome. But as Marx said, “The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolates itself from practice is a purely scholastic question.” (“Theses on Feuerbach”). There is a time and a place for scholastic questions, and there are people with whom reasonable people cannot be friends. But reasonability is a matter of listening, attentiveness, and willingness to enlarge the scope of one's thinking and valuing; it is a virtue, but neither secular nor religious. Everyone needs to strive to practice it well, not to support its entombment in a temple.

In Praise of Forgetting

Originally Published September 7th 2011

Of all the billions of human beings who have walked our planet, what a tiny fraction it must be who have had their names entered in the historical register. The farmers, the mothers, the bricklayers, the foot soldiers, the miners, the porters, the nurses, the gatherers, the sacrificial victims, the vast multitudes whose ignored labours have sustained us across millennia are lost to history. But these forgotten ones are not vain. Unlike the bloated bronzes of kings and queens and politicians whose memorials pollute public spaces everywhere, they are happy in the quietude of their death, for their works endure as the substance that sustains and enables our present life. Because they are content with their works, they do not envy the monuments erected to the great ones. For they know, in their anonymity, that it is the contribution and not the man, or now the corpse, or, after a few decades, much less than a corpse, that matters. And we need not remember the contribution, for if it had real value, it is still with us as a living reality.

If what sustains us is not the deeds of the great but the work of the small, from whence derives the motivation to memorialize?

For the great to be great the small must stay small. For the small to stay small they must be made to constantly look up. The most buffoonish monarch is thus embronzed and elevated on a pedestal. If the sculpture is that big, he must have been important. People are drawn to gaze on *Mount Rushmore*. Would South Dakota be programmed into the SUV's GPS if all that were there was *pebble* Rushmore? Scale teaches honour and respect. If it is bigger than you, it is more important than you. So look on, and feel your place, which is *there*, down below.

But if there were no monuments, how could we learn from the past? But honestly, does anyone really learn anything from official memoriations? By "learn" I do not mean "record in mind as abstract information," but rather, "develop novel understanding that serves as the basis of change." Change does not happen because people have learned from memorials to the past. The people who initiate the changes- the farmers, the mothers, the bricklayers, the foot soldiers, the miners, the porters, the nurses, the gatherers, the sacrificial victims, the vast multitudes when they finally cannot take any more and put everything on the line are focused on their present misery and not the past. And they are the ones that have caused most of the changes that have proven worthwhile. But they are not memorialised. Name one of the marchers who stormed the Bastille on July 14th, 1789. But we remember the event of the French Revolution. So what? Our contemporary *sans culottes* continue to suffer. What good does the memory do?

Our monuments simplify, distort, keep festering old wounds, stoke the fires of guilt, glorify mass homicide, apologize for the unredeemable sacrifice of young life. If learning (of any sort) presupposes a truth of the matter, then it is impossible to learn from official memoriation, which is to its very core ideological and tendentious. Do Remembrance Day sermons include lectures on the real causes of the First and Second World Wars?

But if there are no memorials, how can we honour the sacrifices the dead have made? But most victims have not sacrificed themselves, but have been sacrificed by one power or another.

Honouring the dead through memoriation does not absolve the crimes through which the dead were sacrificed, nor does it bring them back to life. So what good is the honouring to those who have already died? Being dead, they are not present to receive the honours. Why do we not instead try to live differently, so that no one is any longer sacrificed?

How much better would it be to face each sunrise as a new beginning, unburdened by petrified sanctimony and pious distortion, to look upon the day with the wide-eyes of the well-loved child who does not care for the sins of her great-great-great-great-great grandfather. Whatever sins he might have committed do not concern her, for she was not present, and therefore not responsible, and thus ought not be made to shoulder any of the guilt. Guilt is not genetically transmissible. Let it die with the sinner.

Today, let us praise forgetting, not as erasure of memory, but as a way of being, as an ethical commitment to building a different future beyond guilt and retribution.

Ask The Dead

Originally Published January 7th 2012

The withdrawal of most American troops from Iraq at the end of December created a vacuum soon filled with official pronouncements that: It was worth it. ‘It’ referred to the ‘sacrifices’ made by American troops. Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta assured departing American soldiers “that they had been a ‘driving force for remarkable progress’ and that they could proudly leave the country “secure in knowing that your sacrifice has helped the Iraqi people begin a new chapter in history, free from tyranny and full of hope for prosperity and peace.”

(<http://original.antiwar.com/engelhardt/2012/01/03/how-two-wars-in-the-greater-middle/>)

Never to be rhetorically outdone, President Obama, speaking to the 82nd Airborne Division at Ft. Bragg, NC proclaimed that “everything that American troops have done in Iraq — all the fighting and all the dying, the bleeding and the building, and the training and the partnering — all of it has led to this moment of success... [W]e’re leaving behind a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people.”(see previous link) He forgot to add that the ruling faction of this “representative” government seems bent on systematically undermining its supposed partners’ share in power. If Iraq is sovereign, stable, and self-reliant, one shudders to think what kind of country Obama would characterize as dependent and unstable. Afghanistan perhaps? But wait, that is another success story in the making.

But I am not here to criticize vacuous rhetoric. There is nothing to be gained by repeating the statistics of catastrophe. I know that the living deciders are sufficiently clever to invent reasons that explain, to their satisfaction, why these peoples’ deaths were worth it. Time heals all wounds and it absolves all crimes, at least from the perspective of the criminal. For those who decide but do not pay the final price for their decisions, there is always a way to say yes, it was worth it. Any arguments I could muster will not make a difference when the deciders decide to start bombing again. The people who order the bombs to be dropped know how many bodies there are and where they are buried. They do not care. Thus, I am not interested in the reasons why those who live in peace and order war think ‘it’ was worth it. Instead, I am here to share with you a dream.

The Dream of the Irrelevant Philosopher

I am standing on a raised dais overlooking a rolling plain. Beside me are ‘the deciders’ who organized and conducted and justified this war. Extending back from the dais are the four thousand American soldiers who died and the 162 000 Iraqis they directly or indirectly killed. (<http://news.antiwar.com/2012/01/02/ibo-162000-reported-deaths-in-iraq-war/>) The deciders smile, for they are secure in their knowledge that ‘it’ was worth it, and they look proudly upon the dead as an artist looks proudly on his creation. These are the chips of marble that had to be hewn away in order to create the masterpiece.

I look over at the smiling deciders, and then out at the sea of the dead. And then I, the irrelevant philosopher who decides nothing, ask this sea of corpses: "Do you agree, rotting bodies, that 'it' was worth it?"

The bodies stare at me, and their eyes ask what 'it' refers to. I reply that 'it' refers not to the war as a geo-political enterprise, but to each body's own death.

In unison they look away from me to the deciders, and they say in one voice: "No, it was not worth it. We would have preferred to live, even if our lives were hard and not serving the principles that you, the deciders, decided they ought to have served. It was better to live than to become a goat sacrificed to your idols. We who are now stinking in the grave have discovered that it is better to live than to be killed because you decided that your power was more important than our joys— meager as they might have been."

As they spoke the stench of death formed a vortex which began to spin with increasing speed. As it spun structure began to emerge from this vortex formed of the stink of death. The structure assumed more and more human form, but abstract, like a golem. It stretched massive above the dais and it looked through the deciders, though it had no eyes. And then it spoke:

"You, deciders, will smell these fumes of corruption, not just for the rest of your lives, but for all eternity, without respite. And not only will you smell this your creation forever, but this bell of wisdom from beyond the grave will sound in your ears: "It was not worth it. It was not worth it. If you believe that you must take life in order to improve lives, let it be your own that you take."

Learning from Catastrophe

Originally Published July 23rd, 2011

I would like to agree with Habermas, that human beings learn, morally and politically, from catastrophe. The problem, however, is that the *learning* presupposes the *catastrophes*.

So on July 22nd, another catastrophe— a car bomb and shooting rampage in Norway, launched, it appears, by a far right racist opposed to the immigration policies of the Labour government. His identity must come as a disappointment to media terrorism “experts” who initially must have felt certain that they would be able to include Norway in the club of al Qaeda victims.

Lessons not yet learned:

Violent attacks against civilian targets cause death, horror, endless grief, but advance no political cause.

White people can be terrorists.

There is no military or surveillance solution to terrorism; it is random and unpredictable in its particular expressions. The attempt to solve the problem through military interventions and intensified surveillance simply makes society more suffocatingly totalitarian.

All leaders involved in the ‘war on terror’ are the worst sort of hypocritical racists. The expected parade of pontificating grey suits dutifully expressed their outrage at the killing of innocents even as they continue their own war of terror against the civilian populations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen. Either life as life is valued and social systems serve its health and development or it is valued only instrumentally, as means to the reproduction of system-requirements, to be destroyed when it impedes the reproduction or spread of those requirements. When it is wedding guests in Afghanistan, or children playing soccer in the tribal areas of Pakistan or journalists in Iraq who are vaporized by a hellfire missile or chopped to bits by 50 calibre machine gun fire there is no outrage from the authors of these moral crimes, but only excuses. There is no rejoinder possible: they value life when it serves the system-requirements they in turn serve, they smilingly destroy it when it stands in their way.

Violence engenders violence.

True heroism, courage, power, is to somehow be strong enough to swim out of this vortex; to not repay violence with violence.

“Hatred which is completely vanquished by love passes into love: and love is thereupon greater than if hatred had not proceeded it.” Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part Four, Proposition 44.

“But to act so that no man dares strike you because he knows you speak the truth, to act so that you can no longer be arrested because you are asking for the right to live, to act so that all of this will end, both here and elsewhere: that is what should be in your thoughts. That is what

you must explain to others, so that you will never again be forced to bow down before anyone, but also so that no one shall be forced to bow down before you. It was to tell you this that I asked you to come, because hatred must dwell with you. Ousmane Sembene, God's Bits of Wood.

How does this lesson get taught to those in whose heart hatred does dwell?

Give Thanks!

Originally Published July 10th 2011

Let us give thanks for living in the age of the human rights war! Let us bow before the high priestess of human rights, who has dedicated the sacred power of her nation to standing with “those who seek to advance the causes of democracy and human rights wherever they may live.” (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/04/160363.htm>) Let us rejoice at the achievements of this solidarity: 137 000 Afghani and Iraqi civilians killed, between 3.2 and 4 trillion dollars spent warring in the name of peace and killing in the name of life. (<http://www.costsofwar.org>)

The souls of these dead can rest in peace, for their sacrifice, while not willing, has troubled deeply moral people at the priestly court. And amongst those deeply moral people one has reflected on “reality” and “morality.” And his reflections have yielded the conclusion that morality incompatible with reality is “utopian fantasy” which requires “factual balancing.” And so he went forth from the priestly court, into the sacred room where the scales of justice were kept, and on one scale he placed “morality,” and on the other scale he placed “reality.” The scales teetered and tottered, and at the end factual balance was established, and that factual balance yielded a principle, and the principle stated: “individuals may be killed intentionally if their expected death is compensated for by more than an equivalent expected increase in enjoyment of human rights.” (David Koller, “Towards a Human Rights-Based Law of War,” *Harvard International Law Journal*, Vol. 46, No.1, Winter, 2005, p. 251) And so morality was made to bow down before reality, and serve it.

News was sent back to the court, but the priests and priestesses yawned. For they never knew there to be any difference between “morality” and “reality.” They were amused that anyone in their midst would feel driven to determine what “factual balance” would mean, for they knew that there was nothing to balance. For the initiates, “morality” is whatever “reality” requires as its justification, and “reality” is whatever serves the interests of the court in preserving its rule. Still, they accepted the news, and they placed the scroll upon which was written this new principle in the Hall of Scrolls, and they took note of its place, should its content someday prove useful to them.

Word of the principle spread. And some of those who heard the good news were outside the walls of the priestly court. And they too had heard of “morality” and “reality” and were glad when they discovered that others had reflected upon the “balance” between them. But being weak, they had not the power to bend reality to suit their purposes whenever it suited their purposes to bend it, nor to create “morality” to justify reality.

And yet they too knew reality and morality. But living outside the walls of the court, reality was not that which suited the interests of those within the walls, but the hardness of the world with which they had to contend in order to live. And they felt this hardness everyday. But they did not simply yield to it. They thought about it. And they talked about it. And they worked it.

And they talked with the elders. And this thinking and this talking and this working and this inquiring revealed to them that though it is hard, very hard, reality is not unchanging. And it

does not only change to suit those inside the walls, but sometimes, through great and dangerous and long struggles, changes can be brought about that bring happiness to the small ones outside the walls. And this is what the small ones called morality: the principles that forced the hardness of reality to yield, so that the small ones might not only live, but live well.

And within this morality there was a set of principles, and it was known to have a place in the Hall of Scrolls, and the priests and priestesses were known to read from it on solemn occasions, and that set of principles was called “human rights.” The Preface to this scroll proclaimed these rights to be the universal “foundation of justice and peace.” The small people concluded, in their small way, that since their lives, though hard, were still worth living, and that peace meant leaving others to live as they decide, and justice requires ensuring the security of everyone’s life, that these principles must be for the sake of protecting all life, even that of the small. So long as these principles were upheld, the small, wherever they lived, could feel safe.

But then the small ones heard of the new principle recently entered into the Hall of Scrolls. And a great fear passed amongst them. For if the “foundations of peace and justice,” could permit—or, as one of the thinkers amongst them pointed out— even *require* “intentional killing” if that killing allowed some others who continued to live to increase their enjoyment of human rights—they realized that these principles, which had warmed so many a cold night of political terror, might not be protections at all.

So they sent forth for the scribe who had discovered the new principle, and they inquired of him, whether he had thought of the plight of those outside the walls, when he inscribed the new principle? And he came, and he assured them that he did think of them, and that the whole point was to better protect them, when “reality” brought violence and destruction to their midst, because reality could only be managed better or worse, but never changed in accordance with “morality.” For morality is an “ideal theory” and there is no war in ideal theory, but there surely is in reality, as the small ones well know. And so it was with the interests of the small ones in mind that the new principle was proclaimed, and a new day dawned, a day in which the small ones could still be killed, but now this killing would have to be justified.

And if the killing cannot be justified by the new principle, the small ones asked, will our dead have their life restored to them? Alas, the scribe replied, to restore life to the dead is beyond my power, but there may be alternative forms of compensation available. But the small ones— for small ones are attentive to category mistakes— responded that there is no compensation for something as irrevocable as death.

And then the small ones asked: who determines whether the intentional killing is justified? Is it permitted for us small ones who dwell beyond the walls to make that determination?

And the scribe whom they had summoned was given pause, for it had not occurred to him that the small ones might think to use this principle. And he replied that he could think of no interpretation of the principle that would rule out the small ones making use of it in the way they had suggested.

He was going to continue, but an elder interjected: “We have heard of many cases where other small people like ourselves have decided to stand their ground. And they have even appealed to something like the principle you have shared with us. And yet, when the principle was used against the great in the way that you say is permissible, we have heard that the fires of hell rained down— in some places still do rain down— upon their heads, until the many are heard to curse the day the struggle was begun.”

After this comment they thanked the scribe for his explanation, but were now confused as well as fearful.

They wondered how principles which promised the small people a decent life furnished with that which they required to live and live well could be used to justify the very opposite of what they promised. And it was not the minds of the small ones that lacked insight, for they had even stumped the great scribe who had come from within the walls. Then is there a problem with the principles? But the principles were so clear it was not apparent to anyone how the problem could lie there. “Then with reality,” suggested another? “But how can there be anything wrong with reality” a fourth responded: “it is what it is, and we must contend with it.” “Then perhaps with those who claim to be masters of reality,” said a fifth. “Yes, if there is a problem, it must lie with those within the walls, those who claim to stand with us but in reality always stand on top of us, speaking in our name and trampling us to dust if we raise our voice.”

And as they were saying this a faint droning could be heard above.

Is There Anything Else You Would Like to Help Yourself To?

Originally Published July 17th, 2011

Often the best place to find Marxist economic analysis is the pages of the business press. Perhaps because they assume that no one but capitalists are reading, they feel free to dispense with recitations of the liberal-patriotic platitudes about common national purposes that drip from the editorial pages and lay bare the state of the class struggle as the bosses see it.

Case in point: a recent article by David Parkinson in the Globe and Mail's Report on Business section. (David Parkinson, "Corporate Earnings up Despite Poor Economy." Globe and Mail, Monday, July 11th, 2011, p. B3.) The article analyses data from the last several economic quarters to reveal spectacular growth in corporate earnings in the U.S. and Canada while growth in Gross Domestic Income has been tepid. For example, in the first quarter of 2011, U.S. corporate earnings grew by 19% while Gross Domestic Income grew only 2.3%. The corresponding figures for Canada were 22.7% and 3.0%. Why the discrepancy? For the answer Parkinson turns to David Rosenberg, Chief Economist at Gluskin Sheff + Associates, who explains that "the lion's share of gross domestic income is the labour component. That has performed absolutely miserably ... But the share of income devoted toward the corporate sector has been doing just fine." In other words, corporations have been increasing their earnings at the expense of workers, whose real wages are being driven down amidst continuing high unemployment. Or to put it more bluntly, there really is a class struggle over the wealth generated by the economy, and the capitalists are winning. Marxist nonsense you say? Tell that to Rosenberg, who adds that lower labour costs as a result of on-going high unemployment, allows firms to "keep their margins nice and fat. It's absolutely wonderful news for the capitalists."

