

## **Thinkings 2**



**Collected  
Interventions/Readings/  
Evocations 2012-2013  
Jeff Noonan**

## Table of Contents

### **Contents**

<b>Ambivalence: Beginning/Ending; Postscript/Preface</b>	4
<b>The Future of Public Universities in Ontario</b>	7
<b>Undemocratic Centralism</b>	10
<b>“The Rules, Boss, the Rules! The Rules!”</b>	13
<b>On Patriotism (For Canada Day)</b>	15
<b>Answer Me!</b>	17
<b>The Weakness Unto Death</b>	20
<b>Collective Bargaining: Requiem or Renaissance?</b>	23
<b>Time, Gentlemen, Please</b>	25
<b>The Pageantry of Resistance</b>	28
<b>The Venezuelan Experiment</b>	31
<b>Ought as Is</b>	34
<b>Variations on a Rawlsian Theme</b>	36
<b>Here and Now</b>	39
<b>Grandpa, Will There be Smartphones Under Socialism?</b>	42
<b>Four More Years</b>	46
<b>The Ambiguity of Understanding</b>	51
<b>The Ambiguity of Understanding II: The Theatre of Compliance</b>	54
<b>What is in a Name?</b>	58
<b>The Names</b>	61
<b>Syrixa/Syria</b>	64
<b>An Immodest Proposal</b>	73
<b>If A Nurse Dies in December, Does Anybody Hear Her?</b>	76
<b>Hunger Games</b>	78
<b>Readings: Deschooling Society, by Ivan Illich</b>	82
<b>Readings: A Late Quartet</b>	86
<b>Anonymous Beuys</b>	88
<b>Long Day’s Journey Into Fuck You Centre</b>	97

<b>Liner Notes .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>The Destruction of Space.....</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>The Immorality of Biography .....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>Passages From Death to Life.....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Hell full as number of self-righteous Christians turned away from heaven skyrockets.....</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>The (Im)Morality of Enjoyment .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>On Beauty .....</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Art.World.Art .....</b>	<b>118</b>

## Ambivalence: Beginning/Ending; Postscript/Preface

The police never seem ambivalent, do they? Given the opportunity they always wade happily into a crowd to beat the assembled, but not only to beat them, to humiliate them. When they get to turn on their water cannons or fire pepper spray or tear gas, to lob concussion grenades or blast noise, they never turn down the chance, do they? Perhaps there is a lesson in this: if ever we want something unequivocally, if ever there is no trace of wanting the opposite at the same time, if ever we feel no ambivalence, then our desire is obscuring something in its object.

Where there is no ambivalence there is ignorance— typically willful— of contradictory properties in the object. But ambivalence is incapacitating, consciousness of the co-existence of contraries arrests action rather than, as Hegel thought, cause life and motion. One does not know what to do. But the circumstances of life call upon us to act. But consciousness of the reality of those circumstances says: not too soon.

This is why those who never feel ambivalence are dangerous, they act too soon. Animals are not ambivalent- they do whatever their initial instinct tells them to do. Men (and it is most often men) of action do likewise— they react without thought, they attack, they defend principles in ways that contradict the principles without grasping the contradiction. If you point this failing out to them, they will hit you all the harder.

Thought is self-restraint, action held in check. The world is a whole, the mind is a whole that encompasses the world-whole in its thoughts. Wholes contain everything, and the set of everything contains pairs of opposites. The more one thinks, the more negatives for every positive and positives for every negative one discovers. To think is to become ambivalent.

Or is it just to become afraid? “You think too much” is an insult; it implies: ”You never do anything, you talk a good game, but when it comes time to act, you absent yourself.”

To be sure, it is possible to substitute thinking for action in contexts where action is called for, and that is wrong. But it is also possible to substitute action for thinking when thinking is called for, and that is wrong too.

“We must do something.” Yes, but thinking a little longer is doing something. Refraining from acting is doing something. Saving one’s self for other, perhaps bigger battles, is doing something. Patience is also a political virtue.

Thinking people are generally not afraid of acting, more often they are afraid that precipitous action, action in the absence of sufficient support, will make things worse. They are ambivalent. Ambivalence is not the result of not seeing the problem, but of seeing its complexity all too clearly. Ambivalent people see the problem, the solution, and the further problems the failure of that solution can cause. They become suspended in thought between the good the attempt might

produce and the bad the attempt might equally well produce; they become suspended between the desire to do something and the desire to do nothing.

Between equal probabilities force decides. So action man says, “fuck it, let’s do this thing.” When he is right: a fun movie; when he is wrong: the Great Leap Forward.

The context of on-going global crisis seems to call for action. People mobilise. Sections of the left get breathless, more sober sections adopt a more cautious appraisal, one wants the first response to be correct, but the triumphalist tone annoys, so one wants the second response to be correct, but that is conservative and defeatist, so one wants the first response to be correct ...

One looks closer to home and sees all the problems that need attention and feels the need to act; one thinks about the mammoth scale of those problems and worries whether one is up to the task, one wants to withdraw, to hide, but that is cowardly and lazy and selfish, one feels the need to act, and worries...

Many of the past year’s posts seemed to have been forced on me by social and political circumstances—on-going economic crisis, violent global conflicts, the emergence of new left wing movements. Events kept crashing down upon me, stimulating in me some sense of responsibility to use this forum to intervene, if only at a theoretical level, and of course conscious at all moments that nothing I say would make a practical difference on the ground, where it counts. But is that really discharging one’s responsibilities, or just another side of the fun I have with the more free-range philosophical meanderings that also found their way to readers through the digital ether? Ambivalence, you see.

So a second year ends and a third begins. Every ending poses a question: should I just rest here and say no more? One day perhaps, when either there is nothing to say or I have nothing left to contribute to what needs saying. Either point will arrive without me deciding when it has arrived, so in the meantime, I will set out again, opening my thoughts to the world and the world to my thoughts.

## I: Interventions

# The Future of Public Universities in Ontario

Originally Published 11 September, 2012

This document was initially written in response to a request from the President of my University for written feedback on the Government of Ontario's discussion document on the future of higher education in the Province. The document makes a number of problematic assumptions and contains potentially damaging ideas about the future of publically funded post-secondary education in Ontario. The government will release its plans for post-secondary education in the Province sometime in the next couple of months. If you are in any way involved in post-secondary education in Ontario, it is vital to start thinking politically about how to most productively organize to contest the worst of these ideas, should the government decide to try to implement them. Interested readers should also read [David Tough's "Declaration of Independence"](#) of the University from neo-liberal life-destruction. Thanks to Stephen Pender (who in turn thanked Alan Sears) for the link.

In a publicly funded higher education system government policy will decisively affect the fiscal conditions in which institutional goals are set and pursued. It is entirely appropriate that the government making the decisions as to how tax dollars are spent be involved in the determination of funding formulas, tuition rates, and all other matters relating to the size of institutional budgets. It is quite another matter for the government to be involved in the determination of institutional goals, pedagogical methods, and the form and content of research projects. The discussion document under analysis here: ["Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation, and Knowledge: A Discussion Paper on How to Make Ontario's Universities and Colleges Stronger"](#) continually transgresses the border separating questions of funding for higher education from questions concerning the organization of higher education. In what follows I will confine my comments to universities, as I have no experience or expertise with colleges or apprenticeship programs.

Before any useful discussion of practical changes can occur the underlying assumptions of the paper must be laid bare. Its concern with transformation is structured by the assumption that the primary purpose of education is to "grow" the economy by producing job-ready graduates on the one-hand and "entrepreneurs" who will create new businesses on the other. "Knowledge," "Innovation," and "Creativity," the three concepts around which the paper is organized, are all understood as mere instruments of money-value growth. (See page 5). The language employed—including referring to higher education as a "sector"—is derived from business, as is the stated goal of institutional transformation—higher productivity. What "higher productivity" means in an educational institution is never clearly defined, but a close examination discloses that it means two things, neither of which is central to the intellectual mission of universities, and one of which would be directly destructive of the pedagogical side of that mission. The government is keen to "produce" more graduates more quickly on the one hand, and more commercializable research on the other. I will discuss each in turn, beginning with the second aim.

The document assumes that the primary value of academic research is the money-value it adds to the Ontario economy.(p.4) This assumption completely marginalizes traditional scholarly activity in the arts and humanities, work in the social sciences and humanities which is critical of established social structures and practices, and pure research in the natural sciences. Institutional transformation based upon this assumption will deepen already existing rifts between academics engaged in non-commercial (and non-commercializable) projects and those whose research is tailored towards the creation of new commodities and production processes. This assumption blocks from view the deeper life-value of academic research in a democratic society: it broadens the intellectual, political, moral, and aesthetic horizons of citizens, making them better able to understand one another and more capable of resolving conflicts peacefully, more deeply appreciative of the goods we enjoy, more engaged in the complex processes of solving the social problems we face, and more alive to the beauty of nature and the arts that makes life worth living. The free development of academic research projects is thus not a luxury that a free society of socially self-conscious human beings can cut for the sake of “growing the economy.” Economic growth is not an intrinsic value, but good only to the extent that it supports the development of ways of living that are meaningful and socially valuable. All research which contributes to the fundamental human project of creating meaningful and valuable lives is good, whether it makes money or not. A university system must find ways to support all such research or cease to be a university system.

As damaging as marginalizing non-commercial research would be, the assumption underlying the application of “productivity” measures to students is even worse. The assumption that productive teaching means “producing” more graduates in less time depends upon an objectification of students which, if ever operationalized, would destroy the pedagogical mission of the university. Students are not things to be processed by university institutions; graduation is not the same as a minivan rolling off an assembly line. Graduation is an achievement of human individuals who have devoted themselves to a cooperative and interactive process through which their cognitive and imaginative capacities have been developed. The value of the development of these cognitive and imaginative capacities is both intrinsic- it is through their expression in concrete forms of life-project that human existence is made meaningful and valuable—and instrumental— it is through these life-projects that concrete problems of life within the natural and social worlds are solved. To treat students as objects, as factors to be processed as quickly as possible, ensures that the development of the capacities upon which the value of life in general and the solution of more immediate practical problems in particular depend will be compromised. Students will be less and not more able to contribute creatively and constructively to their world. Quality education—education that enables people not only to follow rules and ape institutional learning outcomes, but to detect problems with existing rules and work cooperatively to create better ones—takes time. The government now appears to be preparing to abandon four year undergraduate degrees in favour of three year degrees. I cannot see how a reduction in the time spent studying can be equated with increased quality.

Thus, I find that there are serious and potentially fatal flaws embedded in the assumptions that guide the discussion paper. I hope that the government is serious about engaging academics and students in a democratic dialogue concerning the future of higher education and not imposing by fiscal fiat a vision cooked up by consultants in the backrooms of Queen’s Park. The document itself gives reason to suspect that the later and not the former is the road that has already been

chosen. On p. 6 it flat out asserts that the government is beginning the process of “transforming the system,” and plans only to consult academics and students about how this transformation will take place. In other words, the government is going to impose changes, academics and students can provide input, which may or may not be heeded, but the decision that change will occur has already been taken.

In itself, institutional change is not bad if undertaken for the right reasons and guided by the appropriate parties. The appropriate parties, where institutional goals and the means of achieving them are at issue, are academics (in the faculty ranks and those who have temporarily entered administration), students, and, to a lesser extent, staff. Transforming a higher education system which is performing well (by the government’s own admission) purely for the sake of balancing the budget to satisfy institutional bondholders is not a right reason for changes to teaching and research practices, but rather directly destructive of the institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and life-value of teaching and research essential to a truly democratic society.

# Undemocratic Centralism

Originally Published 9 June, 2013

Democratic centralism is the political practice of accepting the decision of the majority as binding on all members of the group. The practice depends upon self-imposed political discipline—continued membership in a group means identifying with and publicly supporting its decisions, even if one defended an opposed position during the debate. Political discipline compels one to identify with a decision one does not individually agree with, but the compulsion is not contrary to political freedom, because it stems from one's own decision to remain a member of the group and one's own failure to convince a majority during the period of full and free debate.

Democratic centralism is often associated (and dismissed because of that association) with Bolshevism. People forget that “Bolshevik” simply meant “the majority” and ignore the fact that all stable democratic organizations, small or large, rely upon democratic centralism for their stability. If every minority defected from an organization or political community every time a decision did not go its way, there would be no democratic organizations or political communities.

It is not the centralism that ruling groups object to, it is the democratic moment, because genuine democracy means that decisions that weaken their exclusive power might be taken. So instead of democratic centralism we are devolving towards undemocratic centralism. Undemocratic centralism is the political practice of substituting formally legitimate administrative and executive power to make and impose decisions for full and free democratic deliberations. There may be stage-managed “consultations” prior to the decision and dissent permitted after, but the actual decision is taken independently of any substantive democratic process.

Everywhere one looks power that is supposed to be dispersed amongst community or organization members is being concentrated in exclusive administrative and executive offices—in the President of the United States, in the Prime Minister’s Office, in Chief Executive Officers, senior management groups, and Boards of Governors. When the objection is raised that the concentration of decision-making power in unrepresentative administrative and executive bodies undermines the democratic character of institutions, the reply is always that these administrative bodies are part of a complex that make up the institution, their decisions are formally legitimate according to the constitutional rules governing the organization, and therefore there is no violation of democratic norms. And besides, you are always free to protest the decision, even though it will be ignored.

Nevertheless, people do protest. To take a local example: the University of Windsor this week re-affirmed its decision to close the Centre for Studies in Social Justice as of June 30th. Behind the scenes negotiations, an international letter writing and petition campaign, and a spirited demonstration of students, faculty, staff, and community members was unable to change the administration’s decision. They have the exclusive right, they claimed, to make budgetary decisions, and this decision was budgetary. I would argue that the decision represents another

step along a worrying path towards institutional narrowing— from *university* committed to fundamental and free inquiry and dissemination of knowledge to loosely linked research nodes chasing trends to attract external funding that in turn serves the money-value system. The new model is moving away from stable funding that enables researchers to pursue heterodox ideas over the long term towards centrally controlled pots of money, shares of which are allocated to different groups through competitive bidding.

In this way the public university internalizes processes definitive of competitive markets. The assumption is that the “efficiencies” that markets achieve through competition can be replicated in the university, where “efficiencies” take the form of research that produces marketable commodities and graduates that are “job-ready.” The open space-time of an institution for free inquiry and discussion is replaced by the closed space-time of the production institution. Academic freedom in research is compromised to the extent that research that fails to conform to institutional strategic plans is marginalized and de-funded; academic freedom in teaching is compromised to the extent that the range of courses available is determined by government and administrative policy and quality of teaching reduced to satisfaction of generic performance indicators (learning outcomes).

Increasingly across the globe people are expressing their opposition to the lack of or loss of democratic power. In Spain and Greece and Egypt and now in Turkey, citizens are becoming pro-active in the assertion of the primary democratic right: the right to participate as an equal in making collectively binding decisions that affect the conditions of one’s life as a member of the group for whom the decision is binding.

In Canada, unfortunately, people still mostly acquiesce to the usurpation of democratic power. There is private grumbling, but no explosive public demand, not only for accountability from elected officials and bosses, but for their subordination to processes of democratic deliberative formulation of law and policy. But there are small signs that people here too are beginning to stir: Occupy, Idle Know More, the growing revulsion against the authoritarianism of the Tory Government. At present, scattered instances of opposition have not found the unifying language they need to develop into a cohesive and coherent alternative, but the basic structure of that alternative is clear: healthy public institutions serving the common life-interests and choices between policy options determined through genuine democratic processes.

Democracy is not about each particular group getting its own way all the time. Commitment to democracy means commitment to sometimes having to accept decisions that do not favour the short term particular interests of your group. Groups are much more likely to accept decisions contrary to their short term particular interests if they have had the opportunity to make their case and discover that it proved less persuasive than the chosen alternative. In order for democratic centralism to work, the matter cannot be pre-determined behind closed doors by unrepresentative executive groups legitimating their practice by hair-splitting appeal to formalistic procedural rules. That is undemocratic centralism, and its spread is undoing two centuries of social progress which took humanity away from the idea that there is some sort of specialized knowledge required for governance that is the possession of an aristocratic few and

towards the idea that everyone is capable of understanding the common life-interest and arguing responsibly about how best it can be served when differences about how to proceed arise.

## “The Rules, Boss, the Rules! The Rules!”

Originally Published 27 June, 2012

Almost 20 years ago, William Massy and Robert Zemsky lamented the “unproductive” nature of academic labour. Drawing an historical analogy between pre-industrial craft labour and contemporary academia, Massy and Zemsky urged governments and administrators to undermine the bargaining power of academics by discovering technological means to do what formerly only human teachers could do. Their primary focus was the use of new information technologies to disseminate content. Expensive tenured professors could be replaced with contract course developers producing generic modules that could be distributed via the Internet. But they never envisaged uploading the evaluation of student work to computers. (Massy, William F, and Zemsky, Robert. “Using Information Technology to Enhance Academic Productivity,” <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/nli0004.html>)

It would appear that we are now at the threshold of the computer becoming evaluator as well as disseminator. The *New York Times* reports that teams of “professional data scientists” and “amateur statistics wizards” have created algorithms that have predicted “with eerie accuracy,” the scores that human markers assigned essays on American high school standardized tests. (Randall Stross, “Algorithms Show Skill at Grading,” *New York Times*, Sunday, June 24th, 2012). The programs evaluated only grammatical form. For the time being, the human marker is still required to “judge the content.” But since this entire exercise is driven by considerations of decreasing the costs of academic labour (“the software does sharply lower the 2 to 3 \$ cost of scoring essays, possibly even eliminating it”) it is inconceivable that engineers will not continue to search for new algorithms that will be marketed on the basis of a purported ability to evaluate content too. After all, if human thinking is just rule following, a rule following machine should be capable of determining how well or poorly the rules are being followed.