But that which is wonderful news for the capitalists is not for wonderful news for workers. Putting paid to the mythical "rising tide that lifts all boats" unemployment rates remain high: 7.4 % in Canada in June 2011, 9.2% in the U.S, despite very healthy corporate earnings. The real unemployment rate is much higher than these official figures record— as high as 16.6 % in the U.S. (<http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/learn-how-to-invest/The-real-unemployment-rate.aspx>) Figures for youth unemployment (people aged 15-24) are even worse: the average rate of youth unemployment across OECD countries for 2011 is predicted to be 20%. (<http://www.oecd.org>) While tens of millions of people, in the richest countries on earth, struggle to find work, American corporations continue to refuse to invest. Currently, the largest American corporations are sitting on 1 trillion dollars of cash reserves. Ever cheeky, the Wall Street Journal reports that, "there is a cash crisis in corporate America—although it comes not from a shortage of the stuff, but from a surplus ... All told, the companies in the Standard & Poor's 500-stock index are sitting on more than \$960 billion in cash, a record." (<http://www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303654804576349282770703112.html>) These are the "job creators" that John Boehner wants to protect from tax increases.

Thus, the job creators who do not create jobs sit on mountains of cash and reap the benefits of tax cuts. Workers and the poorest of the poor pay for these tax cuts- through lower wages, reduced pensions, reduced benefits, lower social assistance payments, and draconian changes to labour and welfare law designed to make permanent the political weakness of these groups.

Canadians and Europeans best not be smug. Less than two months after winning a minority of votes but a majority government, the Harper regime began to attack workers. First, the government threatened striking Air Canada workers with back to work legislation, a threat they did not act on because an agreement was reached. Not a week later they not only threatened but passed back to work legislation to end a strike by postal workers. The worst is yet to come, as the government is promising to find 4 billion per year in ‘savings’ in order to pay down the deficit. Meanwhile, inequality continues to grow. A recent report by the Conference Board of Canada concludes that, “in Canada, only the fifth quintile—the group of richest Canadians—has increased its share of national income. All other quintile groups have lost share. This was particularly evident in the 1990s, when the income share for this top group jumped from 36.5 per cent in 1990 to 39.1 per cent in 2000,” the level at which it remains today. (<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/hcp/hot-topics/canInequality.aspx>)

The situation in much of Europe remains dire, with unemployment above 15 % in Greece, 20 % in Spain, amidst a rampaging ‘debt’ crisis which is being used to further transfer money from workers and the poor to wealthy and institutional bondholders. Again, the underlying class reality of this crisis is made clear by business journalists. Thus David Olive, writing in the Business section of the Toronto Star argues that “the real bailout recipients are the European commercial banks holding Greek debt.” (David Olive, “No End in Sight for Euro-Mess, Toronto Star, Saturday, July 16th, 2011, p. B3).

It is clear that the ruling class, despite what their ideologues sometimes argue in public, is not at all opposed to income redistribution— so long as that redistribution is from workers and the poor to their private holdings. Economics is sometimes described as the science of rational choice under conditions of scarcity. I ask anyone, regardless of their professed political beliefs: is it rational to re-distribute income upwards, when that income is hoarded or invested in ways that produce more money for the money-holder but no thing, resource, or practice that anyone’s life actually requires? Is it rational to bring new generations of people into the world, demand that they “pay their own way,” but then do nothing to ensure that the economy actually produces meaningful work that would enable them to satisfy this demand? Is it rational to have workers invest a certain percentage of their income over the duration of their working lives in pensions, and then, because of events that those pensioners had nothing to do with, reduce or eliminate payments all together, thereby leaving retired people with no means of supporting themselves, all the while preaching the virtues of savings and self-reliance, which is where pensions come from and just what they were designed to enable people to do? Is it rational to force cities, provinces, states, or countries to sell off income generating public assets for one time payouts to private entities who will then derive all future money-value from those assets, while the revenue from the sale goes not to the public, but to banks that hold those cities’, provinces’, states’, or nations’ debt?

The answer to these questions depends on how one defines “rationality.” If we define rationality as it has been typically defined in neo-classical economics, as the ability to determine which of alternative courses of action will return the most of whatever it is the person desires to that person, then it can be rational to choose policies which redistribute income upwards and so on, over the short term and assuming you are amongst the very few who benefit. But even this instrumental definition of rationality will have to fail over the long term, for some future group, precisely because the natural and social life-support and life-development systems upon which we all ultimately depend are increasingly undermined. If we take a long term perspective rooted in the shared interest of everyone in a life-supportive natural world, and forms of social organization which enable everyone to participate in the collective creation and governance of our lives together, then the type of self-maximizing, moment to moment ‘rationality’ of neo-classical economics is most irrational. It is most irrational because it is, in the words of the Canadian philosopher John McMurtry, “life-incoherent.” If our individual choices give rise to patterns of behaviour which will end up undermining the natural field of life-support and the social field of life-development upon which we all— rich or poor— depend, then these choices and patterns are materially irrational, even for the rich, who can no more live without an atmosphere or a functioning political system than the poor. Beneath the opposed class interest lies a universal life-interest.

Think of a global society in which this universal life-interest formed the basis of public policy choices. It would be a society in which the life-sustaining resources of the earth were collectively owned and controlled by all, and not by private corporations. These resources would be used to create life-value, not money-value. In other words, natural resources would be utilized only to produce goods and services that our biological and social lives required. That would mean that we could reduce the overall output of global industries while distributing its benefits more equally, eliminating body and soul crushing poverty while depriving no one anywhere of any resource, relationship, service, or institution their lives actually require. That would contribute to the all important goal of ensuring that the level of global production was ecologically sustainable over an open ended future. Reducing production (not productivity) and demand would help to ensure that the economic system made available meaningful jobs for all, and yet reduce the overall proportion of life-time any particular person would have to devote to paid labour, because socially necessary labour time would fall as demand for and production of superfluities fell. Finally, this society would be a society in which economic decisions were made collectively by all who have an interest in their outcome, and not by a small ruling class bent on maximizing their own exclusive money-holdings. This sort of society: sustainable, clean, democratic, and just, is a materially rational society, because it could non-violently, non-exploitatively reproduce itself over an open ended future.

People might even be happy in it. I would call this society socialist, but the name is not what matters. How can it not become the alternative we all work towards, as it is clear that what we have now is not working?

Wall Street

Originally Published October 11th, 2011

The surest sign that a novel political movement is gaining in importance is that existing political parties become 'split' over its meaning. Depending on its content and demands, the 'progressive' parties of the ruling class will seek to align themselves to the movement, acknowledging its general legitimacy while regretting the extra-parliamentary means which it employs, while the 'conservative' parties will vilify both the demands and the forms of struggle. Both seek nothing more than their own short-term political advantage, and thus the perpetuation of the existing institutions, ruling value system, and structure of power.

The Occupy Wall Street movement has now ascended to this position of importance. On the one hand, the world's most homicidal Noble Peace Prize laureate claims that he 'understands' the protesters' arguments. On the other hand, the troglodytes of Fox News and the Republican Party are intensifying their slander of the protesters as hypocritical youth with too much time on their hands and no real ideas for change. Ignoring both 'sides' of official politics, the movement perseveres and continues to grow, having now spread to more than 1000 cities and towns across the U.S., with Canadian mobilizations beginning to take shape. They join existing struggles across the Arab World (the original movement was inspired by the Egyptian revolution) and Europe, especially Spain and Greece. While there have been no practical breakthroughs as of yet, the survival of the protest camp for more than three weeks and the movement's growth beyond lower Manhattan have already struck the strongest blow against the apparent ideological invincibility of capitalism since the anti-globalization protests of the 1990's. The dwellers in the belly of the beast are rousing themselves.

No one who has worked to criticize the contradictions and injustices of capitalism and contributed in anyway towards the construction of alternatives can be anything but excited by the unexpected dynamism of this movement. However, it will soon face a challenge far more daunting than combating the inanities of Fox News mouthbreathers and the self-interested tut-tutting of New York's billionaire mayor. That challenge is: how to convert itself from a protest movement built on moral rhetoric that is effective at illuminating the monstrous inequalities of capitalism ('We are the 99%') to a constructive political movement built on a credible alternative to capitalism capable of uniting people in long-term transformative action. As David Schweickhart rightly notes, capitalist crisis alone will not produce the political momentum needed to solve its contradictions. Nor can abstract moral criticism, no matter how well-articulated and justified. Opportunities for progressive change depend on structural crisis and the presence of alternative values, but also on there being a well-developed "counter-project" which convincingly demonstrates how the dependence of human life and happiness on labour and commodity markets can be overcome. (David Schweickhart, *After Capitalism*, 2nd edition, 2010, p. 193.)

It would of course be too much to expect any coherent and well-worked out programme of structural social, economic, political, and economic change to be forthcoming from the Occupy Wall Street movement at this early moment. Political patience is required to allow concrete

goals to emerge through the process of democratic debate and practice freed from the constrictions of existing parties and structures. At the same time, as Naomi Klein rightly emphasized in her address to the protestors, they should not reject, for political-philosophical reasons, the importance, indeed, the necessity, of well-defined, vertically integrated political organizations. "Being horizontal and deeply democratic is wonderful. But these principles are compatible with the hard work of building structures and institutions that are sturdy enough to weather the storms ahead." (<http://www.commondreams.org/view/2011/10/07-0>)

Just as impassioned rhetoric and statistics alone cannot build a new world, neither can real time communication through social media. Rhetoric, statistics, new media, and more traditional forms of organization are simply tools. That which is actually responsible for the development of new worlds are ideas and determined, creative action through which they are realized. But the creative actions through which new ideas are realized requires political and social institutions, not simply movements. As the ultimate dissolution of the anti-globalization movement in North America and Europe revealed, protests ultimately exhaust themselves if they rely too much on resisting and not enough on creating. Today, the most creative attempts to instantiate new forms of democratic economic and social life are not found in amorphous movements, but in political parties across Latin America, especially Bolivia and Venezuela, which are employing political power to gradually carve out new spaces in which human life can flourish free from the depredations and deprivations of the capitalist market. That is not to say that there are not tensions, problems, and contradictions at work in these parties and struggles. It is to say only that society cannot be changed by protest alone, but only through the transformation of spontaneity into democratic planning.

The transformation of spontaneity into democratic planning does not mean, of course, that spontaneity should just be given over to existing political parties and social institutions. Existing political parties are purely creatures of electoral politics and useless as means of change. The existing labour movement is moribund and directionless, having been out-manoeuvred by globalizing capital. But it does not follow that parties and movements of working people are useless and moribund. The worst thing that could happen to the Occupy Wall Street movement—aside from outright violent repression by the capitalist state—is that it starts to believe its own press to the effect that it is a creature of social media. Twitter no more made the Arab Spring than liberty hats made the French Revolution. Ideas have always spread, whether by word of mouth at working people's pubs or the Internet. What matters is not the means of dissemination, but the content disseminated. For ideas critical of the established world to survive and spread they must demonstrate to people not that another world is logically, but concretely, possible. To demonstrate real possibility requires an account either of how existing institutions can be freed from their service to the life-blind dynamics of capitalism and the interests of the 1%, or what new institutions through which social life can be coordinated and human self-determination made real will look like.

Citizens of Greece, No One Said You Had Options

Originally Published November 3rd 2011

Didn't you hear, citizens of Greece, that "The Market," though displeased that bondholders would have to take a haircut on the debt payments they will exact from you, was moved to outright 'shock' that you were to be given a say as to your fate. Like the Olympian Gods of your myths, directing human affairs for their own delectation and amusement, "The Market" warned of dire consequences for this act of hubris. Lightning bolts were gathered to strike should you reject the terms on offer.

Your Prime Minister was summoned. He was reminded by the bluegrey suits that democracy is only ever for other people, those whom the bluegrey suits do not yet fully control and exploit. He was scolded: "Those who are already 'free' are not to drink the unmixed wine of democracy. You are Greek. Surely you have read your Plato. You are not supposed to take the rhetoric of democracy seriously, for if you do, your people will start to think that they have options. Did *"The Market"* say you had options? Did *we* say you had options? No one said *you* had options. You are already "free," so you do not require any options.

"The Market" has spoken. We, the bluegrey suits of Europe, simply give voice to its decisions. You will comply. Your people will pay with their savings and their jobs and the future of their children."

"Now leave us, and go explain your mistake, small man."

So now that your Prime Minister has been properly instructed as to how the world works, it is up to you, people of Greece, to remember ancient but difficult truths. You grew olives and raised sheep and made wine before any German banks existed. You warmed yourself in the sun and wrote and argued and created before there were Euros. You built boats and explored before there were exchange rates. The sun, the sea, the soil and your own labour sustained you, and sustain you still, as they sustain us all.

Your senses, your lungs, your minds, your hands already know that which "The Market" must by all means prevent you from acting upon. Though it believes itself all seeing, all knowing, all powerful, "The Market" is not God but parasite, living off the avails of nature and labour. In fact, it is less than a parasite. Without your compliance, it is nothing. "The Market" can threaten catastrophe, but it cannot stop the sun from shining, the soil from growing, your minds from thinking, your collective action from reclaiming and transforming your own future. It can only take from you that which you have created if you yourselves give up that which it demands. It is nothing, save fear of the consequences it threatens. Despite its fulminations, it cannot act. As ever, it relies on you to give it the payment it expects. If you refuse, it cannot do anything.

"It will destroy the world economy!"

Will it? Will it destroy the creative intelligence and practical capacities of the species? Will it destroy the raw materials from which real production takes place? Will it destroy our abilities to cooperate, plan, and share? Threaten as it will, “The Market” has no power to accomplish those ends.

“It will destroy our savings!”

It cannot do that, either, unless you let it. Demand in full what your government promised in part, before withdrawing even that: democracy. Democracy is *rule* of the people, which presupposes collective control over life-sustaining resources, the institutions that coordinate the collective labour that builds the human world, and the social wealth “The Market” would claim for its own.

This is what “The Market” fears most: Being seen through to the nothingness it really is. For once their real basis of life, activity, and happiness in nature and labour has been discovered, “The Market” can no longer inspire fear. It becomes apparent that we can do without it, since we neither breathe, nor drink, nor eat it. If it no longer commands fear, it no longer commands. Then the great work of re-appropriating the universal life-substance which sustains and enables us all can begin.

The smoke in the room is thick. The final round of drinks has been poured. The last cards have been dealt. The bets have been placed. You have the better hand. Do not fold. Call “The Market’s” bluff. Force it to put its cards on the table.

Then take your money, but do not go home, but tarry in your ancient agoras and stoas and demonstrate to us all once again how to build a better world.

Addendum (June 14th, 2012): When I first published this piece it looked as though “the markets” would have their way and force even greater austerity upon the citizens of Greece. Heroically, however, the people of Greece have refused to silently comply with the demands of bankers and bondholders. There is a real chance that the socialist Left, under the leadership of the group SYRIZA will hold the balance of power after parliamentary elections in the third week of June. Please follow the link below to examine their programme.

In solidarity with the people of Greece: lead the way!

<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/653.php#continue>

new york left forum youth riot

Originally Published March 22nd 2012

New York

The city is the concentrated energy of the contradictions of the last three centuries. Colonialism, capitalism, globalization, financialization generating poverty, homelessness, segregation, racial, ethnic, and class violence but at the same time forming the womb for the Chrysler Building, St. Mark's Place, jazz, the Harlem Renaissance, Walt Whitman, Stonewall, Martha Graham, Louise Bourgeois, Abstract Expressionism, Philip Guston, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Jim Jarmusch, Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, the Velvet Underground, the New York Dolls, the Ramones, Chuck D., Sonic Youth, Sharon Jones...

Coursing through it all, the unchoreographed dance of ceaseless human motion.

Between the grey elegance of the Brooklyn Bridge and an already-cliched-before-it-was-finished Frank Gehry condominium stands Pace University. In the middle of this architectural contradiction takes place the Left Forum 2012. The urban-loving left-wing intellectual is a contradiction in the midst of a contradiction in the city of contradictions: powerless to resist the exhilaration of having a role in the dance; confusion as to how a system he has come here to criticize could have given rise to a creation so irresistible.

Left Forum

In its 30 year history the Left Forum has never been so large. Animated by the Arab Spring and Occupy, 4000 participants gather to listen, argue, and exchange ideas on every imaginable subject: public education and public health care, economic crisis and nationalizing the banks, the politics of twitter and life without money, ecofeminism and how to avoid climate catastrophe, the possibility of new socialist party formations and the role of religion in the struggle for social justice. Militant ideas, articulated from a diversity of perspectives, academics and activists swapping stories in the halls, local and global orientations co-mingling. Best of all, objective evidence that America is not lunatic Santorums and 'reality' tv, but down-in-the-trenches fighters for a democratic society. For a moment, political dreams are freed from historical doubts.

At the same time, a sense of missed opportunities. There was the Occupy think tank on the first night, but at the plenaries, just luminaries talking at, not discussing with. Why was there no attempt to bring 4000 people *together* to talk politics, tactics, strategy, goals, organization, means of institutionalization and transformation? Everyone too much in their own rooms –just like university– pursuing their separate interests, all the while asserting the need for unity, direction, organization, etc. But the organizers organized no space or time to allow this unity to be created.

There was talk of a crisis of leadership in the unions and on the left. Indeed. But this raises a frightening prospect: what if leadership and genuine social progress are antitheses? What if

leaders are motivated only by the power of command, not the value of the idea? Then those with leadership qualities will pursue power, either through the vehicle of established parties, or by transforming whatever opposition movement they lead into an establishment party. In that case, solving the problem of leadership would be a pyrrhic victory at best. Historical doubts return to silence political dreams.

So no leaders then— horizontalism, social media, reclaimed space, the right to the city, liberated zones, spontaneous order, self-organization. So good in the saying and in the hearing, but no match for the very vertical blows of organized state violence.

Exuberant, said Frances Fox Piven at the closing plenary, exuberant she said she felt. Cannot feel the same way. Where is the left today that it was not at when the Forum began?