Remember when, during the Cold War, liberal-capitalism was celebrated for prizes individuality and Stalinism denounced for producing “robots?” Secure in its victory, liberal-capitalism seems to be devoting its considerable intellectual resources to the complete robotization of society. The hero of contemporary liberal-capitalism is not the *outré* iconoclast publicly confronting his staid fellows with bold and surprising “experiments in living” (J.S. Mill), but the solitary financial speculator entombed in front of his computer trading as his algorithms tell him, creating nothing of permanence, pissing away his wealth on superfluities to gratify his immense ego. Alone, following machine rules, “society” reduced to a series of empty leisure and entertainment routines, other people either his co-workers or his servants.

Deeper than the obvious political economic considerations driving the efforts at Medellín human evaluative capacities in grading software is the cult of rule following to which liberal-capitalist society has succumbed. It has forgotten that rules are instrumental, not intrinsic values, good to the extent that they enable us to attain ends worth attaining, and always subject to creative re-interpretation, violation, and transformation. Grammar has no intrinsic value. If one has nothing to say, grammar is of no use. The rules of grammar are means to clarity of expression, but clarity of expression is not always the end of writing or speaking. When the end is other than

clarity, a Beckett, a Pynchon, a Joyce, or a high school senior in Royal Oak is always free to creatively break the rules. If the rule-machine cannot understand the unrepeatable synthesis of form and content which is a work of art, so much the worse for the machine.

But whereas Beckett and Joyce have the good fortune to be dead, and Pynchon the courage to live outside the world of the artist-celebrity, the high school student, facing a radically uncertain future, is at the mercy of the rule-machines. Since art cannot be modeled, it cannot be evaluated, and if it cannot be evaluated, it is worthless to the rule makers and people sorters who tyrannize over thought and imagination in the existing school system. Woe to the student who tries to play creatively with words on her standardized test. Thou shalt follow the rules and be ranked!

Instead of educational institutions, we have disciplinary regimes producing deferential automatons programmed to obey their superiors. For the moment, those superiors are still human. But if educational work still has too much the William Morris wallpaper feel to it, how about politics, which still sometimes attracts people given to the rhetorical arts and who hope to serve the collective good. Talk about anachronism! If educational work needs to become more productive, why not politics too? Ought we not use digital technology to enhance efficiency in the political arena? Why not a machine that replaces the tedious processes of democratic argument and struggle with an algorithm that always selects for the optimal decision— to invest ever more thought and resources in replacing our complicated and quarrelsome but still creative and imaginative selves with ever faster algorithms determining the quickest way to conclude the anthropocene era?

## On Patriotism (For Canada Day)

Originally Published 1 July, 2012

Of all the abominations visited upon the country since the Conservatives came to power three elections ago, I find none more offensive than the renaming of the 401 from Trenton to Toronto the "Highway of Heroes." Officially, the appellation is meant to honour the Canadian troops killed in Afghanistan. Like all such official honours, the real purpose is not to put us in mind of the loss of young lives, but to prevent us from thinking about the causes of young deaths. If we were to think about those causes, we would discover how unnecessary the deaths were. A more accurate nomination would have been "The Highway Of Victims Sacrificed To Appease the Americans So That They Keep the Border Relatively Open to Canadian Goods." Unlike the heroes of classical myth, these men and women did not die because of a tragic flaw, but because of cold political-economic calculation. The deaths were not tragic, just a miserable waste.

But patriotism means never having to think about reality. If you disagree, there is a violent solution for your reluctance to go along with the program. You've seen the bumper sticker: "If you don't stand behind our troops, feel free to stand in front of them." In other words, if you feel that being a citizen of a country involves an obligation and responsibility to expose the realities beneath the syrupy platitudes of power, you should be shot and killed.

Violent threats directed at the non-compliant is essential to patriotism, for it is nothing but blind, uncritical, surrender of thought to national myths. Patriotism demands a complete effacement of historical knowledge and political-philosophical commitment to critique. It demands that one ignore the contradictions and oppositions and struggles out of which a nation is born and through which its political, economic, and social priorities are daily determined. It demands forgetting the counter-histories that patriotic lore silences as a condition of its fictions being taken for true. To discuss historical reality is to undermine the myths. To undermine the myths is to threaten the power of the myth-makers. Hence the violent antipathy that confronts the idol smasher.

What is left of patriotism once we strip from it the jingoism, the distortion, the totalitarian suppression of histories of struggle against the ruling class, the boring ceremonies and middle of the road sing-songy celebrations hosted by someone from LA who has parachuted into town for the day to tell us how proud she is to be a Canadian?

Nothing.

But if there is nothing left of patriotism, it does not follow that there is nothing left of a place people call home. Home is not where we are born but "the place where, when you have to go there/They have to take you in." (Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man"). To have a home is to have a place that cares and nurtures, that satisfies your needs. What makes any country good is not its myths but the extent to which it involves everyone who calls it home in the social project of determining how collectively produced resources will be utilized to satisfy each others' needs and enable each other's vital capacities.

But patriotism has nothing to do with welcoming home everyone who calls a place home. It is only the servants of the myths and the money-makers who are beckoned through the door. Abousfian Abdelrazik was left begging to return home, Conrad Black, who slammed the door on his way out because he was told not to play with the bad kids in the House of Lords is let back in, the prodigal son in reverse. The magnanimity of Canada is boundless!

The point of deflating self-important, chauvinistic, and ideological national myths is not to create a cultural vacuum, or to recommend a cosmopolitan indifference to place, history, context, and cultural specificity. All life is lived in some place and those different places are shaped by different cultural, political, economic, and social forces. Those contexts and local cultures shape our identities and commitments; the universal values whose satisfaction enriches human life, in order to be concretely instantiated, must be institutionalized. Institutions will always take on different colourations depending upon the specific history through which they develop, which means that the values they embody (to the extent that they embody them) will be articulated differently in different places.

Feeling at home in one history and not another seems to me distinct from feelings of patriotism as I have defined them above. No one knows better than the one who lives there what the real problems of home life are. At the same time, no matter what the problems, home— if it really is home, and not just a house, a temporary dwelling place— is the place where we are secure in exposing those problems and demanding solutions. Since our own identities are bound up with our home, if there is something wrong with it, there is something wrong with us— we fail in our civic and personal responsibilities if we ignore the rot in our own foundations.

The stink arising from Ottawa grows more toxic each day. The more the current regime accelerates its attacks on democratic public life, the more energy it pours into disseminating a mythological history of the nation centred on the military exploits of white, mostly English speaking Canadians. A sober historical assessment would disclose that there is little novel in the particular policy moves the Tories have made since winning majority government. But the whole is more obnoxious and socially and culturally reactionary than the sum of its parts. Prevarication, arrogant deflection of criticism, victim blaming, antediluvian social policy, racism and sexism and bourgeois hatred for working people all tied together by smug self-satisfaction typify Tory rule.

But who cares. The Snowbirds are overhead and aren't they brave and talented. Let's not hear anything of cuts to refugees' health benefits, on-line spying, the racist paranoia of the 'war on terror,' Dickensian attacks on unions, the brutal poverty of First Nation's communities, or renewed threats to women's control over their own bodies. It's Canada Day.

## Answer Me!

Originally Published 30 December, 2012

Aristocrats *owe* nothing to their “natural” inferiors. They may accept their petitions or respond to their pleas, they may decide to descend from on high to consult with them, but they owe subordinates no explanation for their actions. Aristocracy means “rule of the naturally best.” The best are owed deference and obedience; they do not owe others an account of their reasons. As Nietzsche says, “I submit that egoism belongs to the essence of a noble soul, I mean the unalterable belief that to [ such ] a being … other beings must naturally be in subjection, and have to sacrifice themselves.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 240).

The liberal-democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century were supposed to have overthrown aristocratic ideals. Democratic equality implies that each is entitled to look the other in the eye and demand an account of the reasons why a certain decision with public consequences was taken. That which applies to citizens’ public actions applies with especial force to governments: when groups of citizens contest the legitimacy or cogency of policies or laws, a responsible government must *respond*. The aristocrat pronounces; the democrat must answer with convincing arguments, or cede the field to her opponents.

Nothing is more anti-democratic than silence.

Yet silence is all that one hears from governments today.

Millions have demonstrated against war- no response.

Hundreds of thousands protest to demand a change in the economic policies that are starving them— no response.

Thousands have occupied public spaces around North America— no response.

A First Nations’ Chief goes on hunger strike to demand a meeting with the Prime Minister and other senior politicians— no response.

Political silence is not the absence of sound waves, it is essentially non-response to the question or counter-argument posed. The club to the head that drives protestors out of the city square, the mechanical repetition of clichés and platitudes- these are noises, but still forms of silence, because non-responses to the content of the counter-position. They say— “you have no right to our reasons. We have given you the same sound bites as everyone else. If you do not accept these tokens, you will be demonized, beaten and dispersed, and or left to starve to death.” Hence, these noises and gestures are really political silence. That which was rightfully demanded was recognition of the legitimacy of the criticism, and a commitment to work together to resolve the dispute on mutually agreeable terms. The only way to acknowledge the legitimacy of the criticism is to address its main claims in a serious and concrete way. Violent suppression, arrogant *ad hominem*, vacuous talking points: these are just noisy forms of political silence.

The aristocrat is silent in the face of opposition from below because he does not recognise the dignity of his subordinates. They are not fully human; they are toilers in the earth and servants of his desires. It is they who must acknowledge the legitimacy of his demand that they sacrifice themselves for his desires, not he who must respond to their needs. Hegel and Marx thought that they had found an immanent way of undermining this relationship. Through the sublimation of their own desires through work, workers proved their essential superiority to the boss. The boss consumes, the workers build, giving permanence to their thoughts in the form of the material things they create.

As democratic institutions developed, it appeared for a while that there might be some truth to this dialectical inversion. But the aristocrats did not go away, they bided their time, granted a concession here and a concession there, made it appear as though a new democratic ethos of working together in the spirit of equality and cooperation and mutual benefit had really been born from Putney and Pennsylvania and Paris. Moscow and Beijing and Havana later promised a deepening and extension of the democratic revolution. Proletarian democracy would be substantive as opposed to the merely formal democracy of the liberal-capitalist world, genuine rule of the people as opposed to “parliamentary cretinism.” (Marx)

Listening to the “debates” in the House of Commons or the US Congress makes Marx’s meaning abundantly clear. At the same time, judged historically, those institutions represented a real gain for working people. For the first time since Athens the doors of power were opened to all citizens, working men and women as well as the well-heeled and propertied. Wealth –earned or inherited, it appeared, would no longer be grounds for silence in the face of resistance.

But no longer. Democracy has not been deepened, but destroyed. In the place of cooperative self-government there is the new servant economy. Wealth is redistributed upward, and those without it return to the ignoble status of servants of the infantile desires of the 1%.

Comfort and complacency and the Cold War and anti-communism lulled people into political slumber. Working people began to think that their problems had been solved. Something called the “middle class” was exalted by all parties, and everyone but the lurking aristocrats thought that they belonged to it. The institutions of working class power began to decay, the few who remained on the revolutionary left were derided, communism was a failure, capitalism put a chicken (or tofurkey) in every pot and a car (or bicycle) in every garage. But that was before the banks foreclosed on the house to which the garage was attached. And when the car got towed off down the street by the repo man, the worker blamed himself, as he had been taught to do. And there was no left to defend him. So he looked up to his superiors for answers. ”The ordinary man, ... is still always waiting for an opinion about himself, and then instinctively submitting himself to it; yet by no means only to a “good” opinion, but also to a bad and unjust one.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 233)

The Prime Minister and others in his circle flatter themselves that they are the new aristocrats, superior in intellect and taste and goals to the masses whose interests they claim to manage. While they certainly never tire of passing judgment on others, they lack that which Nietzsche regarded as the true mark of nobility- not birth, and certainly not political power, but the capacity to create new values. The so-called rulers are in actuality themselves servants, and

willing servants at that, of an impersonal global power that courses through all countries demanding tribute and obedience. This money-power and the microscopically small class in whose private interest it operates is the real “decider.” The role of the politician is not to lead but to ensure compliance. And since they fear nothing from those upon whom compliance is imposed, they feel no compulsion to answer when called upon to account for themselves—unless, of course, it is “the market” calling.

When it is the market speaking, that is all anyone needs to know.

If the market requires war, there will be war.

If the market requires austerity (for others, of course) there will be austerity.

If the market requires quiescent public spaces so that business can be transacted securely, there will be quiescent public spaces.

If the market regards your need for housing as an insufficient basis for investment, your need will be unsatisfied, and you will live without a house.

If your chief demands an explanation of this from the person who is supposedly in charge, she will be left to suffer in the middle of the Ottawa River, because she is too small to count in the calculus by which the market decides.

She— all of us— must become bigger.

## The Weakness Unto Death

Originally Published April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013

On March 30th, 2013 Peter Kormos, as close to a socialist as the NDP had left in its ranks of former elected members, died. His death was perhaps an omen foretelling the extinction of the NDP as a party defined by principled commitment to building an alternative to a failed capitalist society. One week after Kormos' death Thomas Walkom reported that the NDP is debating a constitutional amendment to replace the party's historic goal of creating a society in which "the production and distribution of goods and services shall be directed to meeting the social and individual needs of people" with a new aim: championing "a rules-based economy ... in which governments have the power to address the limitations of the market." (Thomas Walkom, "NDP on yet another mission quest. Stay tuned." (Toronto Star, Saturday, April 6th, 2013, p. A8)).

What is the value of principles? The hard headed political response is: principles have value only to the extent that they inform practice. Since the practice of the NDP has been to manage Canadian capitalism and not address the structural causes of widespread need-deprivation, the vestigial traces of socialist principles in the NDP constitution are worthless, and might as well be removed, for the sake of honest expression of what the party really is.

The hopeful (naive?) philosophical response is: principles have value independent of immediate or short term practice, because they can function as bases of criticism against which the limitations and inadequacies of practice can be measured. The vestigial traces of socialist principles in the constitution of the Official Opposition lend legitimacy to the socialist critique of capitalism. Their presence demonstrates that 'socialism' is not exotic, utopian philosophy with no organic basis in Canadian political history. Instead, it is rooted in a set of principles that people already endorse when they support public institutions (health care, education, meaningful work) and which underlie the history of a party which could conceivably form the next federal government.

But human beings have a curious habit of drawing the exactly wrong inference from empirical evidence. Rather than seeing popular support for the NDP as a sign that people are searching for some political vehicle to solve the fundamental problems that the Conservatives and Liberals have not solved, and then seeing this search in turn as a search for some credible alternative to capitalism, and then *risking* their future on articulating such an alternative (a risk that might be rewarded), the NDP moves further in the direction of becoming just like the failures it aims to oppose. It thus repeats the practice of the British Labour Party, indeed, the whole of European Social Democracy: instead of reading this moment as one to grow by leading the fight against the austerity agenda, it continues "[to adapt itself to forces to its right.](#)"

If the NDP does not judge the on-going crisis of capitalism as its best opportunity to build on its recent electoral success by: a) exposing to public view the systemic reasons why capitalism cannot "meet individual and social needs," b) building a fighting movement against austerity, and c) putting the considerable material and intellectual resources of the party to work to

formulate concrete policy alternatives, which d) an NDP government would implement, what good is it?

The problem here is not that the NDP is seeking to win elections. If a genuinely socialist party were to win an election, that would be a tremendous victory, because the power of the state could then be used to *impose* policies that better serve our shared life-interests. Given that the party would have come to power through legal means, the imposition of those policies would be legitimate according to *existing* democratic procedures. Opponents would have to openly expose themselves as the anti-democrats they (actually) are. Thus, the problem is not “electoralism” in the abstract.

Rather, the problem is that the NDP is seeking power on the basis of abandoning any principle which is offensive—not to the majority of the Canadian people (who support, at least as regards health care and education, the principle of distribution according to need)—but to capital. The party is not trying to convince people that they are a real alternative to the parties of capital, they are trying to convince capital that they are not a real threat to it.

Hence the utter vacuity of support for a “rules based economy … in which governments have the power to address the limitations of the market.” To call this timid would be too strong. It says nothing at all. What economy is not *rules-based*? The core problem of capitalism is not that it is not rules-based, it is that the rules according to which investment decisions are made are blind to shared our life-interests. Thus, to affirm as the party’s goal “a rules-based economy” is to demand that which we already have, and which continues to harm ecological integrity, democratic social institutions, and individual life-horizons. Furthermore, no government lacks the *power* to address the limitations of the market. In 2008 the United States government addressed the limitations of the market by transferring over 700 billion dollars of public wealth to private banks. Tax-credits, tax-reductions, regulatory changes, investment incentives, these are all ways by which governments can and do address the limitations of the market, without in any way addressing the fundamental *problem* of capitalist markets: they depend upon private and exclusive control over resources everyone needs to survive, develop, and realize their creative capacities to contribute to social life.

But why should anyone on the left care about NDP constitutional changes, given the fact that the NDP in practice has long ago abandoned even a mildly reformist agenda? The most important reason is that there is no alternative left political organization with the national reach, the number of activists, and the institutional resources to mobilize *right now* in a *politically effective* way, against the Harper offensive. Yet, it continually refuses to assume any serious leadership role of a new left opposition to capitalism.

Whatever individual activists might feel locally, no one who is allowed anywhere near a microphone on the national stage is allowed to utter anything more than the usual platitudes of parliamentary opposition. Government corruption and ineptitude? Yes. Structural analysis and critique of the global capitalist economy? No, not even thinkable.

Do we conclude, therefore, that, as in Greece and Germany it is time for anyone in the NDP who in anyway understands or instinctively feels that the problem is not the Tories and the solution is

not less draconian adaptation to the demands of capital to leave; that the time has come for a new party of the left in Canada? Chris Nineham, reflecting on an analogous problem in the UK, makes an important point in this regard.

The need for a left electoral project ... is an important aim. It is obvious that some kind of left formation is needed to challenge a Labour Party that has signally failed to challenge the politics of austerity. But experience, both here and in Europe, shows that the successful launch of such a venture normally depends on favourable wider developments. Die Linke in Germany and the Front de Gauche in France both came out of the fusion of radical organizations and important splits from social democratic organizations like the Labour Party. Both involved high profile figures as part of that process.”([Chris Nineham](#), Its Time to Decide: The Left, Austerity, and the People’s Assembly,” The Bullet #794, April 1st, 2013).