Youth Riot

On Saturday evening, Zuccotti Park, a missed opportunity to get involved. Michael Moore was speaking but felt disinclined to listen to celebrity lecturing. Afterwards, however, Moore asked people to march to Zuccotti Park, to mark the sixth month anniversary of Occupy. Peaceful initially, but then, for the crime of sitting down, the cops attacked, arresting dozens, injuring a few. Youth organizing themselves to fight non-violently for solutions. Together, constructive, peaceful, thoughtful, engaged, having fun, creative, happy. If only one could say the same for the police.

On Saturday evening, London, another group of youth, a corporate-programmed herd, doing what they have been told to do, drunk with leprechaun hats and green shorts. A new defence against taking responsibility: inference from internalized media-created stereotype- we are 'x,' therefore we are supposed to do 'y.' No thought, no resistance. Result? Not constructive, not peaceful, stupid, ignorant of the meaning of existing in social space, drone-like, destructive, thinking they are happy but really miserable in the face of a hard world that is not going to do them any favours. But rather than try to change it together, they flee from the task into their ghettos and hope someone else will deal with the problems. Also attacked, beaten, but who feels inclined to help them now?

Enjoy life, by all means, but learn to govern yourselves, because if you do not govern yourselves, someone else will, and that is rarely the better option.

Street Fightin' Men

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There comes a morning every year around this time when you feel a slight chill that announces, whether you like it or not, that summer will soon give way to autumn. As I stepped outside early this morning I felt that chill. A period of transition is at hand.

People who live in these latitudes know what is coming- a gradual relaxation in the humidity, cooler evenings and mornings, shorter days, the leaves changing colour, the denuding of the trees, a creeping brownness everywhere, then snow and winter darkness.

Looking back on this morning from the perspective of this afternoon, it appears the chill air was expressing, like the pathetic fallacy in Shakespeare that I remember studying in high school English class, the changes in human affairs taking place today.

Two endings, and difficult questions about the directions of the new beginnings.

While Moammar Gadhafi has not yet been found, his regime is certainly over. He becomes the latest autocrat to be toppled by the Arab democratization movements. Unlike the first two to fall, Mubarak and Ben Ali, Gadhafi had not been a loyal servant of the West during his 43 year tyranny. Undoubtedly because of that, and because of the oil wealth of Libya, NATO was quick to leap to the aid of the various rebel factions arrayed against him, aid that those still being jailed, brutalized, and killed in Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain have not been so “fortunate” to have received.

Which way does the wind now blow in Libya? Toward the West, sure to be on the doorstep in the morning demanding repayment for its “humanitarian assistance?” Or can it cycle within Libya itself, binding the various factions together in solidarity around a democratic agenda which has real substance: not just constitutional platitudes but collective control over the country’s oil wealth and its use for the comprehensive satisfaction of everyone’s life-requirements so that they might freely develop their life-capacities?

The latter alternative, the genuinely democratic alternative, sounds ridiculous, does it not? Yet it was not so long ago that such an agenda, at least at the level of rhetoric, resounded wherever there was revolution. That it sounds so stupid is a sign of just how irrelevant the left has become to the global tides of change. At the same time, if one becomes so afraid of sounding ridiculous, these ideas risk becoming lost forever, and the ideas (in whatever words they might be expressed) remain the only materially rational alternative to life-destructive global capitalism, still triumphant even in the midst of a global crisis to which no one in power or seriously vying for power has any solutions.

Which way does the wind blow for the left in Canada after the death of Jack Layton? Toward retrenching the cult of personality around which the last election was “successfully” fought? Will the image and memory of “Jack” dominate the life of the party from beyond the grave? Or

can a way be found to create a party program that has real political and economic democratic substance?

That sounds about as ridiculous as hoping for a smooth transition to a democratic socialist system in Libya. Layton's poignant letter to the Canadian people spoke of not giving up on the "cause" that defines the NDP. But what is that cause? On what principled basis did they fight the last election?

But perhaps I see only darkness because evening is falling now. When he was a Toronto city councilor Layton was not afraid to call himself a socialist. I remember that about twenty years ago, when I was a young member of the International Socialists, that Layton came to our convention to debate the question of "Which Way Forward for Socialism?" So perhaps beneath the skin of the politician there was a human soul for whom "social justice" was not just a slogan but meant challenging the structures of power and ruling value-systems.

But as the heroic rebels of Egypt and Tunisia have discovered and the soon to be victorious rebels of Libya will soon discover, removing the men who think they rule from power only exposes what actually does rule: the global money-value system. And that system is not at all so easy to topple or transform, even when it is failing by its own metrics of health and success. It cannot be toppled or transformed by force of personality or parliamentary debate that accepts the prevailing rules of the game.

Progress has always come, in human history, when people, not politicians, demand new rules embedded in a more inclusive understanding of what human lives require for meaningful and constructive self-realization and happiness, and stand together until those new rules have been institutionalized. These struggles are the antithesis of violent struggles, for violence is by definition life-destructive, whereas progress is by definition life-enabling. Look at the history of every revolution- it is not the revolution that unleashes rivers of blood, but the reaction and the civil wars it engenders. If anything of the revolution survives the reaction, it always takes the form of wider circles of satisfaction of the life-interests denied by the *ancien regime*. More people are better fed, better educated and allowed to participate in the key institutions of collective life.

This is the one and only universal cause of humanity: to organize its collective life so that the natural basis of life-support is preserved and sustainably utilized to create socio-cultural human worlds in which all can express and enjoy their capacities to sense and experience the aesthetic richness of the world, to freely explore the boundlessness of imagination and thought, and to have the opportunity to act and create in ways that enable other lives to do the same.

The winds have blown in that direction before. Can they be made to blow in that direction again?

Committing Social Suicide

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Is a society in which politicians deploy the interests of children as weapons in a struggle against reasonable opponents of their austerity agenda democratic in any coherent sense of the term? There were undoubtedly elements of bargaining table theatrics in Ontario Education Minister Laurel Broten's threat to eliminate 10000 elementary school teaching positions if the teachers' union did not accept 0 % wage increases. (Rob Ferguson, Tanya Talaga, and Kristin Rushowy, "Teachers, MDs Warned Over Pay," *The Toronto Star*, Friday, April 13th, 2012, p. A1). Nevertheless, the Minister of *Education*, who is responsible for the health of the institutions in which the cognitive and imaginative capacities of the next generation of Ontarians are cultivated, openly threatened to ignore her responsibilities to those students in favour of responsibilities to the institutional bond holders who own Ontario's debt- the only group that will benefit from the 'fiscal restraint' announced in the provincial budget.

Let us think about the deeper grounds and implications of this threat. Teachers, defending their right, *not to a wage increase*, but to free collective bargaining, are attacked by the Education Minister as the potential cause of a decline in educational quality, even though the only way those jobs could be lost is by her decision to eliminate them. There are three fundamental moral contradictions implicit in the Minister's attempt to make teachers' bargaining demands rather than the government's own policies responsible for compromising the public education system. Teasing them out tells us much about the value disorder under which Ontario, and the world, is currently suffering.

1. Preaching responsibility to everyone else, never accepting it oneself. It is a great virtue to have the courage to assume responsibility for one's actions. Neo-liberal ideologues never tire of lecturing the unemployed, the drug addicted, women, and the poor about assuming responsibility for their lives. Yet they never assume responsibility for the destructive consequences of the policy options they impose upon these targets. Why not? If the policy prescriptions are sound, should they not trumpet their authorship of them? If austerity raises the level of unemployment, and the government that imposed the policy sincerely believes it was the right move, then why not take responsibility for the effects and say: "Yes, our policy did cause higher unemployment, and that outcome is good, because unemployment generates downward pressure on wages, which increases profits, and profitable investment is the lifeblood of the capitalist system. Yes, unemployment causes deep psychic trauma as people are forced to contemplate themselves in a world that has no use for them. Yes, these traumas generate further pathologies like addiction and violence, and these are good too, because they give us a reason to intensify the disciplinary-surveillance-repressive powers of the state, which makes political organizing more difficult, which means that it is more likely that we will be able to continue on with the austerity agenda, even though it is so demonstrably harmful to people's shared life-interests." Yet, we never hear the architects of these problems make these admissions, but must endure their sermonizing to the victims to pull themselves up by their own hair.

2. Self-sacrifice is virtuous, but only those over whom power is exercised are called upon to practice it. Broten's arguments play upon the nobility of individuals' being willing to attenuate

their short term monetary interests so as to help in the collective effort to improve overall economic health. It is true that a willingness to devote oneself to a valuable collective project, even at some costs to oneself, is a virtue. But this abstract moral truth is put to perverse use time and again by politicians whose policy choices attack and undermine those who are actually making a contribution to the public good. The real contributors to the common wealth of material and symbolic life-value— those who build, educate, create, clean, heal, etc.— are only *asked* to sacrifice after they have in fact already been sacrificed. Then, when people resist being treated as tools of an agenda which they have had no part at all in framing, they are denounced as ‘greedy special interests.’ The faceless, fractional minority who actually reap the returns on these assaults but which invests nothing of their gains back into the society from which the money has been extracted happily continues to gorge itself free of criticism and condemnation.

3. Exalting freedom, and then blaming every political (free) decision on an abstract necessity that is impossible to resist. This contradiction expresses the massively destructive moral-political logic of no alternative. Where and whenever politics requires blood on the floor, there some overweening necessity— God, the Fates, the Market (notice the identity of logical function)— will be invoked. Contradictions 1 and 2 presuppose 3 as their condition of possibility. Responsibility for the sacrifice of others’ life-interests requires a subject onto which this responsibility can be off-loaded. The more impersonal this object, the better. If there is no one to blame but quasi-natural forces which no effort, individual or collective, can resist, then there is no *political* problem (i.e., no problem which changes in the structure of collective governance could solve). Thus, even if organized resistance would not be met with force, there would be no point to it, since there is no alternative. Hence, you should bleed silently, but know that it is for the best, because freedom requires the sacrifice you are rightly forced to make because you have lived too high off too many hogs for too long.

Acting on the basis of the truth of 3 is tantamount to committing social suicide. By ‘social suicide’ I do not refer to the extinction of the species, but to the willful destruction of society as a free association of self-conscious agents who decide together how they will live. If we really must sacrifice every life-valuable institution: public education and public health care, publicly funded cultural and artistic spaces, open civic and natural space; if we cannot invest collectively created wealth in opening the intellectual and creative horizons of every person, if instead we must be forced to eliminate all of these life-goods for the sake of a credit rating, then we have lost the humanity it has taken millennia to create.

But is there no hope? Perhaps it is concealed in the existence of the very contradictions which led me to my dreary conclusion. Can one not detect, beneath the prevarications and displacements, a silent acknowledgement of deep wrongs being committed? Could it be that the contradictions are signs that the executors of this destructive value-program recognize that they are undermining the institutions, relationships, and practices that define the very civilization they claim to uphold? Why else would they work so hard to deflect attention away from themselves? Could it not be, as John McMurtry has argued, that “state and corporate agents will go to any lengths to provide cover-ups and rationalizations” for their assaults on the shared life-interest because they know that human consciousness cannot long bear life-destruction. Learning who the causes of life-destruction are activates “a civil commons identification” of

human life with other human life, an identification that can “cross classes, cultures, races, and genders.” (*The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, p. 214).

This civil commons identification carried the spark ignited in Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Greece, New York, and across North America in the Occupy Movement. These movements are seeking to reconnect human social organization to the life-value ground with which it has lost touch. This reconnection is not about higher salaries or special interests, it is about collective self-governance and free self-development– the due of everyone now alive for millennia of struggle against exploitation and oppression of all sorts.

CLASSE Struggle

Originally Published, May 3rd, 2012

Are the alarm clocks of mainstream journalists set to the tune of broken glass? After ignoring a strike of 186 000 students in Quebec for almost 8 weeks, some minor vandalism and a scuffle or two with the cops has set off a flurry of coverage. Objective reporting soon grew dull, so it was replaced by patronizing critique. Once again, people coming together to exercise democratic power in opposition to the further erosion of public goods are denounced as selfish, blinded by the comfort of their historic “entitlements.” Like disobedient children, they need to be taken behind the barn and whipped with the harsh lash of reality.

One does not need to study metaphysics to know with what reality these students need to be lashed. It is the reality of unemployment or drudgery. The wages of the sin of expecting that a society that prides itself on freedom of choice really means that you have a choice— about what to study, about how to organize politically, about whether to accept what politicians try to impose upon you— is condemnation to a life of servitude.

You are free only to make the right choices. What are the right choices? The stern, uncompromising, right wing intelligence of Margaret Wentz can tell us. From her pulpit on Front Street, 500 kilometers from the action, she has discovered that, “the protesters do not include accounting, science and engineering students, who have better things to do than hurl projectiles at police. They’re the sociology, anthropology, philosophy, arts, and victim-studies students, whose degrees are increasingly worthless in a world that increasingly demands hard skills. The world will not be kind to them. They’re the baristas of tomorrow and they don’t even know it, because the adults in their lives have sheltered them and encouraged their mass flight from reality.”

She did not mention whether the journalism students were with the protesters or still at work acquiring the “hard skills” needed to pontificate in press. But no matter. Let us seek further insight into reality.

“A university degree,” she continues “is no longer an automatic ticket to a decent job and a pleasant living. According to a devastating story by The Associated Press last week, more than 50 per cent of recent university graduates in the United States are either unemployed or working in jobs that don’t require bachelor’s degrees. They’re more likely to work as “waiters, waitresses, bartenders and food-service helpers than as engineers, physicists, chemists and mathematicians combined” Margaret Wentz, “Quebec’s University Students are in for a Shock,” Globe and Mail, Tuesday May 1st, 2012

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/quebecs-university-students-are-in-for-a-shock/article2418431>

Now, forgive me if I err, because I only have three worthless philosophy degrees, but has she not just undermined her own argument? First, she chides the social science and humanities students for wasting time with degrees that will not land them a job, and then she cites a “devastating”

report from the Associated Press which suggests that even students with the “hard skills” demanded by today’s hard reality are facing difficulties finding work. If engineers and physicists and other useful people are having to work as waiters and waitresses, might there not be something wrong with the economic system, indeed, with the entire set of priorities of this society, and not with the choices young people make as to what to study? Is youth unemployment in Spain 50% because too many young people are studying philosophy and not enough physics?

In any case, the economics of youth unemployment are not my main concern here. My main concern is the value of education both for the individual who becomes educated and for the society that invests resources to educate them. Let us set aside the invidious contrast that Wentz wants to assert between the pure and applied science and professional degrees on the one hand, and humanistic and social scientific work on the other. Regardless of what one studies, what is the reason to study it? Wentz seems to believe that the entire value of education lies in the job it leads to. Let us accept this answer, but ask: what do we mean by ‘job.’ Do we simply mean paid employment? As Wentz points out, you do not need a university degree to find a paying job. But what if we mean more than paid employment, what if we mean “opportunities to contribute to the value of the lives of others in the society of which one is a part.”

I think that this desire to contribute is an excellent reason to study. But how many ways are there to contribute to the value of the lives of others with whom one shares a social life? Far, far more than there are subjects in university. But let us just stick to those subjects for the moment. Do only engineers and business students have something to contribute? Is life about nothing more than making money and building things? Life in capitalist society is increasingly about nothing more than making money and building things, but it does not follow that there is no value in practices and activities that lead to insight and understanding but not money. There is a reason that the disciplines devoted to interpretation and understanding are called ‘the humanities.’

John Rawls, commenting on the idea of the great German humanist Wilhelm von Humboldt that the good society is a “social union of social unions” argued that “we may say, following von Humboldt, that it is through social union founded on the needs and potentialities of its members that each person can participate in the total sum of the realized natural assets of the others.” (*A Theory of Justice*, p. 523, 1971) For Rawls, a just society was not merely procedurally fair, but substantively valuable for its members. In order to be substantively valuable, it has to make a place for *everyone* with something to contribute, whether that contribution be scientific, practical, artistic, or scholarly. A substantively valuable society is a harmonious unity of different talents, pursuits, goals, and interests all contributing to the end of enabling each to enjoy their lives, rather than just survive. Attaining this society is not an engineering problem, but requires political, philosophical, moral, and economic *imagination*, as well as ‘hard’ skills.’ By ensuring place for all talents and interests that enrich and humanize life, a good social organization enables the progressive ramification and deepening of the whole wealth of human intelligence and creativity. The good society is not a world in which everyone is forced to sacrifice their interests and talents for the sake of maintaining mere biological existence. It welcomes difference of pursuit and goal as the very essence of human community.

The real issue at stake in the Quebec student strike, as in protests against austerity in Greece and youth unemployment in Spain, is not tuition rates or wage levels, it is the legitimacy of a society that brings new life into the world but prepares no *social* space for human *living*. What is at stake is the legitimacy of a society that reduces every commitment to an “investment” in personal monetary payoffs in the future. What is at stake is thus the legitimacy of a society in which no one is ever present, engaged with the object of their interest, because they are forced to instrumentalize their present for the sake of a secure future that never arrives. Commentators genuinely concerned with the well-being of students should be fulminating against the moral absurdity of a world that does not take care to ensure that there is space for everyone to contribute in their own ways to collective well-being, rather than against the students exercising their democratic power to protest against this absurdity.

Democracy, Violence, Negotiation, Freedom

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As I begin work on this piece at least 100 000 and possibly as many as 250 000 students and workers are in the streets of Montreal celebrating 100 days since the beginning of the student strike. They are also openly defying the attempt of the Charest government to intimidate them to acquiesce to its plan to impose higher tuition fees. But this struggle is not about tuition fees. Like the struggles against austerity in Greece, against outrageous levels of youth unemployment in Spain, against the European Central bank in Frankfurt, against military-Islamic rule in Egypt, against NATO in Chicago, this is a struggle about the nature and future of democracy. To properly evaluate its significance and the tactics it has adopted, we need to begin from a discussion of the meaning of democratic political action.

Chantal Hebert, in her column last week in *The Toronto Star*, understood the deeper political issues involved in the Quebec student strike. Unfortunately, she equates mass action with intimidation and confines democratic action to voting at election time. (Chantal Hebert, "Quebec Spring will Spark Political Storm," *Toronto Star*, Saturday, May 19th, 2012, p. A15). But there is nothing in the meaning of the term 'democracy' that can legitimate the restriction of democratic action to voting. If it were the case that democratic action and voting were synonymous, the possibility of democratic political action in between elections would be ruled out as a contradiction in terms.

Now, were it the case that governments were elected on the basis of platforms that understood the common life-interest– life-sustaining environments, economic systems that maintained rather than despoiled those environments, adequate funding for public institutions, a re-division of labour time such that all who need work can find it while no one is forced to work longer than necessary for their own survival and development, rich and tolerant and creative and inclusive cultural practices– and demonstrably served it, and were recallable if they demonstrably did not, voting might have the significance that Hebert attributes to it. But if different governing parties converge around policies that serve masters that are not subject to democratic accountability– corporations, finance capital, institutional bond holders– who all demand of governments the same policies– privatization, defunding of public institutions, lower real wages, higher user fees, subordination of all social practices and institutions and individual goals and aspirations to the discipline and values of "the market"– and these policies demonstrably harm the common life-interest– raising unemployment, making available work more precarious, making social life more cut-throat and mean-spirited– then democracy requires extra-parliamentary action.

Democracy is not just a ritual of choosing ruling parties; it is on-going engagement and experiment with self-rule. Democracy as all-encompassing social practices of self-rule requires mobilization, solidarity, and resistance against anti-democratic social forces, whether the embodiment of those social forces– the given ruling party– has been elected or not. At the same time, engagement and experiment with self-rule also requires coherent and realizable goals, the capacity to build solidarity by articulating the universal value that justifies particular demands, and especially *discipline to resist the temptation to vandalism and non-constructive confrontations with the police*. The student movement has exemplified the nature of a

democratic mass movement: it has coherent short and long term goals (no tuition hikes, eventually tuition fully paid by public resources); it has built solidarity with workers in Quebec and increasingly with sympathetic forces around the world, it has been disciplined. This struggle is the winnable struggle that the Canadian (and global) Left needs to rebuild its confidence and re-take the initiative after forty years of neo-liberal assaults on democracy and public institutions. What it must do now is remain patient and resist the voices- who, if they are not agent provocateurs, they should be- making vacuous calls for revolution, and thinking that setting fires or smashing shop windows will hasten the triumph.

A movement that refuses to be provoked is much more difficult to demonize as violent. At least 100 000 people turned out in Montreal to stand with the students precisely because the Charest government has failed in its demonization efforts. That is not to say that those efforts will continually fail. It has always amazed me the ease with which states- which Max Weber defined in terms of institutional structures with a monopoly on the means of violence- can convince the broader public that democratic action outside of parliamentary norms is “violent.” The police too, behind their shields and body armour and guns and pepper spray and masks and sound cannons and helicopters and horses and cars, regularly invoke their own safety as reasons for attacking, gassing, beating, and kettling generally non-violent protestors. Nevertheless, the ease with which the tables are turned- the armed blaming the unarmed for violence- should sound a warning that the student movement should heed. In order to avoid more intense repression, it is essential to rise above the temptation to respond to provocation. Let the workers and students of Egypt be an example. Faced with far more brutal threats to life and limb, they stood their ground and toppled Mubarak with the power of their commitment and solidarity. The struggle is far from won in Egypt, but the progressive forces have not been cut down and imprisoned. They live to continue the battle.

As do the students. Although 700 people were arrested on the night of May 23rd the movement itself has not been undermined. While a poll on the weekend of May 19-20 found that 68 % of respondents in Quebec supported the government’s position on tuition hikes with only 32 % supporting the students, (“Poll Finds Massive Support for Charest” Andrew Chung, *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, May 19th, 2012, p. A14), the clearly undemocratic nature of Bill 78 leaves the government vulnerable to disciplined mobilization. At the same time, protests cannot continue indefinitely. If, as I said above, this struggle is about the future of democracy, what are the means of resolving the conflict that would best advance the cause of democratic social organization?

The idea that there is a common life-interest underlying democratic social organization as its justifying ground and goal might appear to be vulnerable to the objection that democratic societies are divided and disagree about universal purposes. The reality of division does not disprove the reality of shared life-interests which it is the purpose of democracy to serve, but only proves that there are different interpretations of what the shared life-interest consists in, and what priorities a society with finite resources ought to serve in any given period of budgetary allocation of those resources. Where there is division over what the shared life-interest is and requires, there is only one democratic means of resolving the conflict: negotiation (whose radically democratic implications have perhaps not been fully appreciated by many on the

Marxist left). Genuine negotiations presuppose a common ground, which the parties to the negotiation both seek to serve, but differ as to how best to serve it.

One person on the left who has not missed the radically democratic essence of negotiation is Pat Devine, who has built his model for a democratically planned socialist economy around the practice of negotiation. As he argues in his superb *Democracy and Economic Planning*, in genuine negotiations agreement must ultimately be unforced, the consequence of listening to and accepting the better *argument*, rather than being cowed by threats and intimidation. If one party to the negotiations refuses to move from its position, *no matter the strength of the counter-arguments marshaled in support of the other side*, on the basis that there are economic or other “realities” that preclude the possibility of moving off their initial position, then they are not really negotiating. Mass mobilization in support of the opposed position is then legitimate, *not as an end in itself*, but as a move meant to counter the intransigence of the opposed party. The goal is to enable real negotiation to take place, not to substitute popular for state violence as the ultimate decider of the issue.

Ultimately, that which is radical about real negotiation is that agreements reached on its basis do not need to be policed or coercively enforced. If they are the product of genuine conviction on both parties that the deal reached was the best possible in the context, then both sides will uphold the principles agreed to. As Devine argues, when people have genuinely participated in the process of democratically determining how resources will be allocated, they tend to “co-operate in the carrying out of decisions.” (p.54). And that is the real core of democracy: different people working together to determine the rules and policies that will govern the production and distribution of resources and regulate the institutions in which their public lives are led. If people filter out all the noise, they will hear that the student movement’s primary demand at this point is for the government to return to negotiations without preconditions.

What the students are *not* demanding is “free” tuition.” There cannot be “free” tuition, since there are costs associated with running institutions of higher education. The debate concerns whether a democratic society should fully fund education with public resources, or whether it should be a private-user pay model, or whether it should be some hybrid of the two. In the private user pay model the value of education is assumed to be the ‘property’ of the individual graduate, who converts the investment she has made in her education into higher earnings. In the public-resource model, the value of education is assumed to be social- a society is better if its citizens are more broad-minded, artistically and philosophically and politically and scientifically literate, respectfully open to cultures and life-practices that differ from their own and able to learn from them, are able to think creatively, are non-dogmatic, and peaceful. In this model society decides to pay for tuition from public funds because it creates citizens who are able to contribute back more to the society that has funded their education than they would have been able to otherwise. In no case is tuition for the students free: resources are expended on them whilst they are students, those resources are later repaid through the contributions that they subsequently make as intelligent, engaged citizens and workers.

In this model, instead of society being a competitive zero sum game where one wins only by imposing costs on a weaker party, society tends towards being a virtuous circle of citizens who contribute back to the society that has supported their development. Instead of young people

graduating into debt-bondage to private banks, they would graduate as free citizens of a free society.

Is that really a goal that supposedly democratic governments should call on the police to attack?

Requiem

Originally Published November 28th 2011

This is what it comes down to? Two day line ups to shop for things that will either be broken or boredom inducing this time next year, just in time for people to line up again. Maybe the lines will begin three days early next year, and then four the next, until life becomes nothing but a line up, kept in check by the police. Just like Stalinism?

This is what it comes down to? Children and cancer patients being groped in airports, semi-educated arseholes asking inane questions, random checks on the subway and the freeway, totalitarian surveillance of private life, the virulent growth of uniformed officialdom. All this, nothing more than justified vigilance against external threats to our freedoms. So we should not worry?

This is what it comes down to? Harassing and tear gassing and evicting the mildest of protesters, who were exercising those freedoms in the name of the impoverished, the homeless, the unemployed, the underemployed, the employed in soul-sapping drudgery, of all who have been rendered individually and collectively powerless, of each who is lectured to adapt and suck it up and take it and get with the program of the 'real' world. Enough complaining, for you are free! And this freedom is worth killing for?

This is what it comes down to? A decade of war and occupations, the inhuman cowardice of drone war murder, threat of death as humanitarian foreign policy. To protect our way of life? Or to allow others to enjoy our way of life? What way of life? The freedom to choose to line up to shop to forget for the moment that each have been rendered individually and collectively powerless.

This way of life is exhausted. It has lost its *raison d'être*.

That is not to say that there are no personal experiences worth having, or no value to the relationships we can still construct. It is to say that the deep justifications of the liberal-capitalist world: equality, justice, the rule of law, democracy, can no longer be taken seriously as defining values of this world. The most easily verifiable empirical evidence rules it out. Not even the most brain dead ideologue can believe that liberal-capitalism is any longer any sort of cooperative endeavour between people governing themselves in light of a shared commitment to a common goal.

Not that liberal-capitalism ever was defined by a shared commitment to a common goal. It was a contradictory society, rooted in one dimension in the power of a few over the natural resources all require to live, and on that basis the social institutions through which we organize and express our lives as human beings, and, in another dimension, on universal values which contested the legitimacy of this structure of power. These values are more impressive than the technological marvels the unbridled productivity of capitalism has created.

In place of deference to the authority of blood and birth, moral hierarchies underwritten by the gods, and respect for rank rather than achievement, it claimed to valorize human creativity, individuality, equality of people before the law, common rights defining a shared citizenship, the power of collective self-governance. But the most impressive achievement of all— the one that is so impressive that it must be blocked by all means even as it is ubiquitously invoked as justification— is the freedom to individually decide to participate in collective experiments to rebuild society according to different rules that better serve the common life-interest. There is no principled means of preventing democratic societies from completely re-inventing themselves democratically. Hence, anyone who invokes democratic self-governance as justification for this society— and who does not invoke this value— logically obliges him or herself to support its total reconstruction if that reconstruction is required in order to ensure the continuance of the project of democratic self-governance.

But who amongst those who invokes democratic self-governance as the basis of legitimacy of this society at the same time does not inveigh against any force that actually tries to realize it in new forms of social relationship? It is this contradiction that proves the moral and intellectual exhaustion of this world. Unable to resolve the contradiction, it is ignored, the police are unleashed, and the experiments are crushed. In place of the freedom to live freely, there is the freedom to be cajoled to shop and the freedom to have your library withdrawals tracked. If there were opportunities for meaningful choice, would most people really choose a world in which co-citizens pepper spray one another in pursuit of discount electronics? Is the pursuit of happiness synonymous with mall-wandering in pursuit of bargains? Does that not rather speak of a form of civilization that has lost its purpose, of a world of desperate loneliness, of lonely people desperately trying to buy their way out of despair?

Liberal capitalism has had a long and full life, but it has nothing left to give. There should be no embarrassment in our society's having arrived at this point of terminal value crisis. Critics need not gloat and chirp about the 'failure' of capitalism. Such claims are unhistorical and abstract. It makes no more sense to say that 'capitalism' is a failure than it would make sense to say 'the Roman Empire was a failure' because it collapsed, or that individual lives are failures because they end in death. Everything under heaven comes to an end. Success or failure lies in what has been achieved within finite temporal frames, not in lasting forever. Celebrate the achievement, expose the contradictions, create something new from this tired way of life.

Most people, if they reflect upon the real existential condition of mortal life, prove capable of accepting this most difficult truth: that they and all whom they love will one day be no more. The youthful fury against the dying of the light softens. If we do not always go gently, we nevertheless go, and most of us willingly, if life has been long and full. Why cannot societies, which are just institutionalized networks of individuals, do the same?

Individuals are redeemed not by the blood of a fictitious Lord, but by their social nature. Human life triumphs over death in the human project that opens new dawns even as setting suns dim. Good ideas do not die out just because one historically particular way of expressing them reaches its limits. Ideas, unlike the individual minds they inhabit temporarily, do not expire. Freed from the value-prisons of dying forms of institutionalized life, they animate new expressions of the

human project of building worlds of value out of the givenness of material nature. This collective capacity to rebuild our human world is the highest expression of our freedom.

Human freedom is activity and not artifact. It cannot be confined to one social form forever. If we are not free to reinvent our worlds, we are not free.

Totalitarianism

Originally Published February 16th 2012

The Morally Inverted World of the Conservative Party of Canada

Like their cousins to the south, members of Canada's Conservative Party never tire of reminding everyone that they are a party of 'values.' There is no end to their pieties about the sanctity of life. Yet everywhere in practice they support economic policies that despoil life's conditions, political practices that trample its physical and moral integrity, and intellectual strategies that substitute demonization for reasoned, evidenced refutation of opposition. In just the last week Public Safety Minister Vic Toews exemplified this catastrophe of rationality and morality. One day, he quietly instructed the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) to accept information obtained under [torture](#). The next day, he warned Canadians that we are under potential threat from environmental and anti-capitalist [terrorists](#). And then three days after that, he denounced opponents of intensified [police-state spying](#) on electronic communications as supporters of child pornography.

Do you oppose torture as the worst possible assault on the moral and physical integrity of human beings? Then you are an appeaser of terrorism.

Do you believe that people of the First Nations should democratically decide whether pipelines carrying tar sands oil should cross their lands? Do you believe that an economic system that systematically devours the natural life-support system is materially irrational? Do you believe that an economic system that fails to alleviate absolute poverty, provide opportunities for meaningful and socially valuable work, and treats working people as dispensable and disposable spare parts is structurally unjust? Then you are a potential terrorist.

Do you believe that you should be free to read and watch and talk about your interests free from government and police surveillance? Then you must be a child pornographer.

This is the morally inverted world of the Conservative mind:

torture = life-preservation,

environmental and economic destruction= the good life,

massive expansion of police powers= personal freedom.

Totalitarian Closures

Considered politically, totalitarianism is an attempt to institutionalize the supremacy of a single ruling party whose interests are asserted to be identical to the real interests of those over whom it rules. Since this identity of interest is demonstrably false, the totalitarian seeks to create by exclusion and erasure that which he or she cannot create by persuasion or superiority of

values. Competing ideas and values must be effaced from the social, political, and cultural landscape. Only once there is no alternative to identify with can the society-wide hyperconformity the totalitarian mind requires be secured.

The drive towards totalitarianism of rule is therefore always correlated with a totalitarian closure of mind to anything which is not identical to its exclusionary value-system. Hence totalitarianism always proceeds apace with caricatured demonization of opponents on the one hand and rallying symbols to bind the faithful together against the outliers on the other. The overt aim is to do away with the need to publically argue against and refute opposed views.

Harper has made no secret of his desire to permanently entrench ‘conservative values’ in Canadian social institutions. This struggle manifests both symptoms of the totalitarian disease noted above. The possibility of rational disagreement is excluded from the outset: if you disagree, you must be some sort of criminal. And if you are not a criminal, not only must you agree, but you must manifest this agreement by rallying around the symbols of moral-political purity— the flag, the armed forces, the Queen.

Hatred of Life’s Spontaneity

As I noted above, the Conservatives make no secret of their desire to protect life. At the same time as the Public Safety Minister is celebrating life by sanctioning the torture of living beings, Conservative MP [Stephen Woodworth](#) is employing “pro-life” rhetoric to attempt to re-impose anti-woman limits on abortion.

But what is life, and what is it to be pro or anti-life?

Life is fragile and depends upon material conditions outside of itself for its support. To be pro-life is to defend the integrity and life-support capacity of the natural world. But as we have seen, for the Conservatives, environmental defence is potential terrorism.

Sentient life is conscious of its surroundings and its life-requirements, both for its survival and its development. Human sentient life seeks to build and enhance the social conditions that enable it not merely to survive, but to unfold and enjoys its vital capacities. Collective life is therefore creative of the conditions that allow individuals to create themselves as a unique bearer of value. To be pro-life is to support movements seeking to improve the conditions supporting individual self-creation. Creation of the conditions for self-creation demands enquiry into the arrangements that best enable full and free self-development. Where existing arrangements are found wanting, life’s creative nature pushes on beyond the prevailing limits towards new ideas, institutions, relationships, and practices. This process is constructive, not destructive. To the Conservative, it is potential terrorism.

But spontaneity, development, and self-differentiating movement is not terrorism, it is life-value in action. It is opposed only to the systems of external control and on-high rule that the totalitarian mind needs to feel safe. The totalitarian mind fears that which it cannot control, for that is not subject to external control can develop, become self-catalyzing freedom of thought demanding freedom of action and the enhancement of the conditions that support both.

With finite resources human minds and hands create infinite worlds of meaning. This creative power opposes itself to all attempts to engineer it for specific purposes, to impose external controls upon it, to make it serve the particular interests of groups whose enjoyment of temporary power causes them to flatter themselves as possessors of ultimate truth. Because they flatter themselves as the last men, totalitarians cannot abide change, growth, development, unfolding, or novelty. Totalitarianism is motivated above all by the small-minded desire to control every process from on high and the outside, to steer everything to a pre-determined conclusion. That is why they sing old pop songs grown inoffensive with age but send real artists fleeing from their presence as if from them as from the Reaper. They are death for creative thinking and practice.

Anyone who disagrees is immoral and should be silent or disappear.

Let's be immoral and visible and demand that the world be set morally right side up.