The problem in Canada is that there is no one *left* in the NDP who could split and take sufficient numbers of people with her or him. Without significant numbers of people, the movement would not be able to generate the sort of political dynamic political credibility would require. Without political credibility, it would not be able to attract large numbers of social movement activists, rank and file trade unionists, and “normally” apolitical citizens alarmed at the intensifying attacks on life-conditions. Without those numbers, it would not be able to mount a credible threat to any of the established parties. The (small but real) success of Quebec Solidaire shows that it is possible for left parties to be elected on a principled left platform, but that success also occurred in Quebec, in historical-political circumstances quite different from the rest of Canada. If there is someone outside of and to the left of the NDP who could play this role, I do not know who he or she is.

Hence, a new, cohesive, sustainable, and *effective* democratic socialist party will have to originate some other way.

If Peter Kormos’ death signaled the end of the NDP as a socially oppositional force, does the death of Margaret Thatcher foreshadow the birth of a new one?

# Collective Bargaining: Requiem or Renaissance?

Originally Published 19 September, 2012

It is an elementary Marxist principle that the democratic value of rights won within liberal-capitalist society and their power to ameliorate the lives and living conditions of workers are compromised by the class structure of capitalism. Since political rights do not translate directly into control over life-sustaining wealth and resources — control remains with the ruling class—the structural barriers to a full and free human life that workers face cannot be overcome simply by insisting upon liberal-democratic rights. A [recent report](#) from a coalition of unions and community based anti-poverty groups in Ontario dramatically illustrates this claim. While recession ravages working people and families, immigrants, and women, the wealthiest Ontarians continue to increase their wealth, as is their right in a capitalist market economy. Since the accumulation of wealth, even at the expense of others' ability to satisfy even their most basic life-requirements is consistent with the master right of capitalism, the right to private property, arguments against inequality that advance their claims simply on the basis of countervailing social rights to life-security can never fully succeed.

While this argument against the social power of liberal rights is sound in general, it can, if applied dogmatically, blind the opponents of capitalism to creative ways in which existing liberal-democratic rights can be used as hinge principles. I mean by 'hinge principle' a principle that enables people to legally and legitimately organize within liberal-capitalist society to demand sets of social changes that, taken together, lead in the direction of a different, more fully democratic society. As a door swings open on its hinges to allow coherent passage of people from one side of an entrance to another, so too hinge principles, by legitimating democratic movements from below within existing social structures, open the historical passage from one type of society to a different one. The right to collective bargaining is amongst the most important hinge principles.

The dogmatic understanding of the right to collective bargaining would treat it as nothing more than the right to negotiate the terms of one's own exploitation. The dogmatic argument is not without some truth, but it misses completely the way in which, treated as a hinge principle, collective bargaining can function as the basis for the development of democratic socialist movements from below. Collective bargaining, but even more the deliberations amongst workers that must lead up to it, are practices of collective political agency that can prefigure the democratic governance of work life. The emergence of collective political agency amongst workers is all the more important- and all the more dangerous- in times of crisis. For times of crisis are times of collective decision. Decisions require deliberations, and deliberations generate questions about the depth structures and values of a society that can have radical social effects. When working people come together to discuss what to demand in contract talks they can become conscious of themselves as subjects of their own work life and not simply recipients of a wage. When they become conscious of themselves as subjects, they feel the burden of their

objectification by capitalist market forces, work rules, and bosses all the more heavily. The danger, of course, is that they might start to think about ways of shrugging off the yoke.

That there is a real political danger posed to the normal rhythms of subordination of capitalist work life by the practice of collective bargaining is best illustrated by calling to mind the more and more brazen efforts on the part of business and the state to curtail, circumvent, or destroy it all together. In the past two years the Wisconsin Legislature passed [Act 10](#) which tried ([ultimately unsuccessfully](#)) to strip collective bargaining rights from public sector workers. The Orwellian “[Putting Students First Act](#)” in Ontario similarly deprived teachers of the right to collectively bargain. Since 2010 The [Federal Government of Canada](#) has legislated airline workers, railway workers, and postal workers back to work. The [NHL](#) imposed a lockout rather than pursue serious negotiations in order to impose a massive salary roll back on players. [Electromotive](#) in London made impossible demands on workers before simply closing the doors and moving the factory to Indiana. Chrysler has tried similar threats in the on-going negotiations with the [CAW](#).

While the economic crisis makes the use of workers only real weapon in this struggle— the strike- extremely dangerous (as the heroic Electromotive workers found out) it is heartening to see that workers are not being completely cowed. There was a brief wildcat strike at Air Canada in response to the Tory’s legislation. The CAW has held tough during negotiations with Ford, Chrysler, and GM. While some concessions appear inevitable, workers and negotiators should be lauded for not knuckling under immediately to company threats. More importantly, [Chicago teachers](#) have gone on the offensive against neo-liberal work discipline that treats the classroom like a barracks. Whatever the outcome of their strike, their demands represent a subtle but important shift of terrain: it is not all about money, it is about who controls the workplace and what values rule there.

At the same time as we see evidence that workers are ready to cease being cowed, the threats posed to the future of effective collective bargaining should not be underestimated. Capital is fluidly global, but labour is still by and large confined within national borders. The state has abandoned even the pretence of neutrality, moving almost immediately at the first sign of conflict to pre-empt free bargaining and strike action with forced arbitration and back to work legislation. The corporate media disseminates anti-union propaganda in the guise of prudent acquiescence to ‘tough times’ and fosters divisions between public and private sector workers all the while claiming to speak for the ‘public’ interest.

While it may seem as if the bargaining table is no place to use existing political rights as hinge principles and that mainstream union leaders are not the people to begin to so use them, such conclusions may be (I emphasize may be) overly pessimistic. Given the increasingly dire threats to collective bargaining and the right to strike, even protecting the most conservative version of collective bargaining rights will require concerted political action. The very difficulty of securing monetary gains in this period of on-going economic crisis may have the unintended, but salutary effect, of illuminating clearly the political (as opposed to narrowly economic) value of collective bargaining and point the way (without any sermonizing from already committed socialists) about the need for creative, democratic, life-supportive and humane alternatives to capitalism.

## Time, Gentlemen, Please

Originally Published, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012

On the seventh day of creation, Sunday, in the Christian tradition, God rested. Instead of following the divine example, I begin the day by reading the paper, exasperating myself trying to understand on what basis of principle anyone could continue to support existing capitalist society. I understand the narrow economic interests that it serves, and thus why the ruling class will fight to preserve it. I can understand the reasoning that leads many would be opponents to accept it because they have concluded that there is no realistic possibility of building a democratic socialist alternative. I can also certainly understand the desire to flee the reality of crushing environmental and social problems into the haze of diversionary addiction. But I can no longer think of any plausible argument that capitalism is justified by a superior capacity to secure the conditions in which the higher values of human existence can be realized. Those higher values it once served in its ascendancy against aristocratic feudalism— individual liberty and initiative, the moral and legal equality of human beings, toleration, experimentation, and the need to justify beliefs with evidence and argument— have been discarded, and all that is left is craven service to money-value growth as an end in itself.

The evidence from which I draw this conclusion is not found in occult leftist tracts available only to initiates. The inter-related narratives of life-support and life-development system collapse are openly reported. Canadian Thanksgiving Sunday was, ironically, a day of disharmonic convergence of stories about threatened and actual life-destruction on the natural, social, and individual planes of being alive.

Let us begin with the foundation of all life on earth, nature, the universal life-support system. In *The Toronto Star*, publisher John Honderich travelled to the Great Bear temperate rainforest in British Columbia to bear witness to the land and sea threatened by the proposed [Northern Gateway pipeline](#). “It is a unique place,” Honderich writes, “where ocean, salmon rivers, and coastal rainforest exist in one dramatic landscape that takes your breath away. It is also one of the richest and most productive eco-systems on the planet.” (John Honderich, “B.C.’s Delicate Balance Between Oil and Nature,” *The Toronto Star*, Sunday, Oct. 7th, 2012, pp. A1, A8-A9.) When he says “richest” he does not mean “most money-valuable.” Clearly, he means by “richest” “most full of the beauty of life and the lands and waters that support it.” Yet, life-value, no matter how obvious to the eye that opens itself to what is before it, does not appear to the oil barons and their Tory servants. The possibility of even more profit makes the possible destruction of an irreplaceable wilderness area a risk worth taking. Predictably, to the ‘alarmist’ and ‘radical’ critiques launched by environmentalists and local First Nations people, the industry responds that nothing catastrophic can ever happen. They do not allow themselves to be addressed by the real issue the opposition raises: how can it be rational to risk catastrophic destruction of the extraordinary life-value of this place? The hubris of technophilia combined with insatiable hunger to access the Chinese market predictably blinds industry and the federal government to the depth problem— capitalism, dependant as it is upon unsustainable rates of conversion of the natural life-support system to the bad infinite of money-

value growth, literally devours its own conditions of existence. Unfortunately, those conditions of existence are our conditions of existence as well.

Let us now proceed to the social plane of being alive. Human sociality develops out of nature through interactive labour, mediated by economic, political, and cultural institutions and regulated by definite ruling value systems. Through this interactive labour our organic nature is worked up, transformed, and developed into human social self-conscious agency. Human beings do not choose to be members of a society. We are born, marked by definite needs which we also did not choose and which we cannot satisfy outside of social relationships. Nor can parents, whether as isolated dyads or as single parents, meet all of their children's needs, for the socio-cultural requirements of human life require multiple forms of relationship, activity, and experience, in institutions more complex than the family. The point is: societies are essentially systems of human life-capacity development. They succeed when they enable the satisfaction of the life-requirements without which our social self-conscious agency cannot develop. They fail when they drive human beings to revert to purely mammalian forms of survival behaviour.

On the social plane of being alive too the mainstream media cannot avoid reporting the on-going systemic collapse. In Spain, where the official rate of youth unemployment is 50% and the overall rate of unemployment is 21 %, people are being driven to scavenge food from garbage bins. As Suzanne Daley reports in *The New York Times*, in Madrid, "at the huge wholesale fruit and vegetable market ... in virtually every bay, there were men and women furtively collecting items that had rolled into the gutter." (Suzanne Daley, "Spanish Are Recoiling as the Hungry Scavenge *The New York Times*, Sunday, October 7th, 2012, p. 3). Yet, even as the disaster unfolds overly before our eyes, the purported "rulers" of the society proclaim their powerlessness to do anything about it save to prescribe more of the same murderous medicine.

Onward, now, to the individual plane of being alive, the concrete reality and expression of the natural and social planes. In the individual living human being nature, (the arrangement of elements that produces life and the inputs and systems that support it), and society (institutions, relationships, symbolic codes, value systems) are synthesised. The individual is at once a unique and unrepeatable centre of intrinsic life-value and a social self-conscious agent capable of valuing its own and other life's conditions of existence, other living things, and other people, in wider or narrower circles of association. The intrinsic value of human being is grounded in life's finitude, vulnerability, and capacity for meaningful experience, creation, and mutualistic relationship. Were a specific individual life infinitely copiable, like the pages of a text or a line of computer code, or were it absolutely inert and capable of nothing at all, it might still have instrumental life-value as an input or tool that serves other life, but would lack intrinsic life-value, i.e., would not be worth living independently of its usefulness to others. It is because human life is both intrinsically valuable *and* vulnerable to harm that it is always wrong to treat human beings as nothing but means, as Kant argued (but without laying out the life-value basis of his position). An individual life is worse to the extent that it is treated as means, and worse still the more violent the form of instrumentalization to which the individual is subjected.

Amongst the worst fates that can befall a human being is to be subjected to torture for the sake of advancing the political interests of a ruling minority group.

And so to my final story. *The Windsor Star* reports on a recent court decision that allows Kenyan victims of British colonial torturers to sue the British Crown. What drew my attention, however, was not the decision, but the British government's decision to appeal the ruling. Their decision to appeal is a transparent attempt to delay the process of being held publicly accountable until the victims have died, in essence evading the responsibility to answer for their barbarities. "What could be more despicable, what could be more immoral," asked Paul Muite, one of the lawyers representing the victims, "of Her Majesty's government than to bide time simply to wait for all these victims to die one by one before tasting justice?" (Estelle Shirbon and Drazen Jorgic, "Kenyans Can Sue U.K. Over Colonial Torture, *The Windsor Star*, Weekend Edition, October 7th, 2012, p. A13.) And why is the British government, great champion of human rights and democracy, or so it never tires of telling the world, awaiting the death of the victims of its ancestor-administrations? Money. Talk is cheap, law suits are not. The global brutalization of indigenous peoples—i.e., the British Empire—has left millions of victims, many of whom are still, although barely, alive. The financial costs of successful legal actions could be enormous, so rather than atonement, the government has chosen delay, in the hopes that soon all the direct victims will return to the quietude of dead matter.

The stories provide the facts people need to convict capitalism of morally insane public policy and monstrous crime. That which is absent in the mass media is the conceptual basis required to develop integrated understanding of the shared causes. The shared cause of environmental degradation, the destruction of public institutions, and individuals as unique centres of intrinsic life-value is evident but unspoken in all three stories: the subordination of life and life's natural and social conditions to the reproduction and expansion of capitalist money-value. Since a money-value economy presupposes human life, and human life presupposes natural life-support systems and social life-development systems, their destruction by the process of money-value accumulation is self-undermining. Although self-undermining, the process continues, because it is invisible from the perspective of people who serve it.

But not only is this system-logic self-undermining, it is essentially nihilistic. In place of the entire complex wealth of diverse life-forms and eco-systems, in place of the manifold ways that human beings can experience and create, in place of all the different ways to find meaning and purpose and to build commitments in life, it imposes a monotone singularity: everything for the sake of money-value growth. Capitalism has ceased to be a civilization, a system of social organization that elevates humanity by enabling its properly human capacities, and is now nothing better than an omnivorous machine keeping people alive as spare parts.

## The Pageantry of Resistance

Originally Published February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013

“My concern … with the radical left in the U.S. … is that it has been so long since we have been able to achieve any concrete goals that radical activism has ceased to be oriented in this direction. The aim of radical movements has come to be understood as resistance, rather than social change. The two follow different logics. Resistance, measured by the intensity of opposition, calls for drama, performance, spectacle; change, measured by what the opposition accomplishes, calls for thinking about how to get from where we are to the society we want.”(Barbara Epstein, “Occupy Oakland and the Question of Violence,” *Socialist Register 2013: The Question of Strategy*, p. 81).

Epstein cuts to the core problem of the radical left, not only in the U.S., but Canada as well. Since the beginning of the anti-corporate globalization movement in the late 1990’s, the left has proven adept at fragmentary mobilizations against the effects of capitalism on planetary life and democratic social organization, but has thus far proven incapable of articulating a program of radical reform or revolutionary social change capable of galvanizing a sustainable social movement. The pageantry of resistance— the sounds, the colours, the crowd energy generated by individuals coming together in declarations of public refusal— continues to prove enormously seductive. And this is good. If a sustainable social movement *for* socialism (and not just *against* capitalism), is to emerge, it will require people who demand different sorts of relationships to others, to things and experiences, and to the planet. Discovering that one is not alone in one’s opposition frees, if only for a moment, one’s sense of self from its egocentric capitalist form, for which the value of others, of things and experiences, and the planet depends upon exclusive appropriation and possession.

“Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it— when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,— in short, when it is *used* by us. … In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*.” (Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Collected Works, Vol. 3, p. 301).

Socialist desire demands a different ego, an ego motivated by a different form of desire: for co-presence, for unity of purpose, for satisfaction without exclusive appropriation, for oneness without dissolution of individual identity, for individual identity without absolute closure to the outside. The music and dialogues and arguments and coordinated moving together of a demonstration create a social space in which people can feel the satisfactions of this life-affirmative desire.

“But the construction of socialist society presupposes a type of man with a different sensitivity … men who have developed an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality, ugliness. Such an instinctual transformation is conceivable as a factor of social change only if it enters the social division of labour, the production relations themselves. They would be shaped by men and women who have the good conscience of being human, tender, sensuous, who are no longer

ashamed of themselves." (Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 21) "The beautiful has the "biological value" of that which is "useful, beneficial, enhancing life." By virtue of these qualities, the aesthetic dimension can serve as a sort of gauge for a free society. A universe of human relationships no longer mediated by the market, no longer based on competitive exploitation or terror, demands a sensitivity freed from the repressive satisfactions of the unfree societies, a sensitivity to forms and modes of reality which have thus far been projected only by the aesthetic imagination." (*Ibid.*, p. 27)

"Drama, performance, and spectacle" are essential elements of the pageantry of resistance, and the pageantry of resistance is essential to the slow formation of desires that cannot be satisfied by the capitalist market. But the fulfillment of those desires, as Marcuse makes clear, cannot be accomplished by resistance alone. For their fulfillment, positive, concrete social changes are necessary- abolition of capitalist class structure and the private control over universally required life-resources in which it is grounded, transformation of the capitalist division of labour, the overcoming of alienated labour. Only then can the ego free itself from its alienated need to possess, to feel happiness only in controlling and excluding. Thus, the pageantry of resistance is valuable as a means to the construction of a social movement committed to the hard, long term work of radical social transformation.

However, when resistance becomes an ultimate goal, it can itself become an alienating force. Melodramatic rhetoric, undisciplined vandalism, and hyper-masculine provocation of violent confrontation impede the development of a politics of positive goals. Rejecting confrontation for confrontation's sake does not mean rejecting the need for mobilization and confrontation, but that confrontation must be about winning something more than proof of one's own capacity for heroically suffering police beatings or worse. The only way to adequately protect against and overcome the overwhelming violence the state can bring to bear against radical opposition is overwhelming numbers and a commitment to democratic, and not military or paramilitary, strategies. Which revolutions have been more successful, the Egyptian and Tunisian or the Syrian?

That is not to say that Egypt and Tunisia have been fully successful. Both are currently still in political ferment and tumult, this time against the Islamist forces that have tried to capture their revolutions. But that tumult is a good thing: it shows that the radicalised youth and workers are not going to be cowed into a new submission to an old orthodoxy that will ultimately serve the same socioeconomic interests. People have the confidence to continue the revolution because they have felt the power of overwhelming numbers. Of course, those numbers cannot protect everyone when the state decides to kill, but they can ensure that such a policy can never prevail. Hence, I conclude that any strategy or tactic that impedes the development of a social movement on the massive scale real social change requires is, at this point in history, objectively reactionary.

But Egypt and Tunisia prove something else in addition to the need for numbers. They prove the limits of political consciousness drunk on the Eros of political togetherness. The Islamist forces were able to capture the revolution because they were better organized. The *feelings* of having escaped the bureaucratic hierarchies of increasingly totalitarian capitalism that the pageantry of resistance allows are real, but also partly illusory, to the extent that they depend upon ephemeral

liberated zones such as Occupy carved out. Far more than 99% of global life-space remained occupied and controlled by capital, and that is not going to change until globally integrated and coordinated social movements with long-term political cohesiveness are formed.

In the near term, that which the current context cries out for, to confine myself to my own context in Canada, is a congress, literally, a gathering together, of progressive forces. This congress ought to be absolutely independent of any academic credentialising possibilities and all sectarian agendas— a discussion between activists from every existing social movement that stands *against* alienation, oppression of all forms, and exploitation, and *for* the different requirements of a life-affirmative, democratic world. The discussion needs to be free and open-ended, but also structured by four questions of the following sort: 1) what *general* social changes are necessary to solve the *particular* social problems that draw people into different activist communities? 2) How can these general changes become the basis for sustained solidarity in struggle across distinct movements? 3) What sort of party/movement can best advance the concrete political goals identified in 1?, 4) What are the immediate steps that need to be taken and to which all can agree to create that party/movement?

But who has the authority (not in the sense of right to command, but in the sense of enjoying sufficient respect across all the movements) to initiate such a congress?

That seems to me to be the real practical impasse of the Canadian left.

## The Venezuelan Experiment

Originally Published, March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013

“David Lopez, a business man who was walking his dogs through the Plaza de Los Palos Grandes, said: ‘It’s the end of socialism in Venezuela. It’s that simple. Without Chavez, there is no socialism.’” (Alasdair Baverstock, “Chavez may be dead, but we are still strong,” *Globe and Mail*, Wednesday, March 6th, 2013, p. A10).

The death of Hugo Chavez on 5 March, 2013, poses the sternest test yet faced by the Venezuelan experiment in ‘twenty-first century socialism.’ That Chavez himself was immensely popular with the poor and working class of Venezuela is beyond dispute. He won re-election as President four times, successfully guided the amendment of the constitution, and survived the coup attempt of April 2002. Those achievements—accomplished without military violence, without outlawing opposition parties, without provoking civil war—are enough to put paid to the myth that he was a megalomaniacal authoritarian out to destroy democracy. As I wrote in defence of the Venezuelan revolution last year, “where the state actually acts in the collective life-interest to use natural and social wealth to satisfy life-requirements and enable life-capacities, especially of those who have been historically deprived and oppressed, it is denounced as tyrannical.” (*Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*, p. 173). Who always makes the charge of tyranny? The domestic and foreign capitalist class. Why do they make the charge? To distract attention from the actually tyrannical means by which they control the life-activity of workers, the poor, and oppressed. What are those means? Exclusive control over the natural and social wealth which the Bolivarian Revolution has challenged since 1999.

The democratic credentials of Chavez, his party, and the social movements that support him are not seriously in question. The question that his death *does* pose, and which is crucial for the near term future, not only of the struggle for socialism in Venezuela, but globally, is: to what extent was the popular support for Chavez support for the *democratic socialist transformation of Venezuela*, or support for the *progressive use of state power* to redistribute income and improve basic living conditions for the poor? While often ‘socialism’ is confused with the later, it lies at the far end of the political-ethical-economic continuum that begins with state support for life-requirement satisfaction and ends with democratic control over the means of life-support and life-development. But socialism is not *only* the use of natural and social wealth for the satisfaction of human life-requirements, it is ultimately, a democratic life-economy in which the guiding values of social life are no longer monetary wealth accumulation and formal equality of rights. The guiding values of a socialist society are: a) democratic self-government in all spheres of collective life, b) for the sake of the universal and comprehensive satisfaction of life-requirements, c) so that all people may freely explore, develop, express, and enjoy their life-capacities, d) in all manners which contribute back to the ecosystemic and social bases of human life-support and development, e) are sustainable over the open ended time frame of human life, and f) which cohere with the preservation of the ecological conditions of animal and plant life as goods in themselves and as means for other life. (For a more detailed explication of the political-economic principles see Jeff Noonan, *Democratic Society and Human Needs*; Jeff Noonan, “Socialism as a Life-Coherent Society,” *Alternate Routes*, 35, 195-216, November,

2011 pp. 195-216, and for the philosophical foundations of this conception of socialism see John McMurtry, "Human Rights versus Corporate Rights: Life Value, the Civil Commons and Social Justice," *Studies in Social Justice*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2011, pp. 11-61).

These deeper life-values are the normative basis of the Venezuelan revolution. The amended Constitution equates social development with "ensuring overall human development" (Quoted in Michael Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, p. 14). The conditions of human development, in turn, are identified with an economic system that prioritises life-requirement satisfaction, is rooted in democratic control over economic resources and institutions, and operates for the sake of enabling free expression and enjoyment of life-capacities. These values have been repeatedly affirmed, most recently in the [Second Socialist Plan](#) (2013-2019). This plan formed the basis of Chavez's successful election run in 2012.

"This new phase [of socialist development]—continuing the construction of a just and egalitarian society— requires the development of a system of prevention, protection, and social security ... with a new political equality ... new relationships between the people with nature, the state, society, the workplace, and thought, guaranteeing physical, cognitive, and moral development at work and healthy work conditions (liberating work)." (quoted in Tamara Peterson, "Planning the Next Six Years of Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution, p. 7). The entire project of social transformation is being undertaken with the ultimate foundation of human, social life in the wider natural life-support system fully in mind: the emerging economic system is "eco-socialist ... based on a harmonic relationship between man and nature that guarantees the rational and optimal use ... of natural resources [while] respecting nature's processes and cycles." (quoted in Peterson, p. 14). These are goals that amount to deep-seated, truly revolutionary changes in the values, the culture, the socio-economic structure, and the political organization of society.

That which has been most inspiring about the Bolivarian revolution is that these goals are not platitudes but have formed the basis for real changes: real increases in investment in basic physical life-requirement satisfaction (health, housing, food); new institutions of local direct democracy, real efforts at empowering women, recognition of the land claims of indigenous peoples, nationalization of key industries (oil, cement) and the use of revenues for universal life-requirement satisfaction, encouragement of a solidarity economy outside of capitalist market exchange organized for the sake of mutual need-satisfaction, small steps towards workers self-management and overall democratic planning of the development of the economy, and the first steps towards a [Latin American financial system](#) for life-value investment, a development which would finally sever the bonds of dependency between Latin America and predatory, US-dominated global financial institutions. (For details of the various achievements on the domestic front see Gregory Wilpert, *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*).

Wisely, the Venezuelan experiment has proceeded gradually, not trying to create socialism by political-military fiat but democratically, on the basis of regularly renewed mandates from the majority of Venezuelans. "How else," asks Michael Lebowitz, "can the inherent contradictions among those who want the revolution to continue, e.g., contradictions between the formal and informal sector, between the exploited and the excluded, between workers and peasants, between cooperatives and state sectors— be resolved except through democratic discussion, persuasion, and education that begins from the desire for unity in the struggle?" (Michael Lebowitz, *The*

*Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, p. 161). The democratic development of the revolution has been complemented by what I have called elsewhere a process of organic political problem solving: the realization of the goal of creating socialism is not subject to mechanical stages or violent, voluntaristic efforts to “liquidate” obstacles, but by meeting problems as they arise, trying out systemic solutions, allowing those solutions to stabilize, and then dealing with new, higher order problems that emerge from the initial form of stabilization.(Noonan, “Socialism as a Life-Coherent Society”). Democratization of the economy, to give the most important example, is emerging through the coalescence of various experiments in nationalization, worker’s self-management, cooperatives in the solidarity economy, and so on. That the organic emergence of a democratic life-economy in Venezuela will take time is not a failure of the revolution, but its triumph over dogmatism, ultraleftism, and an unhistorical theory of social transformation and stabilization which demands all or nothing success.

This triumph over dogmatism, etc., also means that the emergence of socialism has encountered set backs, problems, and contradictions. Social spending depends upon oil revenues which ties the Venezuelan economy to global markets, making it dependent upon imperialist customers for its oil (Venezuela is the fourth largest supplier of oil to the United States) even as it seeks a multi-polar world and democratic control over its economic life. The petro-economy is difficult to square with the movement’s professed eco-socialist life-values. Poverty rates remain high (although they have fallen from pre-1999 levels), street crime remains a serious issue, inflation has been a problem, and it has proven extremely difficult to generate a self-sustaining democratic socialist economic momentum. Over all of these these problems loomed the question of Chavez himself: was he the revolution, as business people like David Lopez believed, or was he, as he himself claimed, simply the voice of a real popular movement driving a real social dynamic which will, over time, free Venezuela and Latin America (and hopefully inspire North America and European workers to start getting serious about fundamental social change) from the real tyranny of capitalist money-value rule?

## Ought as Is

Originally Published 3 December, 2012

In his excellent early essay “Notes From the Moral Wilderness,” Alasdair MacIntyre criticizes Stalinism not for being immoral or amoral, but for collapsing morality, that which ought to be, into the given, that which is. “The Stalinist identifies what is morally right with what is actually going to be the outcome of historical development. History is for him a sphere in which objective laws operate, laws of such a kind that the role of the individual human being is predetermined for him by his historical situation.” (“Notes From the Moral Wilderness,” *Alasdair MacIntyre’s Engagement With Marxism*, Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson, eds., pp. 46-7) MacIntyre’s point could be trivially understood as a critique of the principle that “the ends justify the means.” I think he is saying something much more philosophically profound: that which is morally correct and that which actually happens in conformity with “objective historical laws”—laws which operate in the present as well as the past and future—are identical. It follows that if there are objective historical laws, all historical events are determined by them, (just as all things with mass obey the law of gravity). If that which happens in conformity with these laws is good, then it follows that everything which happens is moral. This conclusion is not the same as the conclusion that seemingly immoral means are redeemed by moral ends or that there is no morality, only history. When power asserts the coincidence of the moral with the real something more dangerous, because more insidious, is afoot than the outright rejection of the moral.

One who categorically rejects morality is a psychopath, and easily detected as such. One who collapses morality into the given, who treats every “ought” as an “is” is a ruling politician. When the Cold War boiled, the difference between ought and is was presented as a struggle between democracy and Stalinist terror. The Stalinist regimes ought to become as the West already was—democratic, constitutional, capitalist. With the defeat of the Stalinists ought and is have coincided in the liberal-democratic-capitalist world. The world now is as it ought to be.

Of course, liberal-democratic-capitalists will never invoke the “laws of history” as the Stalinist might have. But every major decision is justified by appeal to a background economic necessity which plays the same logical role as the laws of history in Stalinist morality. The background necessity in both cases justifies whatever policy is in fact implemented. Just as the believer in God reconciles himself to whatever happens because it is “the will of God,” and therefore *both* necessary and good, so too the believer in market miracles invokes the laws of supply and demand to reconcile others—the victims—to whatever is imposed upon them as both necessary and good. Austerity, privatization, regressive taxation, are not *choices*, they are requirements of a competitive economy, and necessary and *morally right* for that reason. Ground war, air war, drone war, operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom and Cast Lead, targeted killings and collateral damage are not *violations of the humanity of their victims*, they are requirements of peace and stability. That which is required to preserve the existing system is necessary, and because necessary for the preservation of the system, good. Courage in defending reality no matter what the cost in lives and livelihoods is rewarded with the Nobel Peace prize. For peace is not *non-violence*, it is doing what must be done to maintain the unity of ought and is, this world which is both necessary and good.

Such a conclusion runs counter to a long tradition of philosophical thought which maintains that only where there is choice, only where things could be otherwise, can there be morality, because only where there is choice can there be praiseworthy and blameworthy action. But the “deciders” are not mistaken, it is philosophy which is naive when it confronts the morality of the “real world” with the morality of books, or at best the morality of individuals thinking about principles in abstraction from historical action. In the classroom professors have the leisure to deliberate about a or not-a. In the real world of the deciders, there is no not-a. Not-a is not-being, negation of that which is, void, emptiness, the end of our way of life, destruction without positive substantiality. Real morality is the goodness of the real, it preserves that which we can see and touch. Real morality negates the negation which is the promised alternative of the radicals- bookish principles and platitudes that cannot be trusted because they have no institutional foundation, they are not instantiated anywhere.

What is true of morality is also true of truth. That which is true is also that which is real- facts on the ground. In the abstract it might sound contradictory to assert that one favours statehood for the Palestinians, for example, and then denounce the partial recognition of this statehood by a majority of the world’s countries. It may sound contradictory to support a peace process which is the relentless violent expropriation of a people from its land. But “majority” is a mathematical abstraction, “contradiction” a logical relation- book learnin’ without substantial implications for the governance of the real. What is real is power. Power is that which can produce the real through its own decisions. Decoded, the “will of God” is just this- the power to determine that which is real, good, and true. You do not need to be a divinity to wield this power, you just have to control that which everyone else requires in order to live and the armed might to kill them if they demand it back.

Since most people do not share in the spoils of power, but toil willingly or unwillingly for its perpetuation, the goodness of their lives consists in having their higher aspirations- and often their lives- sacrificed for the preservation of the reigning “is.” For if that which is is good, and that which is necessary to its preservation is good, and sacrifice is necessary for such preservation, then to be the object of the sacrifice is good. Hence the message of the powerful to the weak: love your suffering and welcome your destruction, for through both you express your goodness in the only way permitted to you- to go under so that others can continue to swim.

## Variations on a Rawlsian Theme

Originally Published 9 January, 2013

Amongst all the criticisms of Rawls' Veil of Ignorance argument, I have never seen what seems to me to be the most decisive comprehensively articulated- the different principles regulating social organization from which people are to choose presuppose liberal-capitalist social dynamics and values. The real problem with Rawls' argument is not that he asks us to abstract from our concrete identities, but that the free play of imagination remains constrained by capitalist reality. Rawls does not contest the colonization of the imagination which, like every other human capacity, becomes re-programmed to serve the ruling value system. Marcuse was never more insightful than when examining the moral and political implications of imagination. "Between the dictates of instrumentalist reason on the one hand and a sense experience mutilated by the realizations of this reason on the other, the power of imagination was repressed; it was free to become practical, i.e., to transform reality within the general framework of repression; beyond these limits the work of imagination was violation of taboos of social morality, was perversion and subversion." (*An Essay on Liberation*, p. 29). Rawls was nothing if not practical, exercising his considerable philosophical powers to find the basis on which the legitimacy of an American society riven by anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, pro-pleasure, pro-expressive freedom struggles could be rebuilt.

But there are perhaps less button-down implications to the Veil of Ignorance and Original Position arguments if we detach them from their specific function in *A Theory of Justice*. Once the political imagination has been detached from the repressive hold of the prevailing social reality, the demands it generates need not be reasonable by those standards. No doubt, *Rawls* was reasonable, but I think there is a hidden radicality to an intellectual exercise which allows us to put a bit of distance between ourselves and existing social institutions. Conscious social change begins with social criticism, and social criticism presupposes a capacity to think things otherwise than they are. Instead of choice between different principles of distributive justice doling out the products of a capitalist economy to people assumed to be naturally self-interested and acquisitive, why not construct an original position which allows people to imagine whatever rules they want for a society in which they would want to live?

A new direction: social philosophy as the invention of rules for possible human worlds.

What rules might people imagine? There would, no doubt, be extraordinary empirical diversity, but also, I suspect, commonalities, both in the sorts of principles avoided and in the sorts of principles affirmed. First, the principles that I believe almost no one would choose.

If people did not know what their social position or sex or sexuality or race or ethnicity or nationality or talent or range of interests or tastes would be, they would be most unlikely to choose the rules that govern contemporary liberal-capitalist society. We do not need to assume that we know the particular path that people will follow in life to draw this

conclusion. All we need to know is that human life is social self-conscious agency. As social self-conscious agents, people posit projects for themselves that define them as individuals. Yet, they also know (because their stomach and their senses and their heart reminds them) that they need resources from outside of themselves and the cooperation (intended and unintended) of other people. Anyone who understands him or herself as a human being, an integrally bio-social being, knows these general facts. If such a person were to invent rules for a possible world in which they would be happiest, it is hard to imagine them choosing a world which allows a minority class/race/gender to control the majority of the resources and the wealth which all require as material conditions for the pursuit of any life-project whatsoever. They would certainly not choose a world in which allocative decisions are made on the basis of which of the open set of possible uses of resources and wealth returns the most money to that minority race/class/gender. Nor would they choose a world in which those who have already secured vast holdings of wealth and resources use the power those holdings confer to impede others from accessing that which they require in order to begin the projects important to them. Nor would they choose a world in which those with vast holdings are permitted to kill others who, because the existing rules prevent them from accessing the privately held holdings of the minority class/race/gender, must struggle against those rules just to live, much less live well. For anyone who chose the existing set of liberal-capitalist rules would almost certainly be condemning him or herself to a life of more or less impoverished, exploited, oppressed, servitude.

If that conclusion is sound, does it tell us anything about what rules people might imagine as a basis of a better life? I believe that it does. If people equated their happiness with the realization of the life-projects they imagine, they would choose regulating principles which ensure the most comprehensive and universal satisfaction of the material conditions of those projects. Since no one would know exactly what they want to do with their lives, but would know that meaningful life depends upon the expression of capacities in the pursuit of different life-projects, they would want to live in a society that ensured, as far as possible, that the material conditions of free life activity were met for everyone, because they could end up as anyone in that society. That means, in turn, that people would choose to pursue projects which preserve the natural system of life-support (for without nature there is no society) and do not bring them into destructive conflict with others within the social field of life-development (for in a social field wracked by destructive conflict, the successful realization of life-projects is threatened, and therefore meaning and happiness too). These sorts of principles do not constrain imagination; they entail a social morality in which everyone's imagination is given as wide a scope as coherently possible—everyone can live as they choose and pursue those projects which are most meaningful to themselves provided only that those projects do not undermine the capacity of others to do the same. Such a society is rather like a life-valuable materialist version of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds, in which maximum order is combined with maximum diversity.