Special One-Time Offer for Supporters of the Tory Omnibus Crime Bill

Originally Published November 13th 2011

It is a frightening world and it is getting more frightening. We've heard the statistics too— crime is going down, the world is getting safer. You know what? We don't believe it either. You know why? Because social scientists, like all scientists, are elites. And elites don't tell the truth. Elites perpetuate themselves. Elites serve special interests. You can trust us on that.

You can also trust us to tell you the truth about what is important to your family. You can also trust your local Tory MP. And you trust both of us to set you straight on what is what.

Now, when we get down to what is what, what is more important to you than your family's safety? Nothing. Freedom is safety. Our fighting men and women in Afghanistan put their lives on the line for your safety, making sure that people who had never heard of Canada, had no idea where it is, or any means of ever getting here, stayed the hell away. And our brave men and women in blue (or, in some cities, black) are fighting hard to keep your family safe from the thieves and killers and drug pushers who want to destroy everything you have worked so hard to create.

But sometimes even the best can't get there in time. You just cannot keep yourself safe from every threat that is out there. Until now.

Because now, in cooperation with our friends in the Tory government, we are offering for a very short time an exclusive offer guaranteed to help you to rest easy— forever.

Construction is about to commence on a set of new ultra-high-security gated communities and we want you and your family to get in on the ground floor. Check out these features:

- isolated, bucolic rural settings
- 10 metre concrete walls, topped with barbed wire
- the most sophisticated closed circuit 24/7 video surveillance
- real time communication with highly trained armed guards
- affordable educational and cultural programming,
- the option of complete isolation from other human beings
- three nutritious meals a day
- lights out at 11, ensuring a sound sleep for everyone, night after night

If supporters of Tory anti-crime laws act quickly on this one-time offer, we will be able to ensure that our institutional communities will reflect you and your values. We mean what we say. These new facilities have yet to fill up. However, if you don't call your real estate agent today, we cannot guarantee you that First Nations, African-Canadian, Quebecois, and ill-

mannered, uneducated white people from Northern Ontario and the East Coast will not succeed in turning our institutional community into another government financed entitlement program. To stop the free-loaders getting to the head of the queue and wasting your tax dollars, you have to act now.

So call today and we can start to build a modern community of people who look, dress, think, and even smell exactly as you do. No more blaring hip hop at two am. No more acrid pot smoke from the neighbour's kid's bedroom window ruining your yard work. No more worrying that your big screen tv is going to go up in smoke in some meth head's pipe. No more worrying that those horrific crimes that happen once a year in a part of your city that you never go to will happen to you or your loved ones.

Once you're inside, you'll never want to leave.

Sartre was right: hell is other people, especially other people who are poor and want to steal your shit.

Protect your shit. Protect yourself. And for God's sake, protect your family.

Because even God can't watch over you 24/7.

But we can.

Contact our broker today to qualify for pre-construction discounts.

Buy now, and you'll never have to face hell again.

Security State Loves the Poor

Originally Published October 5th 2011

“Across this sprawling, chaotic nation, workers are creating what will be the world’s largest biometric data base ... even more radical than its size is the scale of its ambition: to reduce the inequality corroding India’s economic rise by digitally linking every one of India’s people to the country’s growth juggernaut.” Lydia Polgreen “A Digital Plan to Help India’s Poor,” *New York Times*, Sunday, Sept 18th

I believe in taking everyone at his or her word, especially the journalistic elite who get published in the *New York Times*. So, if we take Polgreen at her word, each person in India is going to be “digitally linked” to a “growth juggernaut” and this linking is going to ameliorate the life-conditions of India’s poor. I am imagining the servers on which this data will be stored as twenty-first century pineal glands, converting bytes of data to bites of food. But then as I think a bit more deeply I wonder, as readers of Descartes have wondered for three centuries, about the precise mechanism by which this transubstantiation will take place.

Like Descartes, Polgreen does not explain how exactly a *digital* link to a “growth juggernaut” is going to solve the pressing social problems of India. But then, her goal is not really to explicate the metaphysical mysteries of the relationship between material and digital substance but to induce reverence in the reader: for the miracle of the capitalist market, for the beneficent brilliance of entrepreneurs, and for the liberatory implications of data collection and social control.

These miracles are made possible by the newfound, but paradoxical, wisdom of government. Like Socrates, who knew that which he did not know, democratic government today is competent only at overcoming its own incompetence by outsourcing all functions to the private sector. “Now, using the same powerful technology that transformed the country’s private economy, the Indian government has created a tiny start-up to help transform– or circumvent– the crippling bureaucracy that is a legacy of its socialist past.”

Perhaps Walt Whitman was right in “Song of Myself” when he declared that he was large enough to contain his own contradictions, implying at the same time that consistency is a sign of a meagre spirit. Then again, Walt Whitman was not subjected to iris scans and finger printing as the price of maintaining one’s official existence as a citizen of a nominally democratic state. At this point in history, preserving whatever freedom of spirit and matter is left perhaps requires dreary old logic to point out the contradictions of the cheerleaders of the capitalist security state. Let us start with two:

The first: Polgreen clearly implies that the solution to inequality is more economic growth, even though she acknowledges that this same growth has not reduced inequality at all.

The second: Polgreen attacks government bureaucracy at the same time as she believes that a massive expansion of centrally stored information will solve social problems. But what she is in

fact defending is just more bureaucracy— private, true, rather than public, but bureaucracy nonetheless. Bureaucracy is not synonymous with ‘government’ but means hierarchical organization of and systematic control over information.

But these contradictions are so banal they are hardly worth pointing out. Every page of every mainstream media outlet continues, even in the midst of severe global economic crisis, to champion nothing but more of the same policies that have either led to the crisis or failed to solve it. Growth is good, entrepreneurs are brilliant, so get government off their backs. Let’s roll!! Oh, and by the way, what is your postal code and credit card number?

So, as government gets off of the backs of the money-servants, it is getting onto the backs, and the fingerprints, and the irises, and the DNA, of everyone else. And it is here that Polgreen’s contradictions at least become interesting because, if not unique, at least not cliched. For the real benefit, it turns out, to the Indian poor of being digitized is not that they will be linked to the “growth juggernaut” —important, of course, but gauche and materialist. No, the real value is spiritual: encryption of biometric data in binary code is the magic by which Substance is made Subject; it is the means whereby the Indian poor finally become— wait for it— individuals.

“The new system ... would be used to verify the identity of any Indian anywhere in the country within eight seconds, using inexpensive handheld devices linked to the mobile phone network. It would also help build real citizenship in a society where identity is almost always mediated through a group— caste, kin, and religion. [The system] would for the first time identify each Indian as an individual.”

For the first time! Individuals! For Polgreen, to be an individual means being reduced to a quantified abstraction and entered into a privately managed data base. By *all* submitting to privatized appropriation of a marker of identity, *each* can attain what Indian culture and history has, apparently, long thwarted- existence as a unique human being. Individuality is thus not an achievement of *social* organization — the use of collective wealth and intelligence to satisfy life-requirements for the sake of the free expression of life-capacities in *individuating* ways. No, it is a consequence of *submission* to *private* power contracted by the security state to extend its intelligence apparatus. Individuality— which should be thought of as a verb, as a life-long process of self-creative activity, is made noun— a state that is attained by passive acquiescence to data recording procedures. Once you have been entered into the lists, nothing further is required from you. Save obedience of course.

For that is what is really at issue in the security state: obedience. At every street corner, a new closed circuit television camera. At every entrance to what ought to be and formerly were public buildings, a new search procedure. In every encounter, people who ought to be and formerly were public workers behaving like the worst sort of officioussuspicious cop. In every action, new data trails to trace and record, new threat profiles to construct, new gestures or glances to fear. No public or private act is too trivial or banal not to arouse official suspicion. (“Inside the Surveillance State: How Peaceful Activists End up on “Terrorist” Watchlists.” (<http://www.alternet.org/rights/152432>) The spiral of democracy down the drain of totalitarian plutocracy hastens.

Is it end times, brothers and sisters. Is that the trumpet of the final judgement I hear: "He performs amazing miracles [like turning privately managed biometric data into popular power!?!], even making fire descend from heaven on earth in the sight of men, and by dint of the miracles he is allowed to perform in the presence of the Beast, he seduces dwellers on earth; he bids the dwellers on earth erect a statue to the Beast who lived after being wounded with the sword, and to this statue of the Beast he was allowed to impart the breath of life, so that the statue of the Beast should actually speak. He has everyone put to death who will not worship the statue of the Beast, and he obliges all men, low and high, rich and poor, freemen and slaves alike, to have a mark put on their right hand or their forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he bears the mark, that is, the name of the Beast." (Revelations, 13:13-18)

Or is it new times, being sung into existence by young Wall Street occupiers seeking to reclaim individual futures for themselves by working together against the robber barons and watchlist keepers?

Bad Cop Good Job

Originally Published June 8th 2012

“There is no bad job, the only bad job is not having a job ... You do what you have to do to make a living.” (Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, May 15th, 2012).

Yes, one must do what one must do in order to make a living. The deeper question is: does every way of making a living constitute a human life? Are there bad jobs? The question is not so easy to answer as it might first appear.

It *is* easy to think of jobs that appear to be beneath the dignity of human beings. And yet, human beings do them. If the job is beneath the dignity of the human being, does it follow that the person doing it has lost their dignity in the struggle to make a living?

The question puts me in mind of an excellent film that I saw last year, *Wasteland*. It was made by the Brazilian artist Vic Muniz. It explored his return to Rio De Janeiro to realize a project for a series of large-scale photographs based on the lives of people who made their living picking through the Andes-like garbage heaps of the city’s main dump (closed just this week). If, Jim Flaherty notwithstanding, there is a bad job, this would be it. When I was a kid my friends and I would go pick through the garbage at the dump in our small town looking for salvageable bike parts. The sickly sweet smell of rot was nauseating even in the mild summers of Northern Ontario. That was generated by the garbage of 5000 people. Multiply that by a factor of 2000 (Rio has about 10 million people) and add the deadly humidity of a coastal tropical climate and imagine.

Initially, it is clear that the film maker wants you to think that humanity cannot survive work in these hellish conditions. But as the camera stops panning over miles and miles of decomposing trash to concentrate on the faces and the stories of the people who work there, the viewer’s thoughts and feelings begin to change. One is struck by both the depth of understanding the workers have of how others perceive them as doing work that is beneath human dignity, and the power of their arguments which prove their dignity and the value of their work.

One story stays with me above all the others. A middle aged woman laughingly describes how people on the bus ride home turn their faces away against the smell of garbage surrounding her. But she smiles broadly and says to the camera, as if talking to her offended neighbour on the bus, “Yes, lady, you can turn your face away from me, but you know what, I’ll go home, I’ll have a shower, I’ll kiss my husband, we’ll have dinner, and everything is alright.”

So is this a bad job?

One cannot answer yet, because it is not only a story of dignified bearing and creativity in finding ways to make a living from the trash of a great metropolis. It is equally a tale of crushing poverty that forces people onto the garbage piles to pick out the recyclables. It is about the crushing poverty in which many of the people who work there still live, cramped in *favelas* that

sprawl out from the gates of the dump. It is about the carcinogens and toxins that the unprotected workers have to breathe in order to do their jobs and which shorten the lives they are striving so hard to maintain.

So, is this a bad job?

One can still not answer yet. Because it is not only a story of dignity and disease, it is also a tale of union building, of political struggle, and social development (much of the money raised by Muniz's extraordinary photographs are reinvested in the worker's union and community centre), and of grassroots environmentalism that helps to change attitudes and policies towards recycling.

So, is this a bad job?

To answer the question perhaps we need to make some distinctions. We need to distinguish: the human beings who do the job, the social causes that force them into it, the conditions of work, the life-activity and relations that constitute the job as such, and the outcomes of the work.

Human beings are finite embodied beings liable to suffer objective harms of various sorts. That which is "bad" for human beings is anything that causes objective harm in the form of diminished capacities for experience, activity, and mutualistic relationship, worse health, and early death. If we reflect upon the jobs of the *catadores* what appears bad is the social cause (poverty) that forces them to accept dangerous conditions of work and the conditions of work, not the work as such (separating recyclable materials from waste) or the solidaristic political and social relationships the *catadores* build. The humanity of the people is certainly not damaged by the type of the work that they do— they do it with an energy and humour that elevates them above the doubtless horrific conditions surrounding them. And the work itself has genuine life-value— it re-captures tons and tons of re-usable materials that would otherwise have been destroyed. It also alerted the broader society to the monstrous waste of resources the lack of a formal recycling policy was causing. The work of the *catadores* thus had progressive social effects.

But if it is true that it is only poverty that forces people onto the trash piles, if no one would choose this job if they had real alternatives, does it not follow that the job itself was bad, i.e., that the activity of picking recyclable material from garbage by hand is not an activity that befits human beings? At some past point in history, where there were no alternatives to working through trash by hand, I suppose the answer would be no, at that point it would have been a valuable form of human labour. But at this point of social and technological development, where there are systems that separate recyclable materials from waste before anything gets to the landfill, this form of labour is beneath the dignity of human beings. That is not to say that the people who do it have ceased to be dignified human beings, but rather that they are living under social conditions that imprison them in forms of labour that should long ago have ceased to be performed by human beings.

The soundness of the reasoning behind this answer seems unassailable. It was Marx's reasoning in *The Grundrisse* where he argues that the drive to increase the productivity of labour by harnessing the power of science and technology, although it intensifies the alienation and domination of the workers under capitalism, is historically necessary to establish the conditions for material abundance, conditions which will then free time from socially necessary labour. In a socialist society we will easily satisfy our fundamental needs and have the free time necessary to develop our interests and capacities because "labour in which man does what he can make things do for him has ceased." (p. 250, *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 28*) I do not disagree with the conclusion, but nevertheless worry that there might be implications at least as damaging to our humanity as physically demanding work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions.

In Marx's day machines could do comparatively little; in our day, in the wake of the computing and communication revolution, they can do things that Marx could not imagine. I am by no means romanticizing work in a dump. But I do want to pose the question: how much human labour should we allow machines to do? In Japan at present work is well-under way on "companion robots" programmed to emotionally "interact" with the elderly. Let us assume success in this project: Do we then download our caring capacities into the robots and "cease to do what we can make things do for us?" Where does the process stop, now that things are taking on capacities we formerly assumed were the metaphysically exclusive province of sentient and self-conscious life?

I have no answer to this question, and even if I did, I am not naive enough to believe it would make any difference to the robot builders and neural network designers. But I wonder if the future freedom of humanity from alienated labour lies along that path, or if, under different, democratic social conditions where the burdens and benefits of social life were equitably shared, we might re-discover certain joys in doing even menial and sweaty and smelly things ourselves, even though we had things to do them for us.

The Coefficient of Absurdity

Originally Published July 26th, 2011

It is an oft-heard criticism: academics don't live in the real world. If only the myth of the ivory tower were true. Alas, the real world continues to chip away. For years the neo-liberal fad for quantified "performance indicators" has been invading the university, wasting time that could be spent teaching, reading, writing, or — God forbid- thinking- filling out forms, answering surveys, formulating all manner of outcomes and objectives which have only this in common: they contribute little of any importance to the research or pedagogical missions of the university.

The measurement mania colonizes the evaluation of research as well. Here its true absurdity shines in the form of "citation" indexes which track the number of citations that a given journal or journal article receives in other journals. Consider the following mission statement:

Journal Citation Reports® offers a systematic, objective means to critically evaluate the world's leading journals, with quantifiable, statistical information based on citation data. By compiling articles' cited references, *JCR Web* helps to measure research influence and impact at the journal and category levels, and shows the relationship between citing and cited journals. Available in Science and Social Sciences editions.

(http://thompsonreuters.com/products_services/science/science_products/a-z/journal_citation_reports/)

We are promised "objective means to *critically* evaluate," but critical evaluation is impossible without examining the *content* of the papers. Yet content is just that from which the citation report abstracts. It tells one how many times a particular paper or journal is referenced in the references of other papers, but not what the reference actually refers to in terms of the argument of the paper cited. It could be that a particularly bad paper is cited thousands of times for being wrong. But if all we have to base our "critical evaluation" on is the "objective means" furnished by the number of times that paper is cited, we will be led to believe that the paper is important when, judged from the standpoint of content, it is rubbish. Or, more likely, the paper is not rubbish but trendy, in vogue at the moment, but of little or no lasting value.

Quantitative measures work by abstracting from the particularities of the objects measured so that different objects can be ranked according to some generic property common to them. No dialectical trick can convert these quantitative measures into qualitative evaluations because evaluation of quality demands attention to particularities and differences— just that from which quantitative measure abstracts. Where qualitative differences do not matter, there quantitative measure finds its proper role. If I need 3 meter-long studs to frame a wall, it does not matter what type of wood the studs have been cut from, but only how long they are.

But where qualitative differences do matter, we cannot substitute quantitative performance indicators. That point seems obvious enough, so how to explain their growing ubiquity across crucial social institutions: schools, health care facilities, government, public services?

For our answer, let us return to the mission statement of Journal Citation Reports. Quantitative performance indicators appear objective. Hence they appear to provide scientific support to policy decisions made on their basis. Hence the social and political values that are really behind policy decisions disappear. Thus it appears that no particular social interests are being served by decisions to fund, say, genetic engineering departments over literature departments, or to reduce the number of hospital beds available in an area. To justify the decision one simply cites ‘the numbers.’ The numbers decide. Human beings simply do what the numbers say.

But what do numbers actually ‘say?’ Numbers do a great many things, but one thing they do not do is determine their own meaning, i.e., ‘speak’ the qualitative difference between two sets of themselves. For example, let us set two ratios side by side: 20 children/teacher and 25 children/teacher. Which student/teacher ratio is “better?” We are asking for the qualitative difference (better/worse) that distinguishes two sets of numbers. But the numbers cannot tell us which set is better and which is worse, because they say nothing about what alone can decide the issue: the needs of the students. The better ratio is whichever better satisfies the educational needs of the children.

But neo-liberal performance indicators have nothing to do with performance according to the only metric that matters in the evaluation of social institutions: the satisfaction of the life-requirements that enable human beings to live, to richly experience their world, to think, to imagine, to interact in mutually affirming relationships, and to contribute to the well-being of others. The only ‘performance’ the neo-liberal metrics are concerned with is the amount of money-value consumed by social institutions. A ‘good’ performance is any that costs less money than alternatives. Whether the more costly alternative would better satisfy more peoples’ life-requirements is never posed, because the qualitative dimension of those life-requirements—their satisfaction is that which enables people to live well as human beings— never appears.

That dimension never appears because it is of no consequence to neo-liberal policy makers how the vast majority of people spend their lives. Actually, that is not true: they are concerned to ensure that the vast majority of people live their lives as servants to the growth of money-value-producing, consuming, staying quiet, (unless exhorted to cheer by the scoreboard at a stadium).

Work.

Shop.

Comply.

Crazy Train Takes Strike Three Looking

Originally Published April 12th 2012

One might think baseball beneath the dignity of philosophy. I have always found, on the contrary, that drinking beer all afternoon in the sunshine is most conducive to everyone who partakes becoming a philosopher. What is beneath the dignity of philosophy is bullying on the one hand and servility on the other. Philosophy neither issues nor accepts commands, but only arguments and reasons. To either command or be commanded is beneath the dignity of humanity because both are antithetical to thought. Thinking is what allows us to make ourselves, and the capacity to make ourselves is what distinguishes human being.

This past week the manager of the Miami Marlins, Ozzie Guillen, had the misfortune of thinking in the presence of money. At a press conference he admitted that he admired Fidel Castro. In response, the owner of the team, Jeffrey Loria, suspended Guillen for five games. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/10/ozzie-guillen-suspended-fidel-castro-marlins_n_1414666.html

Ordinary sports fans, mostly working class people, tend to react with disgust when professional athletes go on strike. The press now has a ready-made formula to channel this hostility. It is billionaires v. millionaires, the headlines scream. The hoi polloi are exhorted to cast a pox on both their houses, until it is time to start buying tickets again. As the suspension of Guillen proves, however, it is not the figure on the pay cheque that confers real power. Real power derives from controlling the resources that enable one to amass the wealth that allows one to sign those cheques. As we can see, those with real power control body and mind— not only whether you work, but what you are allowed to believe and to say.

In this case the spectacle is made more disgusting because of the racial dimension that cannot be kept from view. The Venezuelan Guillen is publically humiliated and forced to confess his sin by the white owner speaking as the mouthpiece of the colonial past of Cuba, trying to protect his investment from the wrath of anti-revolutionary Cuban-Americans pinning for the good old days of Hemingway and whorehouses.

There is great beauty in human athletic achievement, as there is great beauty in nature, in people, and in the arts of all sorts. Why should our aesthetic judgements be extended to the dancer and denied to the hockey player? It is not just the individual talent in sport that is beautiful, but even moreso the poetics of space, the constant adjustment of players to each other that creates each game as a unique, spontaneous, living whole. The problem is not athletes and sport; the problem is that athletes and sport are increasingly seen not as the outcome of their own work, discipline, and talent, but a mere function of the monied owners who pay them.

So absolute has the hold of money over all things become that fans now cheer for the team through the mediation of cheering for the owners. In Buffalo, Terry Pegula, the new owner of the Buffalo Sabres, is openly referred to as "saviour—" and this in a country of religious fanatics.

In the more restrained Canada, fans in Winnipeg have confined themselves to turning the national anthem into a hymn to True North Entertainment, the company that brought the Jets back to Winnipeg. While some might take offence at the equation of divine grace and national identity with egomaniacal sports owners, the fans are only expressing the truth of our world- money is god and the greatness of nations.

What are we to say to this omniverous colonization of human talent? I think that there are enough academic critiques and political slogans. I think we need someone to speak as real people speak. And I think we could find no better spokesperson than Ozzie Guillen, who up until this point has never been afraid to speak his mind. So, I think we need Ozzie Guillen to become Ozzie Guillen again and let his anger rise up. And when his anger at being treated as the subordinate of the monstrous ego of the owner has become fever-pitched he needs to find a microphone. And he needs to stand in front of that microphone and say:

“Jeffrey Loria, go fuck yourself. I’ll be managing next year in Cuba.”

Hasta la victoria siempre!

Casket Capitalism

Originally Published July 28th, 2011

I originally wrote this a few days after Michael Jackson's death in 2009. It sat on my hard drive, forgotten, until I was reminded of it this week, as Amy Winehouse's albums surged back to the top of the charts following her death.

Theodore Adorno, reflecting on the meaning of death in capitalist society, lamented that "death is entirely assimilated. For any person, with all his functions, society has a ready stand-in ... dying merely confirms the absolute irrelevance of the natural organism in the face of the social absolute." Individuality and the unrepeatable value of life for the life-bearer is brutally negated, not by the fact of death, but by the demands of the money-value economy. Money, like blood, cannot cease to circulate. After a few tears have been shed we all must return to work until we too pass and someone else takes our place. The function persists, the placeholders change without causing the least perturbations to the social machine.

Perhaps it will be thought that it is different for the famous. In truth, there is a difference, as the recent death of Michael Jackson proves. Those whose names are unknown to all but their friends and family vacate their function so that someone else can play their role. Their "productive" life is done. But for the famous their name is their function, their "brand," and this can keep selling, and, indeed, sell better, after death. Within a day of Jackson's death the media was full of stories of unreleased material, of his father's new record label, and marketing minds across the world were no doubt thinking of memorabilia that will soon waste away in the closets of people too young to have been consumers the first time around. Death is thus not only assimilated, as Adorno thought, because the social machine can as easily replace an individual as one can replace a spark plug, but also because death is powerless to bring an end to the individual's being a priced commodity. In life or in death, as Hobbes remarked, a man's value is his price, and if the price goes up after death, then this just shows that what really matters is not the flesh and blood human being, but the dollars he or she can produce. Commerce is long, life is short.

Dostoyevsky is said to have remarked that if one wants to understand the values of a society one must examine its prisons. In fact, one should examine its relationship with death, the most universal of all human realities. As life and death are inseparable so too the dignity of life and the dignity of death. If our deaths can be sold it is because it is the end of a life that has been sold. Yet, before the indignity of the corpse with a price tag on its casket there once was a human being. This human being lived in a network of relationships with the natural world and other human beings. This human being struggled to make a contribution to his or her world, cared about some things and was indifferent to others, had success and no doubt many failures, hopefully laughed, loved, and was loved in turn, and, perhaps, in his or her most secret thoughts wondered what others would say when his or her ears could no longer listen. If death has any value for living beings it is in motivating us to try to not waste the little time we have, to try to

make a positive contribution to the needs, not the bank accounts, of others. A dignified death makes life whole, both for oneself, who can die knowing that he or she did what he or she could do, and for others, who can laugh and cry together in remembrance of those contributions. But money, which neither lives nor dies, tolerates nothing of completion.

People fear death, for reasons that I have never completely understood. If they thought about it more deeply they would realize that all that makes life worthwhile and exciting depends on its ultimately coming to an end. As good as anything is in a moment or across decades, it would be unbearable monotony were it to persist for eternity, because eternity is not a very long time, it is forever. If people did pause to think more deeply about death, or, what is the same thing, the value of their real, finite lives, perhaps they would begin to resist its assimilation, which means, in reality, their own assimilation to the unthinking routines of money-value circulation which our world never ceases to confuse with the circulation of life-sustaining blood itself.

Open Questions

Originally Published December 8th 2011

In a recent post in *The Bullet*, published by The Socialist Project, Samir Amin called for The Left, North and South, to become more audacious:

“We are not living in a historical moment in which the search for a ‘social compromise’ is a possible option. There have been such moments in the past, such as the post-war social compromise between capital and labour specific to the social democratic state in the West, the actually existing socialism in the East, and the popular national projects of the South. But our present historical moment is not the same. So the conflict is between monopoly capital and workers and people who are invited to an unconditional surrender. Defensive strategies of resistance under these conditions are ineffective and bound to be eventually defeated. In the face of war declared by monopoly capital, workers and peoples must develop strategies that allow them to take the offensive.” <http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/577.php>

All evidence of which I am aware supports the truth of Amin’s conclusion. At the same time, the truth of the conclusion forces my attention on the monstrous chasm between the political power that would be required to build a systemic alternative to global capitalism and the actual capacities of The Left at the present moment. This problem raises a number of questions in my mind. These questions are relative to the Canadian political context in which I am situated, but I assume that they can be easily adapted to relatively similar contexts. I have offered, in other places, answers to some of them. Perhaps I am having a harder and harder time convincing myself of my answers. I am sure that others have posed similar questions to themselves. I am hoping to generate meaningful political dialogue, so if you have any sort of answers, please post your comments. There is no overarching logic to the questions. I simply wrote them down as I thought them up.

- 1) Who is the Canadian Left? Should it include only those who explicitly reject the long-term legitimacy and viability of capitalism and demand a comprehensive socialist alternative? Or should it be thought of more expansively, to include any and all critics of one or more manifestations of capitalist life-crisis— social, economic, political, cultural, environmental?
- 2) If we identify “The Left” only with those individuals and groups calling for some sort of systematic socialist alternative to capitalism, why should the second group, which would be much larger but also more focused on specific concrete problems, take it seriously? If every radical leftist in Canada met, how many people would be in the room? More farcically, how many could agree on the means to achieve the desired alternative and what its basic institutions and dynamics would be?
- 3) If it turns out that this handful of people (which would include me) cannot be taken seriously as potential leaders of a movement capable of effecting systemic change, can we identify any actually existing group or tendency or movement within the wider left that could potentially

assume that role? What would its political identity be? What demands could it pose that would unify other movements under its banner? How would it meet the charge, leveled by Amin above, that social compromises are no longer possible?

4) Does the Occupy movement have the potential to develop into a mass social movement capable of bringing about systemic change? Has the wave of evictions sapped the movement of its vitality, or conversely, forced it to confront the reality of the repressive use of state power, shake off some of its political naivete, and adopt a more concrete set of demands? Or is it in danger of becoming little more than a momentary media-attention grabbing political brand? Or, is it still too early to judge what the Occupy movement is or is not capable of becoming?

5) One of the crucial problems that the Occupy movement has brought to the fore is the increasingly undemocratic character of parliamentary democracies. What should the attitude of the Left be towards existing democratic institutions? Are they more plastic than traditional Marxist critiques suggest? What does Marx's and Engel's argument that the working class must win the battle of democracy (*The Communist Manifesto*) mean today? Do we need to organize a new political party and actually struggle for power? Who is up to meeting that daunting challenge? Can we learn anything from the use of parliamentary democracy and democratically supported state power to build "21st century socialism" in Venezuela? What about Bolivia? More modestly and closer to home, what can we learn from Quebec Solidaire's winning a seat in the last provincial election? It shows that it is possible to win an election on an openly leftist platform, but does it show that the effort is worth it?

6) If not a socialist party fighting for power within a parliamentary democracy, then what? Transformative demands backed by the power of extra-parliamentary movements? But who are these movements? The labour movement still represents massive potential political energy (4.2 million workers are organized under CLC-recognized unions). How can this potential political energy be converted to kinetic political energy? If it cannot be so converted, then what will supply the "mass" in the required mass movement?

7) Speaking of "the masses," what will it take to motivate people to start to fight back in a decisive way? "We are the 99 per cent" had a certain rhetorical power, but it did not motivate anywhere near ninety nine per cent of the population to become politically engaged. How much can people take before they become willing to risk what little they have in the hopes of building something different? Events from the Middle East suggest that nothing less than total social collapse will motivate the depth of struggle required to address structural problems. Must people be driven to the wall before transformative struggles can begin?

8) How can the Left begin to close the massive power asymmetry between the popular and workers' movements that do erupt and the capitalist state? As the evictions of the Occupiers show, repression is always an option when a movement becomes an irritation. But a more effective strategy seems to be to just ignore movement demands. Huge upheavals shook Greece, but the attacks on living standards and public benefits proceeded without real disruption. How long have the Indignados been protesting in Madrid? But nothing has changed, youth unemployment is still 40%. Two million workers went on strike in Britain last week. David Cameron laughed it off— "a damp squib," he called it.

9) How does The Left transform its traditional critique of liberal citizenship rights in light of their shocking erosion since 9/11? Are liberal societies any longer liberal, or have they become completely totalitarian police/surveillance states? If they have, or if they are close to having become so, can this degeneration become a mobilizing platform? One can be a liberal-democrat and dismiss socialist demands as anachronistic failures or adolescent utopias, but can one be a liberal-democrat and dismiss demands to abide by the constitution? Is there anything in the Canadian Constitution that can be mined for purposes of immanent critique and political development?

10) Is mass non-compliance a road less travelled that the Left would do well to explore? What if, instead of arguing about who to vote for, we argued that people should not vote? What if we were successful in such a campaign of non-compliance? Could a society that depends upon voting for its political legitimacy survive if everyone stopped complying with this substantively meaningless ritual? But almost every public institution and practice has become a substantively meaningless ritual. Yet people continue to soullessly enact them, allowing capitalism to reproduce itself. But what if we called liberal-capitalism's ideological bluff? If we are free to act, then we are free to act by not acting. What would happen if we exercised this freedom by refusing to do that which the ideology of freedom needs us to do voluntarily so that it can sell liberal-capitalism as a free society? Will a society non-violently disappear if everyone ceases to believe in it?

Section II: Evocations

Some Joys of Being a Body/Some Sorrows of Being a Mind

Originally Published May 17th 2012

BODY

“Physical life in general is nothing else than this perpetual interchange of the objective and subjective relation ... We enjoy, and are enjoyed.” Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence Of Christianity*.

Breathing the oxygen that becomes a trillion cellular furnaces accelerating you through space, determined, graceful, strong, eyes alive to any impediment, fresh sweat on your face in chilly sunshine paradox, resonating hammer beats of heart against ribs, inflation and contraction of lungs.

Beginning the gentle touch that becomes a lithe caress that becomes liquid entwining, orgasmic electricity, peaceful melting together, then blissful exhaustion.

Being that oceanic feeling of dissolution in the space your body occupies, sheer being present in immediate thereness, floating as a weight that is not heavy.

Swimming in the dizzying euphoria of too loud laughter binding one to the others in irreverent camaraderie of the night.

Curling against the killing wind outside in the saving warmth of cotton and down and love, drifting into the all-enveloping darkness and silence of temporary not-being.

Arising into a moment when existing is uncomplicated, senses joyously alive to the presence of objects, nothing more asked.

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MIND

“Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.” Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Failing forever to hold back that gnawing termite thought that unravles the fabric of the argument you have worked so hard to create.

Racing dread of incapacity to accomplish all that remains undone, deflation of the satisfaction you felt with what has already been achieved.

Piercing memory that comes from nowhere to remind you of what you should not have said/done/thought but did.

Drumming self-doubt reverberating daily, warning that pride cometh before a fall, thus better to not value anything you accomplish too highly, lest it prove unrepeatable.

Agonizing in the truth that time drains inexorably away, constricting the circle of possibility more and more tightly around you.

Believing, rightly, on the basis of still-accumulating experience, that nothing you can do will ever be enough or fully adequate in any respect.

slothefuckdown

Originally Published October 26th 2011

Egocentrism: To be stuck in traffic cursing others for being on the road.

The Essence of Egocentric Inconsistency (1): Once the traffic begins to move, cursing the person in front for going too slowly, and the person behind for pressing you to go faster.

Cause? Structural irrationality of human persons, i.e., acknowledgement of the existence and equality of others' interests but persistent inability to subordinate partiality to one's own case to this principled morality?

Or: The madness of the pace of life, the negation of the present moment by demands from the future incessantly interposing themselves? Perhaps the structural irrationality is effect of this cause, as opposed to the cause itself?

Either way, the consequence: Total absence of the moment of enjoyment, the nihilism of the treadmill moving one forward but getting one nowhere.

Where is it we are all driving/being driven?

Everyone is driving/being driven their own way. Such is the nature of freedom.

But we drive on roads.

Hence a paradox (1)? The necessary outcome of the exercise of freedom is the traffic jam?

The Essence of Egocentric Inconsistency (2): The solution to the paradox is for everyone to take public transit, except oneself.

Or: to stop driving/being driven all together.

But absence of motion is death/non-life.

Hence a paradox (2)? To live well, we must cease to move (i.e., die)?

Or: To just slow down, to create space/time in which to savour what happens.

The Essence of Egocentric Inconsistency (3): To preach 'savouring' as riposte to the mad pace of life presupposes one has something to savour. You do, not everyone does.

Thus, the principle fails to pass the test of universalizability.

Decoded: You savour, others suffer.

But what do I/you/we really have to savour?

Perhaps to suffer slowly is as good as it gets?

The Age of the World Distraction

Originally Published August 3rd, 2011

All magic tricks work by diverting the attention of the audience at crucial moments. So too pickpockets. The distracted mind is incapable of paying attention to what is really going on in its environment. Ours is the age of the permanent distraction.

Human consciousness is capable of its own magic, the most profound magic, *creatio ex nihilo*, meaning and value from meaningless and valueless physical forces, elements, and dynamics. Physically, the painting is but pigment on a surface, seeing it, light rays converted to nerve impulses. What is a body but hydrogen, oxygen, carbon and a few heavier elements? But to be conscious of this surface as a *painting* is to be addressed and affected by its beauty. To be conscious of the flesh as a *human being* is to become bound to it in care and concern.