Connected to a project of social transformation, the imagination is freed from its repressive function to form the real starting point of the new society. “The aesthetic universe is the *Lebenswelt* on which the needs and faculties of freedom depend for their liberation. They cannot develop in an environment shaped by and for aggressive impulses, nor can they be envisaged as the mere effect of a new set of social institutions. They can emerge only in the collective practice of creating an environment … in the material and intellectual production, an

environment in which the non-aggressive, erotic, receptive faculties of man, in harmony with the consciousness of freedom, strive for the pacification of man and nature.” (*An Essay on Liberation*, p. 31). The role of the imagination here is not to invent principles *ex nihilo*, but to project the shape of a world regulated completely by the non-aggressive, erotic, and receptive faculties which already operate, albeit it in tension with the money-value system.

What is best about our society? Friendship, co-operation, reciprocity, mutuality, sharing, being concerned for others and be open to their concern for oneself, creativity, openness, toleration, communication, conversation, the pleasures of company, touch, sight, sound, smell, taste, movement, learning, laughing, playing, exploring ... Which of these is improved by becoming a priced commodity? Are they not all rather distorted, if not outright destroyed? Do you want a friend who will sell you out? Do you want to be someone who would sell out your friend? And so, do we not already agree that the best world is the one of *unpriced* relationships between individuals and between individuals and things? I think that David Graeber is right to conclude that “communism ... is the basis of all amicable social relations.” (“Revolution at the Level of Common Sense,” *What We Are Fighting For*, 2012, p. 174.) The work of the imagination is to reconceive how all those social relations not governed amicably, but through the zero sum games of market competition, can be made so. The desirability of that world does not seem to be at issue, the means of realizing the imagined world is. But what worthwhile goal has humanity imagined that it has not ultimately found a way to realize?

# Here and Now

Originally Published 18 November, 2012

Remarks on the Occasion of World Philosophy Day

Phog Lounge,

Windsor, Ontario

November 15th, 2012

Thanks to Jeff Renaud for organizing the event, Grant Yocom for his work building the Windsor Philosophical Association, and Prof, Gail Presbey of the University of Detroit Mercy for presenting her paper: “Revolution and/or Evolution: Grace Lee Boggs’ Sustainable Activism for Detroit.” Gail’s paper and my response can be seen [here](#).

Philosophy, Hegel famously said, is its own time comprehended in thoughts (*The Philosophy of Right*, Preface). World Philosophy Day reminds us that philosophy is also an intervention in the space in which it develops. Just as time and space form a continuum in the physical universe, so do comprehension and intervention form a continuum in the philosophical universe. It was to remind the world that philosophy is not an invention of the Western academy, quiet and domesticated, but the emergent product of human thought loudly intervening in diverse historical and social contexts that UNESCO declared the third Thursday of November World Philosophy Day.

UNESCO’s declaration of a *world* philosophy day is not, therefore, a denial that *philosophies* are always grounded in concrete social spaces. Instead it is meant to put us in mind, first, of the cultural diversity of the sources of philosophies. At the same time, by calling it World *Philosophy* (not philosophies) Day, I believe that UNESCO is also urging us to think through this diversity to the underlying unity of purpose that defines philosophy as a unique intellectual practice. This unity of purpose shared by all philosophies is its drive to enable people to systematically reflect upon the real metaphysical, natural, social, and ethical conditions of their lives. Understood as a practice of systematic reflection, philosophy is not the preserve of any one culture, or elite, but part of the heritage of humanity, a heritage which is the outcome of diverse practical and symbolic labours of diverse people across historical time and cultural space trying to make sense of their place in the universe, in society, and the value of their own motivations and goals. In so far as it is a practice of reflection, of making a given natural and social reality an object of thought, philosophy, no matter what its express political principles, cannot, by its very nature, leave everything as it is. For as soon as we take the world as an object of thought, we cancel the ontological gulf between mind and thing. Once we cancel the ontological gulf between mind and thing we realize that the world need not be accepted as given, but can be interrogated, questioned, criticised, and, perhaps, changed.

As philosophy comprehends a given time in a definite space, so too does it unite theory and practice, and this in two senses. On the one hand, conceptual thought is a distinguishing practice of human beings. Our world is not simply the world of physical elements, dynamics, and processes. The human world is this world categorized, classified, interpreted, judged, and evaluated in various ways, and categorization, classification, interpretation, judgement, and evaluation are the practices of thought. These practices of thought are not ends in themselves, but guide those material practices through which the social world is built and changed. Without ideas, strategies, and goals, there can be no human activity, and without human activity, there is no human world of institutions, meanings, and values, even though there would still be material elements, dynamics and processes. These elements, dynamics, and processes are made into the human world through cooperative human labour, which is guided by definite conceptions as goals, in the context of theories that tells us what is possible, and value systems that frame what is legitimate.

These institutions and value systems, diverse as they have been across historical time and cultural space, share this trait in common—each projects its reign as normal, natural, and good. And from the perspective of abstract thought, there is no basis to contest these claims. It is only the test of real life that poses challenges to the legitimacy and goodness of different social forms. The only truly effective criticism of a way of life is that it runs into systematic problems reproducing and justifying itself in its own terms. At the point where some sort of structural crisis emerges, a new task for philosophy arises— to understand its depth causes, and, by comprehending them, to clear the way for new value systems and institutions to overcome the impasse. It is precisely when the contradictions of society have hardened to the point of irreconcilability, Hegel argued, that philosophy is called forth. (*The Difference Between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems of Philosophy*). We inhabit such a moment, and the paper that Gail shared with us tonight is a contribution to getting us beyond it. It is in this light, I believe, that we should examine the conception of philosophy it explicates.

Gail brings to light the transformative role [Grace Lee Boggs](#) has played in Detroit. As Bogg's work is on-going, and nearby, it easy for people to go get involved with it themselves, and so I need not say anything more about it here. Instead, I want to talk about what that work means for philosophy and for how it might affect us in the space where we are, Windsor, connected to, but distinct from, our neighbours across the river. It no doubt might strike some that Boggs' work in the community is a repudiation of her philosophical background. The messiness of life down on the ground, the difficulty of comprehending general social problems when one is face to face with their individual victims, might seem to some to explain why people flee to the heights of philosophical speculation, where abstraction reigns and conclusions can be neatly derived by following the rules of inference. But as anyone who has tried to derive conclusions that *mean* something just by following the rules of inference will tell you, there is no escaping messiness and complexity and ambiguity. Though some might like philosophy to be an escape, it is not, and the best of it has never thought of it as such.

Gail's paper is itself an instance of philosophy doing the hard work of trying to understand local problems in light of universal values without negating the specificity of the local, and a discussion of philosophy, in the person of Boggs and her foundation, making a real difference in a specific community by giving flesh to alternative values. There can be no institutional

alternative without alternative values to guide their construction, and philosophy in a time of crisis is the source of those alternative values (even if not everyone who asserts them calls herself a philosopher or thinks of what he is doing as philosophy). What Gail's paper so tenderly brings to light is that values are material realities every bit as real as electrical charge and mass. The value of education is nothing apart from institutions and relationships through which we educate one another. The value of community is not some idea distinct from the relationships of mutual support and solidarity (but also conflict and disagreement) through which our lives as socially self-conscious agents are lived. The genius of Gail's paper, and moreso the work of the Boggs' centre it discusses, is that it makes this very complicated philosophical point easy to understand. We just have to look at the work actually accomplished, how it is the realization of cooperative labour in the service of an alternative set of values generated by the demonstrable failure of the social life-support system in Detroit.

But we are not in Detroit, although we are linked in historical, social, economic, and cultural ways to it. So in order to understand the lessons that Gail's paper and Boggs' work teaches, we in Windsor have to think concretely about the contours of social and economic failure here, and how we can intervene to "rebuild our community from the ground up" as the slogan of the Windsor Worker's Action Centre says. To work out specific projects or to further those already underway is not the purpose of tonight's gathering. Rather, it is to reflect upon what philosophy really is—reflection and intervention into the real, not flight from it. Without philosophical reflection or intervention all problems become technical problems which the experts will reserve for themselves to address. Philosophy, in contrast, is not expertise, it is not the preserve of a few, is not a function of academic training or titles, but a human vocation of critical engagement open to all. When people become alive to that human vocation they at the same time become alive to the real problems affecting their lives wherever those lives are being led. And so philosophy unites thinking people everywhere in the search for understanding and solutions in the time and in the place where their lives are being led right now.

# Grandpa, Will There be Smartphones Under Socialism?

Originally Published 19 May, 2013

Politics is about movement. Conservative (in the generic sense of the term) politics are politics of the present. Their aim is to keep people in place. Radical politics are politics of the future. Their aim is to move people to where they could or should be.

But as Aristotle argued: all things move in response to desire. In politics, inertia is a function of lack of desire. Mechanical force can be applied to keep people in place, but it is of no use in moving people towards a future they do not desire (even if it is, or even if there are arguments which prove it to be, desirable).

Since the financial crisis erupted in 2008, new socialist programs articulating new sets of social values have become legion. The most recent to come to my attention is from Slovenia: “Our goal is a social and economic system based on direct democracy in politics and economy and on democratically planned production. We want a system of production and distribution that is in accordance with the needs of each individual and of society as a whole, and which takes into account the regenerative capacities of the natural environment. For us democratic socialism is not a utopian vision of a distant future, but the process of overcoming capitalism by democratic means. A process guided by century-long traditions of emancipatory struggles of workers, peasants, women and indigenous peoples.” ([Manifesto of the Initiative for Democratic Socialism, Slovenia](#)).

But where is the desire that would move people in the direction of “overcoming capitalism by democratic means?”

In the twentieth century Marxists used to speak of scientific theories of revolution. This science claimed to be able to determine objective class interests, specify the precise structural impediments capitalism put in the way of their realization, the political organizations required for the marshalling of sufficient force to overcome those structures, and the immediate steps needed to put society upon what was called ‘the road to socialism.’

The fragment quoted above dispenses with the rhetoric of “science,” but shares the underlying structure of argument: there are social facts, there are moral truths about human beings, the two can be in contradiction, socialism is the political means by which social facts are made adequate to moral truths. One should not laugh at the epithet “scientific,” if we understand it to mean “objective,” i.e., grounded in demonstrable truths rather than naïve wishful thinking. It is clear that there are such things as objective interests and moral truths are anchored in these objective interests. All human beings have an objective interest in there being oxygen in the atmosphere sufficient for the purpose of maintaining life. It is wrong, a real harm to human beings, to deprive them of oxygen. By like reasoning, it is wrong for any social system to deprive whole populations of that which they require from the natural environment.

The existence of classes does not complicate the metaphysics of objectivity. If classes can be identified they must have a definite social function. The interests of the members of the class would coincide with being able to access that which they need in order to continue their function. The problem arises when one attributes to classes interests that cannot be satisfied within the existing structure of society. The problem here is not that such interests might not be real or impossible to establish. If objective human interests are present in all classes, but cannot be satisfied by one class given its structural position in capitalist society, then it is straightforward to specify the structures that must be overcome in order to realize those human interests. The problem is not theoretical specification of objectives, but absence of desire.

What happens when there are sound theoretical arguments that not only purport to demonstrate but do in fact demonstrate with as much certainty as the subject matter admits of that people, because of their class position, are systematically impeded from realizing their human interests, but these arguments, though true, do not produce any political movement amongst the class (or subaltern groups more generally) whose interests are not satisfied? Not only are basic human interests not being satisfied, those who are deprived *know* they are being deprived, articulate the pain of that deprivation publically in their own words (they cannot be accused of being dupes of Marxist ideologues) and yet do not move.

There is acknowledged need for fundamental social change, but no desire to bring that change about.

If we look at the recent history of Arab revolutions, including Libya and Syria, if we look at the great revolutions of the seventeenth (England) eighteenth (the United States and France), the nineteenth (the wave of complex liberal-democratic, national-popular, and socialist revolutions that swept Europe in 1848), and the twentieth (the Russian and Chinese Revolutions and the immense wave of anti-colonial nationalist revolutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America) what all share in common is that the target of the revolution was a ruling class whose power and legitimacy in no way depended upon the consent (howsoever contrived and superficial such consent might be) of the majority of people. In other words, it was the absence of any formal mechanism of accountability of rulers to the ruled that turned opposition into *revolutionary* force. Absolute monarchs felt morally superior to their subjects, they were beheaded. Colonial authorities felt racially superior to their subjects; they were driven back to the home country by armed force.

The inability to bear the absolute disrespect for, contempt or denial of, the humanity of the subaltern in situations of unaccountable authoritarian rule drives people at a cellular level to any sacrifice. Increasingly, we inhabit just such structures of unaccountable authoritarian rule in what used to be called but no longer should be referred to as “liberal democracies,” for they are neither liberal (governed by constitutional limitations of the exercise of state power) nor democratic (governed by the people in their shared life-interests). Nevertheless, these societies retain the appearance of liberal-democracy, because the formal institutions of accountability have not been eliminated. Their persistence has real political implications.

The experience of radical oppositional politics in the global North in the twentieth and now twenty-first century has followed this script: Every serious political crisis since the Russian

Revolution (and especially the wave of worker-student uprisings in the late 1960's) has been defused, because the ruling classes acknowledge— even if not sincerely— the democratic legitimacy of the demands for radical change. The point is not that ruling classes ever agree to changes that are in reality radical; the point is that oppositional forces, employing the language of democracy and demanding accountability on those terms, find it impossible not to agree to dialogue, elections, and so forth when offered. The way in which the Quebec student strike of 2012 was ended is the most recent case in point. Once agreed to, the movement splits into small bands of outliers who warn that the ruling class is not sincere. True as these warnings are, they always go unheeded. Why? Because as totalitarian and paranoid and unjust and spiritually bankrupt as modern capitalist society has become, it has not yet lost legitimacy.

Over the course of the winter I was a member of my union's Motivating the Membership Committee. We visited all the departments and schools of the university, engaging the membership in frank discussion about the state of the union and the future they want for it, and arguing with them that the best union is a democratic union and a democratic union relies upon the energies of its members. A colleague in law did us the courtesy of expressing bluntly what other colleagues were too polite to say: "We elect you guys to do this work. We don't have time for it. So you do the job that you were elected to do and keep us informed."

Is this not the way in which the wider working classes relate to the social problems that affect them? In response to calls to build "democratic socialism" they seem to respond: "Though we are suffering and though we want a solution, we do not want to disrupt our lives in order to build that future."

But: the demonstrations, the manifestos, the books, the articles, the projects, the programs...

But: look at the size of the demonstrations, and then compare them to the size of crowds at a soccer game, or a hockey game, or a concert, or an overnight line-up for the latest gadget.

About a month ago I was at a retirement dinner for Ron Aronson, a legendary Detroit radical educator and activist who was stepping down after forty years at Wayne State University. He gave a moving farewell address under the title, "Whatever happened to progress?" In the front of the room his granddaughter fidgeted with her iphone while her grandfather spoke. He asked whether smartphones were really elements of the sort of social progress people actually require.

Most of the people in the room were older leftists for whom the answer was no— the gadgets are useful, but we have lived without them, and could do so again, and happily. Theirs (and mine) is/was a socialism of a cultivated humanist ethos—a different way of living and relating, a different scale of valuing nature, society, self, and others, a welcoming of a different set of demands upon the self and its capacities to contribute to others' well-being.

But their fight is almost over; my generation struggles only to hang on to the achievements of the previous generation. And for the new generation, new modes of relationship are evolving. Although these modes often seem one-dimensional and unsatisfying to those who grew up when there was no alternative to the material sociality of live bodies co-present in physical space, for those who have never lived without the internet and the virtual social networks it enables,

material co-presence is reduced to one option in a drop-down menu of seemingly infinite possibilities for relation and sharing.

But are the virtues and values of virtual reality— the ever unfolding, playful and inchoate churning together of the high and low, the erudite and the idiotic, the sublime and the cute, the irreverent and the conformist, the public and the private, the engaged and the frivolous, the sacred and the profane— the virtues and values of "a social and economic system based on direct democracy in politics and economy and on democratically planned production?"

## Four More Years

Originally Published November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2012

Communist society, Marx famously argued, would be based upon reciprocity between contribution and need: “In a higher phase of communist society … after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly … the narrow horizon of bourgeois right can be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banner: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*). Despite the fact that Marx thinks of his slogan as applicable only to the future, it is anchored in a more basic moral pull that draws people to want to contribute to their societies, and expect to be recognised for those contributions.

Philosophers and political theorists and activists who feel this moral pull at present, who want to contribute as philosophers and political theorists to improving peoples’ conditions of life today, but whose philosophy or theory leads them to conclude that existing capitalist society is structurally flawed, face a curious problem. Their primary contribution to the improvement of *existing* society appears to be abstract strictures about the need to abolish it in favour of a foundationally different society, a contribution which is really no contribution at all, *to the present*. Such thinkers seem to offer, in the place of an actual contribution to a better state of the existing world a promissory note: the movements I am helping to build will create a better society and once this better society has been established my debt will be paid.

This argument may sound convincing to people who belong to radical political movements. From the perspective of people who are engaged in day to day battles to solve immediate problems of deprivation, poverty, homelessness, ill-health, and other pressing social challenges, the argument can sound— and not without reason— rather self-serving. Instead of real proposals that can better meet unmet life-requirements tomorrow, the radical theorist’s assurances that “a better world is possible, someday” sound like reasons *not* to try to do something today. Political theory becomes like formal logic— valid inference from abstract premises, but in a language no one speaks. While I do believe that there is a real social value to making arguments about the need for a different future, and that they are by and large correct in pointing out the systematic barriers capitalism places in the way of solving our most pressing problems, I also believe that radical critics owe more to existing society than abstract demonstrations of the need for a systematic alternative to capitalism.

Tuesday’s election put me in mind of this problem. The radical philosopher in me says, with ease— it does not matter who won, because both candidates are subservient to capitalist money-value, to American imperialist interests in dominating the rest of the world, and to a reactionary cultural and social agenda that panders to bigotry, close-mindedness, xenophobia, and American exceptionalism. Yet, it is at the very least an ironic place for a supposedly political philosopher to end up— above the fray and outside of real politics as it plays out. And this irony, or perhaps worse, escapism, has rightfully been pointed out to me by many people, but perhaps most urgently by American friends and colleagues who are not uncritical champions of Obama, but

frightfully concerned critics of what Romney proposed for America. While I understand the argument that they make—there are only two real choices in American politics and if one is considerably worse than the other, progressive citizens have a duty to try to elect the better of the alternatives—I am not convinced that the argument is correct. At the same time, I do not think that it is a convincing rejoinder to preach political abstinence, to save it for the day a real alternative has been built, because that day might never come, and the hard business of making the world as good as we can make it today and tomorrow must still be transacted.

So I find myself in a quandary—wanting, as most radical thinkers want—to contribute as a radical critic *in the present* to a better tomorrow, but also believing that tomorrow will still be dominated by the forces that oppress, alienate, and exploit today, so that real solutions require a longer timeline for their realization. Perhaps the quandary can be solved by trying to think in two temporal registers at once: the present, and what is possible given the realities of power, wealth, and ruling value system, and an open future, in which new political movements with transformational programs can be built. Since formal democracy and the right to freedom of thought and assembly permits the construction of such movements within capitalism, we can pose a question that usefully illuminates the limitations of what ruling politicians have in fact done, not from the perspective of the distant future, but from the perspective of what can legitimately be accomplished within the existing legal and moral and political frames of capitalist society. And when we bring this frame to bear upon the first Obama term, judging him not by abstract Marxist theory, but by his own commitments and the uncontroversial values of liberal-democratic capitalism, one must conclude that the first Obama term was a disappointment. But that is not all. The reasons for so judging it reveal, in a non-dogmatic, concrete and not abstract way, why there is present value in a politics that reserves its hopes for a more distant future, and thus asks that its practitioners be valued not for the immediate benefits their work brings, because it brings none, but for its contributions to hastening, even a little, that future by bringing to light the way in which hopes for immediate solutions are dashed by present political and economic realities. So that is the goal I will pursue in what remains of this essay.

In his powerful [acceptance speech](#) delivered to tens of thousands of people, mostly African American, in Chicago's Grant Park on the night of the 2008 election, Obama embraced the faith Americans had put in him to solve the colossal problems which were the legacy of the odious Bush-Cheney regime:

“You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime — two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century. Even as we stand here tonight, we know there are brave Americans waking up in the deserts of Iraq and the mountains of Afghanistan to risk their lives for us. There are mothers and fathers who will lie awake after the children fall asleep and wonder how they'll make the mortgage or pay their doctors' bills or save enough for their child's college education. There's new energy to harness, new jobs to be created, new schools to build, and threats to meet, alliances to repair. The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even in one term. But, America, I have never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you, we as a people will get there.”

Obama identifies four key problems that his administration would address: 1) Foreign policy: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the need to repair alliances, 2) The economy, putting people back to work and ending the recession (which was, in 2008, just emerging), 3) health care reform, and 4) what we might call broadly changing the culture of America, harnessing the “new energy” to which he refers.

Only a die-hard racist could not have been positively moved by the overwhelming symbolic power of the first African American president promising a new beginning in a park named in honour of the victorious general of the Union Armies in the Civil War. Looking into the faces of the assembled, mostly African American, many weeping, you realized that this moment was world historical for them, and for anyone whose radicalism is rooted in human-hearted concern for each other’s well-being. The hatred of what America had become under Bush-Cheney, a visceral manifestation of hope for a more egalitarian, inclusive, peaceful, and democratic future coursed through the crowd. To try to take Obama at his word ask to what extent he succeeded in advancing those values in the four areas noted above does not seem to me to alienate oneself from that hope, but rather to take it seriously.

1) Foreign Policy. Obama came to power promising an America that would respect international law and act on the basis of consensus, not unilateralism. He appointed Hilary Clinton, tireless prosyletiser of the rhetoric of human rights as Secretary of State. His first promise in office was to close the Guantanamo Bay gulag. This promise set off the first hysterical right-wing firestorm of his presidency. What is most notable is that he put that firestorm out by betraying his promise. The gulag still festers on the southern shore of Cuba. He did ‘end’ the war in Iraq by withdrawing most American combat troops, but he did not cancel the Bush-Cheney neo-colonial monitoring office (the monstrous American embassy) or withdraw military “advisors” and “trainers.” While winding down one war he intensified two others- the Afghanistan catastrophe and the psychotic and immoral “drone” war. He has not attacked Iran, but he has imposed sanctions that are doing decisive harm to the civilian population, and this after scuppering an agreement that would have seen Iran import rather than produce nuclear fuel, an agreement that he himself once supported. He continues to underwrite the murderous colonialism of Israel in its on-going war on Palestinian life-conditions. Osama bin Laden was killed on his command, which is fine for fans of mediaeval revenge tragedies, but does little to advance the cause of peaceful reconciliation and the rule of law in foreign affairs.

Arguably the biggest challenge he faced in foreign policy– because one that nobody anticipated– was the outbreak of revolution across the Arab world. It was, ironically, in Cairo in 2009 that Obama promised a new era in American-Arab relations: “We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.”

His words contain a courageous and admirable admission of the reality of colonial domination, but, alas, practice has not lived up to promise. His administration backed Mubarak until the last possible moment, intervened in the Libyan Civil War, arguably exacerbating the post-revolutionary conflict, did nothing in Bahrain while the government (host to the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet) butchered Shia demonstrators, actively intervened in support of the government of Yemen, and is currently fanning the flames of civil war in Syria, looking for a faction it can control. The underlying principle of American foreign policy since the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine has been reinforced, not abandoned: American interests=global interests and anyone who disagrees will be threatened with destruction.

2) The Economy. Obama's stimulus plan mitigated the severity of the economic crisis in America, but did nothing to address or even acknowledge its structural causes. There was moralistic denunciation of bankers and Wall Street greed, but no public analysis of the interlinked history of stagflation in the 1970's, systematic attacks on unions, banking deregulation, the financialization of capitalism, consumer indebtedness, and the 2008 recession. His policies while in office have not challenged corporate power, the contradictions of the Green capitalism he espouses, or redress the steady erosion of working class living standards and the stupendous and [growing inequalities](#) between the top ten per cent of Americans and the rest. Nor has his administration taken decisive steps to [regulate banking](#). His policies here have been much more tepid than some of his most important and learned supporters have urged. Paul Krugman, for example, advised him to nationalize those banks that had received federal money. He did bail out the auto industry, but stood by as the Big-Three extorted historic concessions from the UAW, including the shameful two-tiered wage policy. He stood by mostly silently when public sector unions were attacked in Wisconsin, and did little to advance the general idea that a healthy economy ensures comprehensive and universal access to life goods, (as opposed to the private appropriation of money-value).

3) [Health Care Reform](#) Considering the lunacy unleashed by Obama's mild reforms, it is a minor miracle that he was able to achieve anything at all on this front. The arguments in defence of Obamacare at least acknowledged the scandal of a "health care" system that left millions without insurance and protected the nefarious means by which private insurers would try to avoid paying for complex and expensive treatments. It opened the door, at least, to a discussion of the merits of public health care. However, there was no serious and sustained effort made to defend the moral basis of a public health care system— health care is a shared human need that a wealthy society ought to meet for all because human well-being requires it— and thus no real effort at making reforms that would bring the United States closer to the model of public provision. The reforms attempt to address the problem of lack of private insurance by mandating individuals to buy private insurance (purportedly made affordable through a tax cut). They thus attempt to solve the problem of private, money-driven insurance companies exercising control over people's medical decisions by extending the power of those same insurance companies ever wider. Nor will the reforms do anything to challenge or redress the massive inequalities in access to quality care. As before, the rich will be able to purchase longevity and physical well-being, the poor will have to get by with what little they can afford.

4) The Political Culture of America. In his acceptance speech in 2008 Obama spoke of the new energy he could feel in the nation. That new energy, after the eight years of darkness which was

Bush-Cheney, was real. And it was squandered. While Obama did at least say the right things about gay marriage, inclusiveness, the reproductive rights of women, about democratic cooperation, and equality, he was lukewarm towards the Occupy movement and did nothing to mobilise the extraordinary political hope his election generated. His failure in this regard is most obvious when one examines it in the light of the Tea Party movement. Violent, racist, irrational, and armed, it hijacked the public agenda and propelled the Republicans back into control of the House of Representatives. By this point, the new energy that Obama felt had dissipated. The left, whatever one means by “left” in the American context, had absolutely no answer, no competing forces on the ground, in the streets. But had the energy of 2008 been used as a building block for a new left movement for a revitalized American democracy, there could have been. That there was not, and is not now, on the morning of his re-election, is perhaps the biggest failing of his first four years.

# The Ambiguity of Understanding

Originally published 17 April, 2013

A few days after 9/11 a student group asked me to participate in a panel discussion about the attacks. I began my presentation by stating that, regardless of how I felt about the loss of life as a human being, my role as a philosopher required me to try to understand the events. I was immediately denounced by a colleague from the Political Science department for trying to “understand” people who were clearly “evil.” I found it alarming, a) that a person who considers himself a political *scientist* was not interested in the causes of an event of momentous geo-political significance, and b) that he had such a weak grasp of the English language as to not know that the verb “understand” has two very distinct meanings: “to empathetically grasp a situation from the perspective of another,” and “to grasp the causes of events.” I was not saying that I “understood” the attackers (i.e., put myself sympathetically into their shoes) but rather that I wanted to understand the causes of the attacks -i.e., why the hijackers felt that the social, political, and historical relationships between America and the Arab world justified them in attacking it. To understand the justifications they gave does not entail that the one understanding accepts those justifications as themselves justified.

Alas, my colleague is not alone in abhorring understanding when it comes to terrorism. Alan Dershowitz, in his influential *Why Terrorism Works*, insists that one must never investigate the causes of terrorism, because to do so is tantamount to legitimizing it. “We must commit ourselves,” he says, “*never to try to understand or eliminate its alleged root causes.*”(p.24) Does understanding the aetiology of a disease increase its incidence? Does the study of the causes of an airplane crash encourage more pilots to crash their planes so that they can get their names in the TSB report? For everything in the physical and social universe we look to structured, systematic investigation precisely for the sake of isolating causes. Once we know the cause of a problem, we can address it. When we do not know the causes, we are helpless and must suffer the consequences of the effects.

When it comes to terrorism, in contrast, we turn to superstition. We are enjoined to pray for the victims, even though it is clear that terrorism is a very human, political problem. We do not pray when the power grid goes out; we turn to technicians who fix the problem. Some people do pray when they fall ill, but they also seek out medical attention. The point is: we know that the solution to human problems requires understanding of the causes, but in the case of terrorism, there are systematic blocks to inquiry into the causes. Since the causes, general and specific, are never addressed, the problem recurs.

And so it happens again, this time, in Boston. And so it happens again, officials angrily deny that any rational explanation is possible: “Make no mistake: An act of cowardice and of this severity cannot be justified or explained,” Suffolk County District Attorney [Dan Conley](#) said. “It can only be answered.”

The angry man does not care about *reasons*, only the superior violence of his response.

I happened to be driving home from Toronto the day after the Boston bombing. Once I got west of London I could pick up American talk radio, so I started listening. The tone was one of disappointment: that the FBI had not yet hung the crime on a foreign terrorist group; defiance: America's enemies will never prevail, and delusion: one Christian station was offering free Constitutions (The Foundations of Freedom kit) so that its listeners could remind themselves of the unique greatness of the USA.

It never occurred to them that the person who planted the bombs might be a Tea Party psychopath protesting recent attempts to tighten gun laws.

The problem with trying to understand events is that one must go where the evidence leads. Speaking to the nation in the aftermath of the blasts [Obama](#) classified the killings as a terrorist act because civilians had been killed by bombs. "Any time bombs are used to target civilians, it is an act of terrorism." On the same day as the Boston bombings— as almost everyday— there was an American [drone strike](#) in North Waziristan. The majority of those killed in those strikes are civilians, killed by bombs.

Therefore, the drone strikes are ....

Well, President Obama, what are they?

If we follow the evidence, we arrive at conclusions that are extremely discomforting to those who trade in platitudes about the moral innocence of the United States and its allies, including Canada. That the West is not morally innocent does not imply the conclusion that therefore all means of resisting it are legitimate. A liberation movement scars itself permanently and undermines its capacity for democratic life-valuable social re-organization if it adopts secretive, substitutionist, paramilitary or terroristic organization. At the same time, in a world where violent destruction of 'the enemy' is the default tactic of the world's richest and powerful nation(s), where increasing numbers of people in those nations feel completely shut out, not only from power, but from any sort of dignified human existence, the probability of terrorist activity increases.

It is of course possible that understanding alone will not solve the problem, and there can be attacks which are more or less random, and in countries whose culture and social organization would seem to make them immune to violent attack (Norway, for example). There are many diseases whose causes we understand but which at present we cannot cure. That said, one can be certain that *not even trying* to understand the causes of terrorism will ensure that the violence will continue.

I do not generally like political art, because it tends to be didactic and obvious. But there are exceptions, and one of the best is Ousman Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, which I have cited many times before. At the end of a long and brutal strike against the French colonialists, the young men of the village want to hunt down and kill the French prison guards who had tortured them. A village elder, who had also been the victim of torture, warns against giving into the desire for revenge:

"If you want to kill him you should also kill the blacks who obey him, and the whites whom he obeys ... If a man like that is killed, there is always another to take his place. That is not the important thing. 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; this is what should be in your thoughts. This is what you must tell the others, so that you will never be forced to bow down before anyone, but also so that no one shall be forced to bow down before you ... hatred must not dwell with you."(p.350).

Unlike District Attorney Conley, the elder does try to understand and explain. His reason for so doing is not to justify, but to find a political way out of the cycle of violence that has consumed his community. He realises that political problems require structural changes— simply revenging oneself on individuals will not work, because, unless the structure is changed, new individuals will replace the old ones, and the same patterns will be repeated. Structures need changing, most importantly, the structures and ruling value system of the Western world, in the eyes of which the majority of people are but indentured servants. But it takes a long time to understand and solve complex problems, and Americans prefer swift justice.

## The Ambiguity of Understanding II: The Theatre of Compliance

Originally Published 20 April 20, 2013

The previous post ended with the claim that “Americans like their justice swift.” Swift, apparently, justice has been- within three days of the attack, the Boston Marathon bombers had been identified, tracked, one killed, and the other in custody.

“The hunt is over, said a [tweet](#) from the Boston Police Department. ”The search is done. The terror is over. And justice has won. Suspect in custody.”

The victory of justice follows a now familiar script. First: the killing. Second: the warning: no one escapes American justice . Third: the hunt. Fourth: “success,” the capture or killing of the suspects. Fifth: the melodramatic demonization of the perpetrators– “A direct confrontation with evil” (not “two evil people, but evil itself) said Secretary of State John Kerry. Sixth: the declamation of the victory of justice.

But: the victims corpses are still cold in the ground. The social conditions that breed violence remain unaddressed. The next embodiment of “evil” is growing up somewhere right now, devolving steadily in anger or frustration or delusion or fanaticism towards the fateful decision to: shoot up a primary school or movie theatre with a machine gun, explode a truck bomb in front of a federal office building, murder a room full of women engineering students, fly hijacked planes into office towers, gun down teenagers at a day camp, gang rape a young woman and post it on the internet, rain Hellfire missiles on a wedding party, shoot up a village with a 50 calibre machine gun, let hunger strikers die rather than put them on trial ...<sup>n</sup>

But: after every atrocity, the perpetrators are apprehended or killed, and everyone is assured that justice has won. A pyrrhic justice it is, no, that requires endless murder and mayhem over which to triumph?

This is not a freedom enabling but an enslaving justice. It is a justice of self-subordination to the police, a justice of acquiescence to armed over-reaction, a justice of concession to irrational fear.

That which is most alarming about the response to the bombings is not that “[Police](#) ordered businesses in the suburb of Watertown and nearby communities to stay closed and told residents to stay inside and answer the door for no one but authorities” and that Boston followed suit by shuttering its “subway, bus, Amtrak train systems and Greyhound and Bolt Bus ... taxi service and every ... area school,” but that these demands were acceded to with no public dissent whatsoever .

The city was transformed into a stage for the latest performance of the theatre of compliance. Citizens of the land of the free shelve their critical faculties and civil rights and sit back and watch the show: hundreds, perhaps thousands of assault-weaponed armed police spilled out of armoured personnel carriers, some with fixed machine guns; National Guard helicopters ferried

police across the city. A no-fly zone was imposed. But this drama is too important to be confined to a single stage; it reaches out across the nation to its borders. I was in Detroit last night and on the way home US Border agents were stopping every car and truck on the approach to the bridge and briefly searching it. Behind the mandatory macho posturing one could sense that the officers knew the entire operation was not about finding the suspect in someone's trunk next to some smuggled beer, but a political spectacle whose message was: we are watching everything, we see everything, we control everything, we are the actors, your role is to comply.

It is not difficult to find people willing to play the role. All one has to do is invoke "public safety," as the [Boston police commissioner](#) did: "For public safety ... we are asking everyone to shelter in place for the time being."

One might respond at this point: "It is all well and good for you to pontificate from your study, but in the real world there are real dangers. Those bombs were real and they killed real people, and, regardless of whatever abstract philosophical principles and naïve hopes for the future you might entertain— at taxpayers' expense no less!— the perpetrators had to be apprehended before they killed even more people, and in order to apprehend them, extraordinary police measures were required. So— put your own ass on the line, or shut up."