No special training is required to be addressed and affected by beauty or to be bound in ties of care to others. All that is required, as Iris Murdoch once said, is the ability to *pay attention*.

But what is distraction? The diversion of attention. What is the diversion of attention? The undermining of the capacity to be addressed, affected, bound.

This is what freedom *appears* to be— liberation from things that want to *hold* our attention, to *stop* us in our tracks, cause us to tarry, take possession of our thoughts and feelings, turn them in unanticipated directions, open us, make us lose ourselves in their depths. This is what freedom *appears* to be— accumulation of those experiences and things that the self *wants*.

This is what emptiness actually is— liberation from things worthy of holding our attention, inability to stop in our tracks, unwillingness to tarry, refusal to allow our thoughts and feelings to be possessed and led towards real depth, ego-centric self-enclosure. This is what emptiness actually is— to be closed off to the world by one's desire to possess it.

Dwelling in distraction means being incapable of seeing the world beyond one's own desires, of being incapable of being seized by objects of experience that transform by opening and deepening the self. Irreplaceable lifetime dissipates in the breeze of superficiality, trivia, gossip, and ephemera blown continuously by the bellows of the media-entertainment complex. The only constants are that the content must change continuously and maintain its hold over the consciousness of the spectators.

Submerged in this kaleidoscope people become incapable of *concentrating* on the world of things and other people. Apparently connected along infinite vectors to others, each ego is actually alone and separate because no demands are placed upon it to do anything save register with a click whatever content is being projected onto its field of consciousness.

All that is of permanent value in human life— loving, creating, healing, understanding, communicating, educating, enabling the growth of others' capacities, have in common the requirement that the person, in order to love, heal, create etc. must give himself or herself over to

the object and maintain their focus upon it despite the noise of the world. In order to love someone, I must care about the good of the one I love; in order to learn, I must pay attention to that which I am trying to understand; in order to write, I must allow my thought to follow the logic of ideas, in order to heal, I must focus on the needs of the one who ails.

Beyond whatever political criticisms one might make of the age of permanent distraction there is this ultimate problem. The distracted mind is incapable of loving, creating, healing, understanding, communicating, educating, or enabling others' capacities. Entrapped and enthralled and permanently amused, its life passes rapidly by and leaves no trace of its value anywhere.

On Being A Tourist

Originally Published, September 1st, 2011

To be a tourist implies a lack of rootedness wherever one happens to be, of passing through, and thus also of a certain essential lack of commitment to the place and people one is visiting. This lack of rootedness and commitment colours being a tourist with a certain moral ambiguity: on the one hand, that one leaves home at all implies a rejection of parochialism and an open mindedness about ways of organizing life that differ from home. At the same time, this cosmopolitan open-mindedness also implies that being a tourist is always to be a spectator rather than a participant, and, as spectator, an objectifier of the locals.

The tourist leaves home in search of managed difference. For the tourist gaze, everything, even the most banal still-life street scene, the one the locals breeze past in busy indifference, is captivating. Everything and everyone is a photo-op. But the tourist is more amateur anthropologist than voyeur, for the tourist is interested more in learning than pleasure. And so the people, their history, their cuisine, their art, their monuments, their public and private spaces are reduced to static objects for the tourist's edification. "Look honey, there's a lecture tonight in English on the customs governing street crossing! Let's go!

While there is thus moral ambiguity, there is also moral reciprocity. For if the tourist objectifies, he or she is objectified in turn. For the tourist, the locals are a source of dinner party wisdom to be shared with friends once one returns home. For the locals, the tourist is a constant target of the breathless capitalism of street level retail. If for the tourist everything about the local is a photo-op, everything for the tourist-dependent local is an object for sale. An ideal if undignified dance of mutual dependence.

But the omni-objectification to which the world of the locals is subjected by the tourist is at the same time the only means of ever transforming oneself from spectator-tourist into a participant in the life into which one has inserted oneself. All growth is painful. It is only the tourist who can bear the discomfort of knowing that he or she is an object because, as tourist, she or he is observed as she or he observe the locals, that can eventually assume the social invisibility of the local, an invisibility which is the key to becoming a participant.

The real difference between being a tourist and being a local is not geographical, a matter of where one calls home, but of social invisibility. The local moves through ordinary social spaces unnoticed— she gets on and off the bus, finds her way around; her muscles know just how to contort to avoid colliding with other locals on crowded streets. The tourist is always conspicuous— he has to read the sign on the bus that explains how and how much to pay, his progress is arrested at each intersection by the need to check the map, he finds that the 'natural' means of avoiding collisions at home do not work here, people zig when his muscles expect them to zag, and so he's always saying 'excuse me' in the local language. The tourist is thus visible, all too visible.

Yet as each banal transaction is repeated, a new ease and grace comes over the tourist's gestures. His eyes become more like the eyes of the locals, rolling at the clumsiness of the

newbie who doesn't know how to properly operate the vending machine in the subway, eliciting a mis-pronounced 'I'm sorry' from the fumbling unfortunate clogging up the line. Instead of watching him, the local's glare now passes right through to bear down on the new arrival, working hard under pressure to figure out how to buy the subway token so he can get on the train that will take him to the museum of the history of the city's subways.

On Sadness

Originally Published July 1st, 2011

At any moment the sadness in the world can overcome me. This morning in the market I passed a stand with prettily coloured and carefully sculpted cookies. But the stand sat unattended and ignored. Although the baker was not present, I was seized by the sadness I imagined she or he must feel in response to seeing that all that their beautiful creations aroused in others was indifference. His or her absence amplified the loneliness of his or her creations.

How many such bakers are there in the world, absent from my sight, but still somewhere, struggling to survive and to contribute only to see their contributions ignored, or rejected, or destroyed? Or worse, how many potential bakers are there with a contribution to make but who find that the world does not care, and thus makes no space for them?

This seems to me to be sadness: the deflation one feels at being someone, or identifying with someone, who is not wanted, needed, or desired. Is there deeper pain for a social being than the inner acknowledgement that one's outer presence is in no sense valued by others?

“We are with you in the hour when you realize/That you are the fifth wheel/...

I know that you no longer hear/But/Do not say loudly that the world is bad/

Say it softly/For the four wheels are not too many/But the fifth is/And the world is not bad/

But full

(Bertolt Brecht, “Ten Poems From a Reader for Those who Live in Cities”)

The genius of poetry is to use words to so perfectly evoke the idea or feeling that the idea or feeling itself need not be stated. It is when the poem is silent that it strikes deepest. The soul-killing effect on the fifth wheel of the silence that follows “but full” cuts through the reader. Brecht need not say anything further. The silence after the succinct finality is more brutal than the most detailed description of the fifth's wheel's feelings ever could be. An appropriate silence is infinitely meaningful.

The poetic silence seems to be impossible for philosophy. As *argument* it is obliged to spell out, spell out, spell out, to explain, to justify, to defend its conclusions, and then defend them again. Yet, philosophy requires a sort of poetic attunement to the world— not just a focus on objective analysis of elements, governing principles, and structures, but also meaningful comprehension of the emotional colour through which human life within those structures is inwardly lived. If the world is not just element, structure, and force, but also life, intention, and feeling, then

philosophy cannot understand by reducing the inner to the outer. Its duty is to comprehend both in coherent synthesis— like a symphony whose objective musical structure is made real through its subjective expression in performance.

On Happiness

Originally published January 18th 2012

In the Preface to *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*, Irving Singer remarks that a “meaningful life is not necessarily a happy one. Yet the two are not contradictory.” (p. xv) Three possibilities follow from this claim: Life can be happy but not meaningful, or meaningful but not happy, or both happy and meaningful.

A meaningful life, from my perspective, although not necessarily from Singer’s, is a life that has significant impact on its world. A meaningful life is weighty, substantial; it leaves a trace that others can follow back to the person who lived it. Such a life is *objectively* valuable. It retains its meaningfulness even in the case that it does not engender happiness in the person who lived it.

Happiness is a subjective valuation of life-activity and, if Singer is right, independent of the impact that the life which is happy has on its world. While the logical relation between objective and subjective value is clear enough, what has remained opaque through the history of philosophy is the nature of happiness itself.

Are the atomists correct to equate happiness and absence of disturbance? Is it synonymous with ‘joy’ ‘or ‘elation?’ Or are joy and elation properly felt only in relation to rare and powerful experiences? Is happiness then that mundane feeling of contentment that accompanies one’s being busy about something one happens to like, whether pushpin or poetry? Or is it, as Aristotle’s unsurpassed analysis in the *Nicomachean Ethics* asserts, “activity in accordance with virtue” (Book X, Ch. 7. 1177a12) and “the end of human nature?” (Book X, Ch.6, 1176a32) In that case, the poor in spirit might be blessed, but they cannot be happy. Happiness would be reserved for the strong of character who are willing to undergo the pain that excellence exacts.

If our own age has not followed Aristotle in linking happiness and virtue, it concurs with him that its achievement is an essential goal of human life. Today, happiness has escaped poetic and philosophical word labyrinths and found its way to the sterner offices of scientific enterprise. Bio-chemists, evolutionary psychologists, neurologists, even the practitioners of the dismal science, economists, have marshaled their statistics and brain scans and molecular models in pursuit of guaranteed happiness inducing procedures and products. To be unhappy has become some sort of failure of development or morals or both, an affliction, a disease to be cured. Happiness has become morally and psychologically mandatory.

But just what has become morally and psychologically mandatory? Certainly not “activity in accordance with virtue,” for activity in accordance with virtue demands both subjective effort and social opportunity, and science can ensure neither. The happiness of the scientists is not the *consumption* of difficult and precarious labours, but a pleasant feeling produced by the *consumption* of products; a state whose achievement has been delinked from any particular sort of activity. If happiness is an *achievement* then it is only acquired with some risk. One might

struggle and yet not succeed, and thus not be happy, even if one's labours were mighty. But if it is a state with no necessary connection to one form of activity rather than another, then it might be produced in ways that require nothing of the subject who comes to feel happy.

But is there something wrong with a pleasant feeling and an easy disposition? Is there something wrong with attaining either without the labours of Hercules? Why must a good life always be busy about heavy and serious things? Life is short and the moment of enjoyment should not be lacking.

The peace of soft feelings soothes the mind and encourages it to drowse. But it wakes with a start and asks: "is it not insipid to seek comfort in idle pleasantness when there is serious work to be done? Are not great works always purchased at the cost of anxiety and terror of failure? What value to life without creation, and how is creation possible other than through struggle?"

Perhaps there is no other way to create than to struggle and no other way to be virtuous than to create. But must all creations transcend their time to be meaningful? We cannot all be pyramid builders and symphony writers. But we can all be, to a greater or lesser extent, builders and teachers and healers, friends, carers, lovers, partners, perceptive admirers of beauty and helpers in the fight for justice. Lives such as these, modest but committed, are themselves creations.

Perhaps in the moment in which we become conscious of ourselves as committed and engaged subjects we feel unburdened of ordinary cares. In that moment of feeling unburdened is there not also a feeling of being well-disposed towards all existence (not towards every particular thing that exists, but towards being in general and our being alive amidst it)? And might we not call this feeling of being well-disposed towards everything (a bearable lightness of being?) happiness, and a life lived so as to produce this happiness meaningful?

This feeling of unburdened positive disposition towards existence is ephemeral, as it must be. Were it to persist we would become disengaged and passive and lose our grasp on happiness just because we tried to hold it too tightly. One must tense one's nerves again and re-enter the fray, never knowing whether happiness will return, but secure in the knowledge that it would be lost were we to try to live any single moment forever.

Fragments For The Last Sunday Evening Of February

Originally Published February 27th, 2012

“*Rien faire, comme un bete*, lying on water, looking peacefully at the sky, being, nothing else.”
(Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 157.)

If one desires the peace of being, nothing else, why not look to rocks rather than animals? For it is the mineral, not the animal kingdom, that truly has nothing to do. It persists, it supports, but it does not act. Yet it has structure, it has beauty, it erodes and becomes soil and enables life without intending it. It holds up the entire human world, but philosophy has nothing to say about it.

Not so the worldviews of the people of the First Nations. Many of their sacred spots are anthropomorphic rock formations. Typically, one assumes that the place has become sacred because the rock reminds the community of the human form- the spirit has shaped the rock to take on the appearance of a person. Could there not be a deeper wisdom in the opposite interpretation? What is the opposite interpretation? That it is not an immaterial spirit – animating power, moral centre, directing intelligence– that has shaped the rock to look like a person, but the spirit is rocky substance– solid structure enduring across aeons, the ground linking generation to generation, the underlying basis supporting collective effort across time, resistant to impetuous change but tolerant enough to permit alteration over the long-term, a universal foundation that joins everyone whose feet touch the earth?

Philosophy needs the geologist’s sense of time in order to understand the development of the conceptual tectonic plates that organize our lives. If we do not understand these, we literally do not understand the cultural ground upon which we stand. If a rock that lasted billions of years were conscious, imagine the depths of reflection and understanding it could accomplish.

Speed is crucial if you are prey to something else. But if nothing is hunting you, why not stay still for a moment? Concentrate. Pay loving attention. Explore the nuances of the environment that surrounds you. Caress it. Smell it. Hear it. You might never return to that spot. Learn its depths before departing.

I was staying in a hotel on the straits of Mackinack over the summer. The landscape was familiar to me, as it was just like the landscape of my boyhood home in Northern Ontario. But this was Northern Michigan, not Northern Ontario. I let myself feel how I was feeling. I felt at home and not at home. Strange, but wonderful. But that is not the whole story. Standing on the balcony of our room one evening I noticed a family from Japan. Stretching before them were the straits, the muscular rocks and evergreen forest of the Canadian Shield, the gently arched back of Mackinac Island. They saw none of it. They took stupid tourist photographs of each other with their I-phones.

Years ago I wandered the streets of Old Jerusalem looking for the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, magnificently lost in the labyrinth of alleys and cramped streets, one minute exposed under the baking desert sun, the next covered by ancient vaulted arches, now in a spacious

square, now in a crowded casbah inhaling the scent of uncommon spices, now coughing up five sheckles to see the spot where my entrepreneurial friend assured me Jesus first picked up the cross, now coughing up five sheckels for a Maccabee beer in a youth hostel in the heart of the Old City, my mind totally given over to reflection on the multiple architectures, histories, and hatreds that vibrate across this space. But aside from the people who lived there, I seemed to be the only one alone, and the only one paying attention. Everyone else was part of a tourist group, all behind a camera or video camera lens, all of them totally alienated from the life around them.

Why be anywhere if you are not going to concentrate on where you are?

People have utterly lost the ability to feel comfortable being by themselves. Josie and I were having lunch in Toronto awhile ago and a young man sat down next to us. On the other side of him was another couple having lunch. Instead of reading the paper, or daydreaming, or staring at the walls, he immediately dug out his laptop and started sending emails. I could feel him worrying that others would think he was totally bereft of friends, and so instead of just enjoying his lunch, he made a great show of letting us all know that he did too know other people, people who wanted to hear from him. Come to think of it, I don't even know if he bothered to eat. I think he might have just had a glass of water before making up some excuse to the waitress and leaving.

Being able to be alone is hard, but it is a condition of being interesting to other people who are capable of being interested in interesting people (which is not everyone). Where does emotional and intellectual depth come from if not from reflection upon what our experiences have meant to us? But that reflection requires time, silence, and solitude. People do not like silence, because when there is no other sound you have to listen to yourself, and it is generally painful to hear what you have to say. Our doubts and failure speak louder to us than our triumphs.

Section III: Interpretations

Politics and Inertia

Originally Published March 8th 2012

Norman Finkelstein at

Palestinian Human Rights Week

University of Windsor

Wednesday, March 7th

Norman Finkelstein spoke to a standing room only crowd at the Ambassador Auditorium last night. He was a deceptively powerful speaker whose quiet intelligence shone more and more intensely as his argument developed. My aim here is not to give a complete report on its content, but rather to expand upon certain of its core principles in ways that I feel might be relevant for the Canadian left. These reflections might usefully be read in light of the questions I posed in my December 8th, 2011 post, “Open Questions.”

Finkelstein has recently turned his attention to the Indian struggle for independence, and in particular the political thought of Mahatma Ghandi, for ideas that can help bring about a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finkelstein claims to have learned from Ghandi that the fundamental assumption of orthodox Leninism- that political passivity or conservatism springs from ignorance that only the vanguard party can overcome- is materially false. People are not ignorant of the structural problems that beset their worlds. No, people are not stupid, according to Ghandi, they are lazy. The problem of politics is thus not education and enlightenment, but overcoming inertia. The way to overcome inertia, argued Finkelstein, is to present the political public with a coherent agenda for immediately realizable solutions to a fundamental problem.

He proceeded to support this claim with what I regarded as an effective thought experiment. He asked the crowd to consider two movements that shared a critique of capitalism, articulated this critique in identical manifestos, but presented the public with different practical demands with regard to the specific problem of the suffering of homeless people in cold climates. The first manifesto concludes by asking people to donate spare coats to the homeless; the second manifesto asks the same people to donate a spare room. The second manifesto, Finkelstein argued, is the more moral, but the first the more political.

If people were willing to deeply reflect upon their duties to their fellow human beings, and they had a surplus room, they would feel obligated to offer that room to the homeless. The problem is, people do not fully reflect upon their duties to their fellow human beings, and even if they did, most are psychologically incapable of fulfilling this duty if it means giving up something that, while surplus, is also of essential importance: their privacy, their space. If we try to base politics on moral demands that most people are incapable of living, then we will be moral, but we will also not solve the problems that stimulate our moral consciousness.