There is much in this sort of response with which I cannot completely disagree. There is a paradox in which every social critic is trapped: he or she looks to the future for the solution to the problems of the present, but those problems have harmful effects right now. The critic says: "deal with the causes, not the effects," but dealing with the causes takes time (years, decades, centuries?) while people suffer or are in danger right now. There are mechanisms for dealing with the effects, and the prevention of (further) harm justifies the use of those mechanisms, even though they treat effects and not causes. I agree that sometimes there is no good alternative to using available mechanisms to treat effects.

At the same time, making concessions to reality does not require that anyone, regardless of their politics, suspend all critical faculties just because the police demand it. With the suspect's face everywhere, with thousands of police scouring Boston, surely trained experts knew that the suspect lacked freedom of movement and that therefore, like a lost cat, he would not be far from the scene of the initial confrontation.

And of course, that turned out to be the case, and it was actually the *lifting* of the lockdown that led to his capture.

But there is no outcry this morning over a city basically placed under authoritarian police command. Instead, people did exactly what they were told to do, and for no other reason than that they were told to do it. People are killed everyday in every American city and the police do not issue commands that no one leave their house or only answer their door to uniformed authorities. The perpetrators of the bombing were clearly not Dr. Moriarty-like criminal geniuses. They were no greater threat to public safety than any of the many thousands of armed Americans walking around any city right now— as I write, someone is being murdered somewhere in the US— and yet people in the land of the free immediately stopped what they were doing in order to do what they were told to do by the police.

But to many people freedom is identical to doing what one is told by the police. For those whose only interest is social reproduction, freedom and security coincide, and the police are the embodiment of this coincidence: “*Security* is the highest social concept of civil society, the concept of *police*, expressing the fact that the whole of society exists only in order to guarantee to each of its members the preservation of his person, his rights, and his property.”(Marx, *On the Jewish Question,* Collected Works, Vol., 3, p. 163). If preservation of that which exists is the highest value, and the police are the institution that preserves that which exists, then police *force* and freedom coincide, at least for those whose driving emotion is fear.

But fear and rational public policy cannot go together. So that after the arrest has been made and the triumph of justice proclaimed, reason wants to say: “But it will happen again just like the last time and nothing really has been won.”

But reason is most often too afraid to speak out.



## What is in a Name?

Originally Published 28 March, 2013

In 2009, Obama went to [Cairo](#) and announced that he desired to reset the relationship between the United States and the Arab world. This past week saw Obama in the other great capital of the Middle East, Jerusalem, in what was presented by the American and Israeli media as an attempt to reset the purportedly strained relationship between the US and Israel. But the [speech](#) in Jerusalem more or less repeated the same geo-political platitudes that have always characterised this “special relationship.”

The foundation of that “special relationship” is security- Israeli security, US oil security, but dressed up as deep care for human life:

“When I consider Israel’s security, I think about children like Osher Twito, who I met in Sderot. (Applause.) Children, the same age as my own daughters, who went to bed at night fearful that a rocket would land in their bedroom simply because of who they are and where they live. (Applause.) That reality is why we’ve invested in the Iron Dome system, to save countless lives, because those children deserve to sleep better at night. (Cheers, applause.) That’s why we’ve made it clear time and again that Israel cannot accept rocket attacks from Gaza, and we have stood up for Israel’s right to defend itself. (Cheers, applause.) And that’s why Israel has a right to expect Hamas to renounce violence and recognize Israel’s right to exist. (Cheers, applause.)

Defense = the “qualitative military superiority” of Israel against homemade rockets. Defense= 100-1 kill ratio.

But peace cannot come through this type of “defence.” Peace demands a refusal to retaliate, from both sides, no matter how impossible such restraint seems.

“One can make war only against a face, one can kill, or give oneself the prohibition not to kill, only where the epiphany of the face has already taken place … for Levinas, the prohibition against killing, the “Thou shalt not kill,” in which, as he says, “the entire Torah is gathered,” and which, “the face of the other signifies” is the origin of ethics.” (Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 90).

The reality of ethics is not the rules or commandments through which its precepts are expressed. The reality of ethics is concrete encounters between human beings that preserve peace. At one point in his speech, Obama seemed to understand this profound truth.

“But the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination, their right to justice must also be recognized. (Cheers, applause.) And put yourself in their shoes. Look at the world through their eyes. It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of their own — (cheers, applause) — living their entire lives with the presence of a foreign army that controls the movements, not just of those young people but their parents, their grandparents, every single day. It’s not just when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished. (Applause.) It’s not right

to prevent Palestinians from farming their lands or restricting a student's ability to move around the West Bank — (applause) — or displace Palestinian families from their homes. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. (Cheers, applause.) Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land. (Applause.)

A certain reciprocity is acknowledged, but not the full face of Palestinian humanity. The Palestinians have a right to self-determination and to justice, but their children have no names. Their rights are asserted as legal abstractions but all means of acting on those rights as flesh and blood human beings- demanding membership in international institutions, fighting back against occupation and settlement, are denounced.

The Palestinian children have no names? So what? What is in a name?

One's humanity. Human beings could just as well be classified as the “naming” animal as the “rational” animal. In every human culture new parents look their child in the face and name her or him. To recognise a human being as a definite individual is to “put a name to the face.” Saying, “hey you” is rude- it denies one’s reality as a person with a specific identity, a concrete history, and unique interests worth getting to know. The child in Sderot has a name, the child in Gaza does not. The interests of the first are concrete: safety in a definite home and a definite bed for a definite purpose, the interests of the second are abstract: self-determination as a generic right.

A generic right always outweighed and overridden by security:

“That’s why the security of the Jewish people in Israel is so important [is the security of Arab citizens of Israel of lesser or no importance?]; it cannot be taken for granted. But make no mistake: Those who adhere to the ideology of rejecting Israel’s right to exist — they might as well reject the earth beneath them and the sky above, because Israel’s not going anywhere.”

“And that’s why security must be at the center of any agreement. (Scattered applause.) And there is no question that the only path to peace is through negotiations, which is why, despite the criticism we’ve received, the United States will oppose unilateral — unilateral efforts to bypass negotiations through the United Nations. (Applause.) It has to be done by the parties.”

In other words: if you fight back, you will be destroyed. If you try through international legal institutions- the very ones the United States uses, when convenient, to secure legitimacy for its *wars*, to create the conditions for *peace*, you will be accused of “unilateralism.” Once so accused, you will further be discredited as obstructionist, punished via more *unilateral* land theft, more illegal/immoral settlements, intensified squeezing of your life-space, forcing you, for the sake of your humanity, to fight back, which leads to accusations of terrorism, which justifies your further destruction.

This is “defence,” as defined by a Noble Peace Prize winner.

But still, Palestinians, have the “right” to self-determination. There are problems only when they act on it.

Perhaps I am being unfair. Obama goes on to praise the “many Palestinians, including young people, [who] have rejected violence as a means of achieving their aspirations.”

Like those who went to the United Nations to demand their right to self-determination be recognised by having Palestine declared a sovereign nation? I do not recall any coercive violence being employed to twist the arms of the 138 countries who voted in favour of recognizing the Palestinian state. And what happened? Joining UNESCO was treated as if it were a war crime.

Like the young Palestinian student I met two years ago at a conference at the Law School of the University of Windsor, a brilliant, hopeful, peaceful young man, who had travelled to Cairo and camped out in Tahrir Square and learned the political lessons of mass, non-violent, democratic action, who took those lessons back to Ramallah, and was subsequently imprisoned by the Israeli Army? Is he one of those Palestinians to whom Obama refers?

He has a name too, but Obama forgot to mention it.

Again, let me be fair, for it is true that Obama did not mention all Israeli's by name either. Good taste prevented him from mentioning anyone by name who defends “Eretz Israel” and the expulsion of the Palestinians to achieve it. No, they are referred to obliquely, as friends with whom Obama democratically disagrees.

“I recognize that there are those who are not simply skeptical about peace, but question its underlying premise, have a different vision for Israel’s future. And that’s part of a democracy. That’s part of the discourse between our two countries. I recognize that. But I also believe it’s important to be open and honest, especially with your friends. (Applause.)”

Would he similarly treat the difference between his tolerant pluralism and the Ku Klux Klan’s racist White America policy as just “part of a democracy?” The days are getting longer and warmer. Perhaps it is time for another “beer summit” on the patio at the White House. Obama could invite David Duke this time.

## The Names

Originally Published 5 September, 2012

In *Underworld* there is a brilliantly insightful and fall-out-of-your-chair-gasping-for-air funny section in which Don Delillo imagines a Lenny Bruce show at the height of the Cuban Missile crisis. Bruce riffs on the names of the American officials holding the fate of the world in their hands. “All right, dig. Dean Rusk. *Dean*. Born to lead, to advise and instruct. Born to be bald. No, yes, wise, but also tough and shrewd. Look out for men with one syllable in each name. Unyielding motherfuckers. But here’s my favorite, okay. You know what I’m going to say, don’t you. ... That’s right. McGeorge Bundy. *McGeorge*. How do you survive childhood with a name like that? Was his name reversed at birth? A mistake at the hospital? Of course not. They did it. They marked him for greatness. (pp. 591-592)

The Cold war required names of great heft and substance, names that evoked the character of men strong enough to bring the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation and urbane enough not to sweat when they told the tale over drinks afterwards.

The crisis of our age is of a different sort. It is a crisis in which the established form of life is being destroyed by its own dynamics. Capitalism is not being threatened by an outside enemy but by its own self-devouring contradictions. At the Republican National Convention last week America, and the world, were introduced to the man who claims to have the solution to this crisis, a man known as “Mitt.”

If *McGeorge* Bundy connotes the type of man capable of killing another with only a stare, “Mitt” connotes a charming frat boy sleazeball who comes over to help you change the sparkplug in your lawn tractor and ends up leaving with your wife and all your savings, but you can’t stay angry at him, because he’s just such a swell guy. Doesn’t the name just overflow with down home American goodness? Can’t you just picture Mitt’s whole life-history: the smiling Little Leaguer, the starting quarterback, the handsome businessman, the helpful neighbour, your bud who’ll help you out of any jam. And isn’t America in a jam right now? Well then, it is clear what needs to be done.

Hey? What happened to Medicare and a woman’s right to control her body?

American presidential politics are a surreal synthesis of the medieval and the postmodern. The contenders are not politicians so much as saviours, always claiming divine sanction for their candidacy and policies. Always it is their ‘character’ (and their wife’s character, and their children’s character, and their dog’s character, and their great-great grandfather’s character) that is at issue. But what does character have to do with the capacity to provide a systematic explanation of the causes of pressing social problems? Nothing, of course, but the absence of such explanation is not decried, because no systemic problem is ever acknowledged. The problem is always the other *person*. The solution is to be found in the act of placing trust (or should I say faith, given that, just as in the Iranian theo-democracy, it is god that is the real agent of political decision making in America?)

So Mitt, in his [acceptance speech](#) told the American public: “Now is the moment when we CAN do something. With your help we will do something. Now is the moment when we can stand up and say, ‘I’m an American. I make my destiny. And we deserve better! My children deserve better! My family deserves better. My country deserves better! So here we stand. Americans have a choice. A decision. To make that choice, you need to know more about me and about where I will lead our country .... If every child could drift to sleep feeling wrapped in the love of their family – and God’s love — this world would be a far more gentle and better place.”

Mom, dad, trust, and the love of god. Problems solved.

Of course, the other camp repeats the same platitudes. So [Julio Castro](#) at the Democratic Convention claims god for *his* side: “The days we live in are not easy ones, but we have seen days like this before, and America prevailed. With the wisdom of our founders and the values of our families, America prevailed. With each generation going further than the last, America prevailed. And with the opportunity we build today for a shared prosperity tomorrow, America will prevail. It begins with re-electing Barack Obama. It begins with you. It begins now. Que dios los bendiga. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.” The consequence of dueling deities cannot be reasoned democratic debate between alternative plans, but only *ad hominem* denunciation worthy of Reformation sectarians. Senior CBC Washington Correspondent [Neil MacDonald](#), trying to track the lies and counter-lies that pass for political argument notes in a recent article, “Where the other guy’s lies are concerned, politicos tremble with a terrible righteousness. But when someone answers their own malarkey with facts, they suddenly all become postmodernists: There are no facts, only political constructs, power controls knowledge, ... If you conclude from all this that facts are not the primary concern of political parties, you’d be realizing the painfully obvious.”

All this heat and light and smoke notwithstanding, the entire drama plays out within an atmosphere of cynical public malaise born of long experience of betrayal. For the majority of people know that neither candidate will address the real problems besetting their lives (although one might make those problems significantly worse).

Blissful would it be to ignore this sanctimony but one cannot, since the American establishment also believes- and not only believes, but acts as if — their president is also being elected to lead the entire world. Political blindness is to understand yourself by only ever looking in the mirror and never in the faces of others. The entire United States government apparatus is a Borgesian hall of mirrors. [Condoleezza Rice](#), speaking to the RNC: “Everyone asks, where does America stand? Indeed — indeed, that is the question of the hour. Where does America stand? You see when the friends or foes alike don’t know the answer to that question, unambiguously and clearly, the world is likely to be a more dangerous and chaotic place. Since World War II, the United States has had an answer to that question. We stand for free peoples and free markets. We will defend and support them. (APPLAUSE) We will sustain a balance of power that favors freedom. Now, to be sure, the burdens of leadership have been heavy. I know, as you do, the sacrifice of Americans, especially the sacrifice of many of our bravest in the ultimate sacrifice, but our armed forces are the surest shield and foundation of liberty, and we are so fortunate that we have men and women in uniform who volunteer, they volunteer to defend us at the front lines of freedom, and we owe them our eternal gratitude.”

The eternal gratitude of the grave, for too many. But no one sees them. When you confuse your own reflection for other people, everyone looks like you.

Addendum, September 12th, 2012

Not a week after I posted this essay comes news this morning that the U.S. Ambassador to Libya and 3 other American diplomats had been killed in Benghazi, centre of the Libyan revolution and, the Americans expected, solid ground in which they could plant “the foundation of liberty.” Apparently the Libyans who attacked the embassy missed Rice’s speech.

## Syriza/Syria

Originally published 3 August, 2012

More unbearable than the humidity of a July day in Windsor is the hypocrisy of the world's "democratic" leaders. The less the importance of the statesperson, the more Walter Mitty-ish their self-understanding. The more moralistic the argument, the wider the gap between objective unimportance and subjective self-importance. The ministers of the present Canadian government expand this gap to Grand Canyon proportions. In reality, even the Prime Minister could walk around any world capital without a security detail, for, outside of Ottawa, he is unknown and mostly irrelevant. Yet given a chance to bray in front of a microphone (even if only the Canadian media is listening), he puffs himself up to Churchillian stature.

When it looked as though the far-left coalition in Greece, Syriza, would win the recent elections and bring an end to the draconian attacks of international financial capital on the life-interests of Greeks, Pericles of the North boldly asserted that "we cannot have a [Greek election](#) determining the future of the global economy, that's not fair to anybody." But Greece did not create its economic problems on its own; the Greek crisis is a moment of a world wide crisis of capitalism for which no capitalist, and certainly no finance capitalist, is willing to pay. On the contrary—the bond holders sink their teeth into the arteries of society ever more deeply, drawing out more and more life-blood.

Where a society is being bled dry by the servants of a materially irrational ruling value system, it is the part of those who affirm the principle of *rule of the people* to work together to free social institutions from the totalitarianism of money-markets. This democratic principle is just the one that Syriza serves: "An exit from the crisis" its program argued, "requires bold measures that will prevent those who created the crisis from continuing their destructive work. We are endorsing a new model for the production and distribution of wealth, one that will include society in its totality. In this respect, the large capitalist property is to be made public and managed democratically along social and ecological criteria. [Our strategic aim is socialism](#) with democracy, a system in which all will be entitled to participate in the decision-making process."

But a program that seeks to peacefully engage citizens in devising an economy that serves their real life-interests is disallowed by our champion of democracy.

Curiously, once we leave the land where democracy was first practiced in the Western world, once we leave the plans of Syriza for the civil war of Syria, rule of the people returns to the agenda of the allowable. Rick Roth, spokesperson for Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird said towards the end of June that "'The Syrian people must [collectively decide for themselves](#) a path toward the better, brighter future they all crave.' Except that there is no 'people' leading the struggle in Syria, no common interest binding the rebel factions together beyond (understandable) hatred of Assad, no coherent plan for a post-Assad nation, no clearly articulated program of comprehensive economic and political democracy, but only a sectarian

war to the death in which the only thing the various opposition factions seem to agree upon is the need to somehow provoke Western-intervention on their side (which is not in fact really one side, but an incoherent tangle of competing agendas).

In Greece, an unarmed and peaceful mass movement for democratic change was demonized as an attempt to hold the world hostage. In Syria, a violent opposition stoking the flames of civil war is celebrated as democratic. How can these apparently contradictory positions be reconciled? By teasing out the underlying unity of purpose that guides Western strategic thinking. In every conflict, in every systematic tension between established ways and new possibilities, the aim is always to identify and bring about that outcome in which resources, wealth, territory, people, and the knowable set of political possibilities more fully serves the growth of money value, either directly, by putting wealth-creating resources under Western corporate control, or indirectly, by weakening the claims of competitors (in the case of Syria, Iran) by installing regimes friendly to Western money-interests. If civil war—always the most homicidal of political conflicts—needs to be provoked and stoked, so be it. The question is never about the security and well-being of people (witness the civilian body counts in Afghanistan and Iraq) but always about how Western interests will extend their control over the future.

We have come along way from the heroic anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s, 60s and 70s when the long-brutalised peoples of Africa and Asia stood up to their colonial tormentors and demanded, fought for, and won their independence. That the dreams of new popular democracy and socialist economy that inspired these peoples to impossible victories over European and American imperialism died in the harsh reality of global geo-politics in no way diminishes the grandeur of their achievements. But these victories were born of patience, long-term preparation, planning, and, most of all, solidarity.

Of all the differences between the anti-colonialist struggles of the post World War two era and the current struggle in Syria (and before that, in Libya) it is the absence of social solidarity in the rebel factions that is most noticeable. Where the earlier struggles were motivated primarily by a concept of the nation struggling for its independence against a racist colonial regime, the new struggles are against internal ruling sects (products in one way or another of colonialism to be sure, but not targeted as such). Instead, they are targeted (rightly) for their long history of violent repression and corruption, but also demonized because marked by an invidious difference—religious or ethnic or both.