The first manifesto makes demands that are less than a fully human morality would require, but it would also most likely generate a wide response. The problem of homelessness would not be solved, but the problem of the homeless freezing would be. The program of the first manifesto will not solve every injustice caused by capitalism, but it does mobilize people to effectively meet others' real unmet needs for warm clothing. The point is not that a politics of charity is preferable to structural changes. The point, rather, is that serious political commitment must be commitment to action, action, to be successful requires broad social movements, and broad social movements can be activated only around goals that people believe are achievable in a given social, political, economic, and cultural context. Adherents of the second manifesto could rightly object that the movement does less than is required to solve every structural injustice. The problem, however, is that this critique is academic, made from a position of political isolation, and thus incapable of bringing about the change it demands. It fails to provide people with either rooms or coats. It will leave the pressing material need unmet and the structural causes of need-deprivation unchanged, because it asks of people more than they are capable of giving. It will fail to build a political public, and it will remain an impassioned, but practically useless, critique.

The first manifesto builds a political movement, argued Finkelstein, the second creates a cult. While his use of 'cult' might sound like an invidious slur against the far left, that is not how I interpreted it. I did not sense that he was being dismissive of radicality in politics, or implying that people who insist on a morally pure politics are dupes or brainwashed. Rather, I think that he meant by 'cult' a self-selecting group of people capable of great discipline and sacrifice, but who are incapable of reaching and motivating a broad social movement, because most people are not willing to impose that degree of discipline upon themselves. So the question he posed was: do you want to belong to a political movement that can make an immediate difference, or do you want to belong to a cult that has abstract plans for perfect solutions, but lacks— and will always lack— the power to bring them to effect?

I have belonged to a cult, in the non-pejorative sense explained above. I learned a great deal from truly thoughtful, caring, engaged people. I participated in a number of struggles, but never in a fully committed way, because these particular struggles were always for us instruments of building our own movement. But we never managed to grow, and, as I now think back on that time with Finkelstein's argument in mind, I can see clearly why we did not. Most people wanted to belong to a political movement that could make a difference, not master the abstract intricacies of Marxist theory. I did master those intricacies, and today I am a full professor of philosophy who struggles constantly to motivate myself to *act*, because I am capable of providing elaborate theoretical critiques of any partial movement, so well did I learn my lessons.

Overcoming this inertia, not in my own case exclusively, but across the broad spectrum of Canadian citizens who are concerned about the environment, an economy that can provide meaningful jobs, a society that makes a place for its young to contribute, that has transcended the utter spiritual vacuity of capitalist consumerism, demands that a new left arise that is capable of figuring out what the political public is willing to do right now to advance these demands. There are different movements addressing different aspects of each of these problems, and many left-wing intellectual like myself have tried to supply moral, political, and theoretical unity to them.

But where is the practical program that links the abstract and the concrete in *winning* mass struggles?

I wish it were otherwise but I think it is clear that Finkelstein is correct. Most people with something to sacrifice are not willing— unless circumstances have become comprehensively catastrophic— to sacrifice it all for the sake of political activity. There are a few people who are capable of giving everything— all their intellectual and emotional energy, their time, their resources,— to the fight for the morally best world. But most are not, at least not right now. Yet, people are cold, and the problem is how to get them warm right now. A new left needs to begin with modest goals. Modest goals do not require the new left to be a creature of existing parties, which have no goals beyond power, or to take on board any illusions about the possibility of a just and democratic capitalism. Modesty means asking not “what *is* to be done?” absolutely, but ‘what *can* be done?’ right now.

In a brilliant essay, one of the best on Marx that I have read, Andrew Collier argued that Marx is more kin to the traditions of British conservatism (think Edmund Burke, not Margaret Thatcher) than to British liberalism. He means that for Marx political values are not fauna of disembodied reason calculating private advantage, but flora of the soil of long traditions. Transformational politics can only succeed if it anchors itself in these traditions: “What he shares with conservatism is his belief that starting from where we are rather than an idea of where we want to go, and asking what can be done, not for the good of people in general, but for the good of *these* people, with *these* traditions, *these* needs, *these* skills, *these* resources.” (Andrew Collier, “Marx and Conservatism,” *Marx and Contemporary Philosophy*, 2009, pp. 99-100) The real structure of Marx’s politics was thus not utopian, as both liberals and conservatives often accuse those politics of being, but, as I have argued elsewhere, ‘organic’— an on-going living development rooted in existing plateaus of achievement and oriented by realizable goals that demonstrably build up and out from solidly that which exists right now. If a new left is to be built, it has to start from an honest accounting, not only of where we are, but where we can realistically go as a first step.

Jesus on Woodward Ave.

Originally Published December 22nd 2011

Reflections on Humanity and Creation in Light of the Rembrandt and the Face of Jesus Exhibit,
Detroit Institute of Arts

In the catalogue that accompanies the exhibit, Blaise Ducos explores Rembrandt's various solutions to a "classic conundrum of history painting: how to depict the passions of the gods. How does one portray the intense emotions of beings who are suprahuman." (p.180). I want to suggest that the paintings, etchings, and drawings of Rembrandt that make up the major works of this exhibit attempted to solve a different problem: not how to represent the emotions of a god, but how to communicate the emotions of a human being living in the knowledge that he has been condemned to death. The problem is therefore not one of rendering in terms comprehensible to humans the emotions of beings that are more than human, but rather how to get humans who believe in the divinity of Jesus to see through that belief back to his essential humanity.

In the various renderings of Jesus' face, as well as in other paintings on display, especially *The Visitation* and *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, it is the human situation, the human drama, and human emotions that are essential. As one meditates upon the paintings, but especially upon the eyes— which are for good reason called the windows to the soul— we see a Jesus that is at once contemplative, melancholy, reflective, anxious, but above all, it seems to me, resigned. Christ's resignation to his fate— the human fate, to suffer and die— is most evident in the eyes of the six *Head of Christ* paintings that Rembrandt created between 1648 and 1656. The curatorial notes hung alongside the paintings speak of a contemplative face and spiritual profundity. That is not what I see when I focus on these faces. I could not see a human meditating upon his divine mission, but rather simply a human being who has become aware of his finitude. The eyes look away from the viewer. This is not Christ the teacher or Christ the saviour. This is a man who needs to avert the gaze of the other so that he might have a moment to reflect and try to understand his fate, our fate: life, suffering, death, oblivion.

Except that for Christ there would be no oblivion. But the human rendered in these paintings is not a man rejoicing in his knowledge that after his torture, execution, and death he would rise again and live evermore. No one who *knew* that he would rise from the dead could attain any spiritual depth, because spiritual depth requires triumph over a great burden or challenge, and for anyone who *knew* that he would rise from the dead, knowledge that he would die would not be a great burden. Christ on the cross does not laugh at his tormenters in the knowledge that soon he will rise again; he cries out, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me." (Matthew 27:46-7).

The eyes in these paintings are not looking past the grave into the beatific light of the afterlife; if anything, they are looking into the grave with melancholy resignation. It is in this melancholy resignation— attained by reflection upon the real situation of humanity and the recognition that it

cannot be transcended— that true spiritual depth is born. The spirit is the strength to bear the knowledge of the unrecoverable loss of the body— to bear it by going on to do that which one must do. And what must we do: understand one another and serve one another: “I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you entertained me, I was unclothed and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matthew 25: 35-7).

Were this face able to see the certainty of resurrection after the certainty of death, it would lose its human beauty. The mystery on display in this exhibit is not the Christian mystery of death and resurrection, of man and god united in a single being, it is the mystery of great art: how does a composition of definite material substances, arranged according to knowable principles of structure and technique, and created in a specific historical moment continue to communicate to an open ended number of people over an open ended future?

Answering this question requires more than descriptions, even supremely evocative descriptions, of the unsurpassed play between light and dark in Rembrandt’s paintings, of the subtle complexity and detail of the architecture of his shadows, the depth of expression in the faces illuminated in the light, of the communicative power of the sparse lines of his drawings. The mystery is the spirit of art: its ability to aesthetically and affectively seize the viewer and transform his or her understanding of the possibilities of representation, construction, arrangement, sound, texture, narration. I believe that this aesthetic-affective seizing is what Benjamin meant by the ‘aura’ of the work of art, (*Illuminations*, pp. 220-225).

For Benjamin, the aura is what separated the original work from mechanical reproductions. I believe that it also applies to the relationship between the aesthetically unprecedented and the derivative— only those works that provoke a new way of sensing and experiencing the subject-matter of the work and the creative processes and practices through which that subject matter has been rendered as work of art has an aura, and seizes us by virtue of it. The seizing is less a matter of cognition— although re-thinking of our understanding of the subject-matter, and, indeed, of what constitutes art in general, can be an effect of being seized. But before cognition there must be the experience, not quite mute, perhaps, but needing time to struggle its way to words, just as the artist must struggle his or her way outward from feeling and conception and originary idea towards the materialized work. Overly hasty conceptualization and theorization negates the moment of seizure too soon, and the sense-enlarging vitality of the experience is lost.

For me, that which seizes in these paintings is the greatness of Jesus, not for his miracles— which, from a mortal standpoint, were horrifying. Look at the faces of the witnesses in the etching *The Raising of Lazarus*. There is no joy, but only a recognition of the monstrousness of the act. One wonders whether Rilke had this painting in mind when he wrote of the same miracle:

“He stood erect, brim-full of that unblinking,

mounting gesture, that so painfully

lifted up his hand (no hand was ever

raised so slowly, so immeasurably),
till it stood there, shining in the gloom.
There it slowly, clawingly contracted:
what if all the dead should be attracted
upwards, through that syphon of a tomb,
where a pallid, chrysalid thing
was writhing up from where it had been lying?
(Rainer Maria Rilke, "The raising of Lazarus.")

Both focus upon the horror of mortals witnessing that which they claim above all to desire: a reprieve from death.

The spirit does not take us beyond the grave, but resigns us to it.

And the spirit of art seizes us because art reveals to us the beauty that can shine through the tears and blood of this finitude?

John Brown: Paintings

Originally Published April 4th 2012

John Brown

Paintings

Olga Korper Gallery

17 Morrow St.,

Toronto ON

March 31st- April 28th, 2012

The Tragic

“It is high time we reinvented a relationship to tragedy in painting, literature, philosophy, and politics.” (Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*,” 2005, p. 24).

Not the reinvention of the tragic hero, much less the artist as tragic hero, but of a relationship between art and tragedy.

What is tragedy? Seeing the catastrophe coming and not being able to do anything about it, witnessing loss, recording it, preserving it, testifying to it, above all, bearing it because of its necessity.

Painting

Is not all painting in some way a bearing? Not bearing witness, for that would tie it too closely to the specific moment, but a helping us to bear the burden of having senses, of not being able to keep the world out. Painting is a transformation of the visual so as to make it bearable.

Catastrophe is that time when that which is seen cannot be borne. We seem close: War on Terror, Drone War, Full Spectrum Dominance, Surveillance State, Police State. The human body/being crushed beneath the machine rhythms of what some people still want to call “the free world.” Catastrophe would be that time when art is no longer possible. But we are not there yet.

Look and See

Paintings

Every painting begins with a surface, a pure unformed space, and an idea (but not necessarily an idea of any *thing*) that demands materialization. Who knows where the idea comes from—memory, a chance encounter, a random experience, the unconscious, or maybe from nowhere)? Every painting begins with the impossible but necessary first brush stroke. It is impossible because the unformed space upon which the initiating mark which first materializes the idea gives no better reason for starting here rather than there, with this colour rather than that. Impossible then, but since it exists as the first mark of an ultimately completed sequence, also necessary, because a completed work logically presupposes a beginning. So the work begins by reaching into the infinite and seeing what you pull out. This act inaugurates the work but it does not work. More paint, less paint, brushing, scraping. The work starts to form itself and starts to work. The work begins to work. From the unformed freedom of the surface and the first inscription a material logic unfolds that shows the way to the finished object. The paradox of creative activity is that the absolute freedom of the pure unformed beginning is realized as the absolute determination of the completed work by rules that unveil themselves as material accretes in definite ways upon the surface. Free creation is the process of allowing oneself to be determined by these emergent rules. To learn how the work will work. And then it works.

Free determination by emergent rules is the opposite of machine operation. Machines operate by imposed rules and have no idea of how they work or of the work that they do. Machine functioning is the antithesis of the creative act. It is an ever present and growing menace. The artist paints the machine menace and enables us to bear the threat. But it would be wrong to see these paintings as commentary. Viewing them is not a lesson concerning what they are “about.” The paintings are not “about” anything. Still, they are confrontations with what there is. And they hope. This has been said once by the artist: all painting- inscription of form and content in the unformed space of the surface— is an act of hope. An act of hope that something living will escape the workhouses, weapons, cyborgs, drones, servants of machine functioning that populate these works. Let them arrest your eye so that it can see differently. Look and see.

John Brown: Watching



John Brown: Watching, Photo: Josie Watson

As one looks at *Watching* a reverential image of a Buddha on a podium dissolves into the static violence of the observing soldier . The enlightened one becomes an eyeless, networked seer, reporting and receiving instructions, guarding, warding off. The form is human but without a face: sentient but non-living; one with the machine that protects and defines it. The lifelessness of the watcher is emphasized by the extraordinary darkness—literally and metaphorically—of the image. There is an almost total absence of individuating detail in the figure, the background threatens to absorb it completely. And yet, here at the moment of almost total loss of the human there is still illuminating light that gives shape and structure to the figure. Even the watcher requires light, and where there is light, truth can be seen. The light allows the watcher to be watched and the truth to be seen.

John Brown: Stupid # 1



John Brown: Stupid # 1

Stupid # 1 is thematically and compositionally related to *Watching*, but is even more horrifying in the separation between human form and humanity expressed in the figure, a towering cyborg whose simple lines remind one of the robots of 1950's and 1960's science fiction movies but whose contemporaneity with 21st century military technology cannot be doubted. "Stupid" means to lose one's faculties of sense, discrimination, and thought— to be scared stupid is to be frozen, incapable of intelligent action. The cyborg is stupid— insensate and unthinking in any human sense; even more pitiless and remorselessly threatening than the helmeted watcher. All traces of any possible human-hearted connection with whomever it might encounter have been abstracted out of the painting. Again, there is no face. All that remains is the solid shadow form looming. Here too the figure is individuated not by any features peculiar to itself but by the light that radiates from behind and from the side. But the figure seems to be stepping in front of its source and positioning itself to wall off the last rays. When the light is gone for good, there will be nothing more for us to see, nothing more for us to bear.

John Brown: Prince Albert



John Brown: Prince Albert

The violence of machine functioning is interrupted by the playful, comical rear wheel, obviously too flimsy to support the heft of the machine. But the real power of the painting is the intricately painted, colourful and ambiguous form in the centre. There is a suggestion of organic structure here. But is it a body that has been churned to bits by the machine? Or is it a body slowly materializing by a centripetal force drawing towards the centre the uncountable chromatic particles- the streaks of colour left over from scrapping away heavier layers of paint- that populate the open but bounded field of possibility that forms the background?

John Brown: Victoria



John Brown: Victoria

A more threatening- but in a way, even more comical (look at the wobbling front wheels and the cartoon-dragster wheel in the back) –companion piece to Prince Albert. It is hung, appropriately, on the same wall, and in some ways best viewed from afar, so that both can be seen together. On first glance the painting seems to be derived unambiguously from an armoured car. Yet, towards the rear the dark solidity of the metallic structure begins to dissolve into colour and space. Is the space reclaiming the hardness of the iron, or is the iron devouring the empty space? Possibilities opening up and closing off at the same time.

John Brown: Waiting



John Brown: Waiting

An extraordinary expression of the indistinct architecture of memory. A disused industrial structure – the old mine- floating in space just as the mental image that memory summons floats free of all context in the mind’s eye. The almost complete absence of detail intensifies the power of the image, just as the abstractness of the mental image intensifies the desire for its object. There is a longing in this painting– for the human beings who have long since left the scene? for a return to an earlier time? The structure is paradoxically solid and diaphanous. It cannot contain anyone or anything. Despite its stony materiality it cannot keep anything out or in. We do not see into it, but through it and beyond it.

John Brown: Listening



John Brown: Listening

Like “Waiting” “Listening” has a nostalgic air about it. A rectangular structure perches upon a rusty-coloured arched surface not unlike the soot-blackened reddish granite of Sudbury’s ancient mountains. But what is one to make of the structure that dominates the centre of the piece? As

with "Watching," the figure undergoes a transformation the more one looks at it, but this time from non-living to living. On first glance, it seems inert: a box, a cage, a chest? Look longer, and what seems initially imprisoning and lifeless becomes comforting and sheltering of a living form. A chair with its back to the viewer in which is resting a person, an old woman perhaps, her head slumped to the side, resting, in the warming and healing embrace of its arms? Peaceful, silent, finally able to rest.

John Brown: Eating



John Brown: Eating

If there is a common element to the paintings in this show it is the paradoxical nature of the central images. "Eating" is perhaps the most paradoxical. On one level, it is the most obviously representational— can the machine be anything other than a warplane, an F-35, streaking through space soon to exit the viewers frame of reference? But the longer one looks the less obvious it becomes. As in "Victoria" and "Prince Albert" there is again a transition between living and dead elements— the engineered, rectilinear geometry of the black machine and the freer form greenness escaping the confines of the airframe. On longer view, the whole image seems suspended: suspended in time and space, hovering above a target, suspended between programmed purpose and the free articulation of living substance.

John Brown: Speaking



John Brown: Speaking

“Speaking” is the only painting whose central image seems purely organic. At the same time, it is completely indefinite—its curves and its colour suggest life, but it is not a representation of any whole being. It is more reminiscent of Gericault’s body-part studies, or even Rembrandt’s or Soutine’s sides of beef, than a portrait or even an allusion to or an evocation of a coherent living whole. Yet the paint radiates an inner light outward, as people at their most beautiful are said to ‘glow.’ The inner light that helps us bear the enclosing gloom.
Hope?