Underlying Marx's theory of revolution is the most enlightenment of principles (indeed, the most philosophical of principles): that people are rational, and, in so far as they are rational, will eventually unite around a shared set of interests that derive from their nature as human beings. Ultimately all differences that do not derive from objective, non-alterable conditions of human life, will be recognised as morally arbitrary and cease as a result of that recognition to be sources of enmity and conflict. I too believe in this principle—it informs almost every page of philosophy that I have ever published. And yet, as I watch yet another country degenerate into mad civil war I am forced to question its truth.

Questioning its truth does not entail doubting its moral and political value. Could anyone deny that solidarity and a program of social reconstruction based upon recognised shared life-interests

is morally and politically superior to arms-fuelled struggles to destroy a ruling sect so that another sect can take its place in the command of state institutions? As an ideal, the rationality-objective life-interest-solidarity-democratic social reconstruction linkage is unassailable. But true as a matter of how people will eventually behave, given the right social circumstances? The continued unravelling of the world seems to suggest otherwise: people are as irrationally and irredeemably violent as the coldest hearted realist could imagine.

Marx says somewhere that humanity sets itself only such problems as it can solve. Since human problems are problems of social organization, and social organization ultimately derives from human action and interaction, there are no social problems that cannot in principle be solved by changed forms of action and interaction (changed social institutions and ruling value system). It follows from this argument that in the case where changed action and interaction cannot change circumstances, those circumstances are not problematic, but a fixed structure within which life must be led— an objective set of facts to which human beings must reconcile themselves. We adapt to the changes of the seasons, we do not try to stop them happening. I think that Marx is correct, but it does not follow from this claim that the problems that we could in principle solve will in fact be solved. More and more it feels as though our problem solving capacities have been exhausted.

## Ozymandias in Aleppo

Originally Published 8 May, 2013

In “An Immodest Proposal” I claimed that “everyone must practice philosophy to this extent: they must meditate on the finitude of their lives and accept it, if for no other reason (although it is a very good reason) that they do nothing intolerable and unconscionable to others for the sake of preserving themselves a few moments longer.” This claim, which I directed to everyone in the living of our everyday lives, applies *a fortiori* to politicians, revolutionaries and reactionaries alike, in so far as they have the power of command over the lives of others. If a system can only be maintained, or a new one brought into being, by doing that which is unconscionable and intolerable, then the old system must go or the new one await a more propitious opportunity for its creation. But I can think of no important instance in history when those vying for political power have heeded this claim. Philosophy has thus proven itself quite useless in the heat of political battle, and history contains a monstrous pile of corpses killed before their time as a result.

No one need school philosophers in their political irrelevance. We know best of all that politics does not heed philosophical council. Hence, a consistent theme across the history of philosophy West and East is disdain for the world as an irrational nightmare of violence and ambition above which the philosopher must rise.

“The wise man … will not let himself be dazzled by the felicitations of the multitude and pile up the mass of his wealth without measure, involving himself in measureless ills … he will … keep his eyes fixed on the constitution in his soul, and taking care and watching lest he disturb anything there either by excess or defect …” (Plato, *Republic*, Book IX, 591c-e).

“The purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many.” (Epicurus, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, p. 27).

“The person who has lain down violence toward sentient beings, … who neither kills nor causes to kill, that one I call superior. The person who is harmonious amid the hostile, peaceful amid the violent, free from grasping amid the greedy, that one I call superior.” (Buddha, *The Dhammapada*, Chapter 26, Verses 23, 24).

Would politics heed reason and truth, philosophy would have something to contribute. But it does not. So, understanding the ephemeral nature of life philosophy shirks from the fight when the gloves come off. When one sees clearly the transitoriness of things, there is nothing so valuable as to be worth fighting for by *any means necessary*.

“Can despots compass aught that hails their sway? Or call with truth one span of earth their own, save that wherein at last they crumble bone by bone? (Byron, “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” Canto The First, Verse XLII).

Rather than read philosophy or poetry, the [Syrian](#) regime and the rebel factions opposed to it trade accusations that one or the other has used chemical weapons. If true, I ask whichever side resorted to the measure: “What is the prize so valuable that you have convinced yourselves that it is acceptable to poison the other side in one of the most gruesome ways imaginable?” Really, what is political power historically other than the ability to boss other people around more or less brutally for a laughably short period of time (taking a cosmic time-scale)?

The small person thinks himself big by pushing the other around. But to what end? Power does not confer immortality, and once consciousness ceases, so too the memory of one’s former ability to lord power over others. One takes nothing with one to the grave. Staving off a rebellion extends your life a few years more, tyrant. But it will end soon enough. Why not go in peace, without destroying the lives of those who oppose you?

“And on the pedestal these words appear: ‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away.” (Shelly, “Ozymandias”).

But you too, rebels, need to ask yourselves: what will be the effect of all that blood on you when you come to rule? What happens when the ghosts of the old regime haunt your happy new world, or when your version of justice grows tiresome to a newer generation? If you are a real alternative to the brutality you oppose, must you not find alternatives to brutal means of struggle? The necessity with which you justify struggle by any means necessary (the regime will not give up any other way) will, history seems to teach, harden you in ways you do not expect, but which have never proven conducive to real social and political progress— more comprehensive and universal life-requirement satisfaction, inclusiveness of opposed perspectives and deliberative resolution of conflicting demands, mutuality, toleration of differences, an ethos that rejects destruction, waste, and violence, and which affirms creation, beauty, and peace.

The philosophical disdain for politics is not disdain for the conditions of good human lives. It is rooted not in rejection of concern for the quality of human life, but recognition that revolution is necessary, but on time scales no individual will find politically acceptable. The very idea of revolution, Hans Jonas argues, combines radicality of transformation with compressed duration: “Is not the difference between slow and fast, between evolution and revolution, entirely relative, and therefore arbitrary? Relative it is, but not arbitrary. For it is relative to something absolute, to a natural limit of measurement: the individual human life span.” (*Philosophical Essays*, p. 47). The reactionary clinging to power wants to preserve his life forever; the revolutionary struggling for power wants to see her dreams of justice realized. Neither can have what they want, neither will relent.

The longer philosophical view sees the necessity of the calamity that always has and will always follow such a collision.

The problem, nevertheless remains: how to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable time-scales—the brevity of individual life and the impatience it understandably breeds, with the more measured pace of real social development? How to reconcile the oppressed’s

legitimate demands for satisfaction now, with the philosophical-historical knowledge that this demand cannot always be met in the present?

Solving this problem would be philosophy's real contribution to practice.

# The Radicality of Doing Nothing

Originally Published 27 May, 2013

In a May 23rd [speech](#) to the National Defence University, US President Obama argued that because terrorists will not refrain from striking domestic and foreign targets if they find an opening to do so, "doing nothing's not an option." At the same time, he argued that "perpetual war through drones or special forces or troop deployments will prove self-defeating and alter our country in troubling ways. So the next element of our strategy," he continued, "involves addressing the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism, from North Africa to South Asia. As we've learned this past decade, this is a vast and complex undertaking. We must be humble in our expectation that we can quickly resolve deep-rooted problems like poverty and sectarian hatred ... But our security and our values demand that we make the effort."

I believe that human beings must be educated to immoral indifference; that our instinctual inclinations are to work to alleviate the sufferings of others. It might seem that Obama's commitment to the hard work of addressing the underlying problems that generate terrorism is an expression of this moral instinct. In questioning whether it is an expression of it, I set aside obvious political suspicions about the degree to which Obama can step outside of the imperial realities of the US presidency. I will also not pose the problem of the relationship between US "values" and "US interests" i.e., whether there are any values beyond security—military and economic—actually ever served by US foreign policy. Instead, I want to ask whether it is really true that (assuming a sincere desire to solve "deep-rooted problems") doing nothing really is not an option.

I said above our moral instincts are to reach out to people in need in an effort to alleviate their suffering. But the proper expression of this moral instinct must be reflectively tempered. It is not always morally right to assist another with a difficult problem, even one that is causing him or her great hardship and suffering. There are forms of suffering that human beings must go through in order to fully express their humanity. Often, the right thing to do is to let a person struggle on his or her own to solve a problem, even at the cost of allowing him or her to fail. If we respect human individuality, see the value of life not only in outcomes but in striving towards difficult goals whose achievement is and must be uncertain, the caring thing to do often is to let an individual try and fail. Though failing a student may crush his or her dreams, it would not be right for a professor to write the student's final paper. Caring for the student as a student demands honest evaluation of his or her work, no matter what the short term costs to his or her ego that failure might impose. Doing nothing, in the sense of not substituting one's own superior experience for the student's own struggles, in this and many other analogous cases is the right thing to do.

The same reasoning holds in the case of the political struggles of collectivities to solve their own "deep-rooted problems." The moral basis of solidarity with oppressed groups is not first and foremost concern for outcomes, but with respect for their humanity expressed as respect for their

right to self-determination. And what, after all, is respect for the principle of self-determination other than a commitment to doing nothing, in the same sense as above- not substituting the accident of superior historical experience for the struggles of the oppressed group? Doing nothing— leaving people alone to determine their own collective life- is often the only morally and politically correct option, even at the cost of short-term, (in an historically relevant sense of time), failure.

This conclusion seems monstrous. How can the powers of the Global North sit by and tolerate honour killings, acid being thrown in the face of schoolgirls, or indiscriminate shelling of civilian neighbourhoods? What is monstrous is the destruction of life-value. What is right is whatever is the best means of addressing the causes of the belief that such monstrous acts are even justified, for once people stop believing the monstrous is justifiable, they stop doing it, because no one wants to be a monster, but acts that way only because they do not see the harm they cause. Is there evidence to support the argument that armed intervention by countries with a history of colonial and imperial power in countries who were the victims of that power prevents more monstrosities than it causes?

Regardless of the answer to that question, history does teach, I believe, that at crucial moments people cannot be spared the need to stand up and fight for themselves. Good fortune in history is to enjoy the benefits of past struggles without having had to endure any of the sacrifices. Willing self-sacrifice for the sake of improved life-conditions in the future is amongst the highest virtues of human being. The heroes of human freedom are those who, when the occasion demanded it, set aside their comforts and security and fought against oppression and injustice.

The value of self-determination is a universal value: it connects us across differences but it does not negate them. Human life-activity in different environments has produced distinct cultures, and political and economic competition has created asymmetrical power relationships that simply cannot be ignored. It can happen, therefore, that respect for the right to self-determination can conflict with interpretations of other values— democracy, sexual equality, freedom of individual life-path— that may well be universally life-valuable, but whose life-value not universally recognised. In such cases there is no shortcut to universal acceptability. Respect for the capacity of others to find their own way through problems of invidious hierarchy, sectarian narrow-mindedness, and the delusion that some other-world being sanctions earthly power is the only choice compatible with respect for the humanity of others, with treating them as beings who are capable of understanding and solving their own problems.

The very same problems that reactionary forces like the Taliban threaten to impose on women and non-believers have been elements of Western history. Women went from being the property of their fathers to being property of their husbands. Political legitimacy depended upon religious foolishness (the divine right of kings, belief that class structure reflected a natural hierarchy that was ordained by god). Women, feudal peasants, and racialised minorities in the Global North did not call out for others to save them. Enlightened aliens did not descend from another planet to enlighten the rulers. People organized and fought back and worked out solutions on their own. People died in those struggles, but real gains were made, although all are now in the process of being reversed. It is perhaps cosmically unjust that some of us, because of where and

when we live, have been spared the need to fight battles that are still in other persons' futures, but mortals cannot correct for cosmic injustice.

To repay others for their contribution to whatever advantages we enjoy, one must always be responsive to calls for solidarity. But solidarity with people engaged in a struggle for self-determination demands that we allow them to take the lead and define the parameters of support, and also— perhaps most importantly— allowing them to make and work through the mistakes that also mar our own history. And that is what I mean by doing nothing— not doing nothing absolutely, for there is always political work to be done at home, against domestic problems and against the problems domestic policies and prejudices have on the Global South- but holding in abeyance the arrogant belief that we know exactly how every culture is to work out its conflicts with itself and other cultures. If there is ever going to be global peace, it will come from a universal conviction to not destroy that which is different or that which disagrees. And that is a conviction people will only reach when they see the historically powerful let them be to define their own future, internally and externally.

So doing nothing is an option in those cases where the good outcome cannot be attained without an individual or collective struggle in which something essential to individual or collective well-being is at stake. One cannot learn if one is not willing to fail, one cannot teach and not sometimes fail people. Groups cannot be free if they are not willing to stand up against their oppressors, one cannot respect others' freedom and not let them conquer their own oppressors.

Doing nothing is also an option because all the somethings which the Global North has historically done have not made people's lives in the Global South better. Often (as the US in Iran and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) imperialist interventions have provided legitimacy for responses which are reactionary when measured against the domestic politics of the liberal-capitalist imperialist power. So it is time to let people be, and trust that they have as much practical intelligence to solve their problems as we in the Global North grant ourselves.

## An Immodest Proposal

Originally Published 1 May, 2013

In *A Modest Proposal* Jonathan Swift famously suggested that the problem of hunger be solved by the poor eating their children. Since the rich are not hungry, and look only to their own interests, they have not lobbied to change the laws regarding cannibalism. But there are organ shortages, and many who are able to pay are happy to have the poor butchered, not for food eaten but for their organs, which will be still be consumed, but whole, not digested, as life-extension commodities, rather than nourishment. If anything reduces human beings to the status of mere means, contrary to Kant's categorical imperative to always treat rational beings as ends and never as mere means, on-demand organ harvesting would seem to be it.

But why turn to philosophy for moral insight when there is documentary film? "I expected it to be a very black and white story when I started out," said Ric Bienstock, director of a new documentary on organ markets. "Then I realized there was a lot of moral ambiguity." (Barbara Turnbull, "Organ Trade Cuts Both Ways," *The Toronto Star*, Saturday, April 27th, 2013, p. L1).

Where is the ambiguity? There are brutally impoverished people on the planet for whom the prospect of selling an organ to a wealthy white client appears a route out of poverty. Liberal-moralistic opinion might find the practice abhorrent, but then again, liberal-moralistic opinion is not giving up any of the comforts that afford it the time to reflect upon moral problems. Aghast at the practice but acquiescent in the system that produces the poverty that drives people to sell their organs in the first place, the liberal-moralist rebels from the thought that she or he might be part of the problem, rather than a beautiful soul passing judgement from above the fray.

"Moral ambiguity" is what the conscientious moralist feels when she confronts a practical moral problem (the poor being forced to sell their organs) generated by a social system she regards as, in other contexts, legitimate and just. She feels something is wrong with a person having to sell a vital organ to survive, but she also sees that for those with no assets or high-money value skills, the income they derive from the sale can "improve" their lives." Hence the ambiguity- if the person is not allowed to sell, they continue in poverty. If they are allowed to sell, they are reduced to slabs of organ-meat for First World luxury consumption. Condemnation of the practice from on high does not solve the very problem that drives the poor to consider selling their organs in the first place.

No one who is not conscientious feels moral ambiguity. The free market fundamentalist feels no moral ambiguity: let the poor sell!

Indeed, emerging organ-markets seem to confirm the free market fundamentalist view of the origin of markets. Where there are relative scarcities (someone lacks and demands that which someone else possesses and will sell) there are motivated buyers and sellers, and where there are motivated buyers and sellers markets develop. In the case of organ sales, poverty creates motivated organ sellers, affluence creates motivated organ buyers. And so a market for organs has emerged, just as one would expect. And yet, despite the perfectly "natural" way in which

this market has emerged, organ trading remains illegal. For the fundamentalist, this restriction on trade is a textbook demonstration of paternalistic interference in natural market relationships, interference which prevents the poor from monetizing their assets and pulling themselves out of poverty with their own renal systems.

Rather than solve the ambiguity, the market fundamentalist, like all religious zealots, abolishes the problem by abstracting it from social and historical reality, presenting it as a matter of “rational” choice between the only two alternatives that compute in the market-fundamentalist program: make money, or not. Any policy which constrains this choice by considerations of morality external to the market metric of monetary gain generates soft-headed public policy. The liberal-moralist’s sentimental attachment to bodily integrity as a basic condition of human dignity keeps the poor impoverished, all the while driving the practice underground. The moralist, according to the fundamentalist, creates the worst of both worlds: the poor still sell their organs because that choice is economically “rational”, but in conditions which are ripe for corruption and malpractice because clandestine.

The abstract cogency of this argument and its apparent concern for improving the lives of the poor gives the moralist pause. Its conclusion *feels* wrong, but its commitment to practical realities forces the moralist from her perch to consider matters on the ground. Genuine thinking is thus engendered which disrupts the happy certainty of pre-reflective belief. If moral principles just *sound* right, but leave material harms in place, perhaps the unsentimental economist is correct. But if the unsentimental economist is correct, then it is not wrong for those with money to *demand* the organs of those with no other option but to sell. And that seems wrong if anything is, because no rational person would choose to sell their kidney if they had alternative means of survival. But then the other side demands voice again: in the moment, there appears to be no alternative for the poor person but to sell the organ, so could it not be the case that prohibition does more harm?

Moral ambiguity is the result of serious thinking about troubling practices. Rather than default to pat answers or preferred conclusions, the thinking person risks unsettling her certainties even at the cost of losing all easy sense of what to do. At the same time as moral ambiguity is the product of genuine reflection, resting content with it in regard to practices that both presuppose and cause the extreme debasement of human being, its total objectification and instrumentalization, is a failure to persist in the thinking that lead to the ambiguity in the first place. It was *concern with life and well-being* that caused the moralist to question her initial assumption, and it is *concern with life and well-being* that can resolve the ambiguity into which conscientious reflection falls before it succumbs to the danger of degenerating into lazy moral perspectivism.

Lazy moral perspectivism is the opposite of self-satisfied moralism: everyone is right from his or her own perspective. We have to structure things so that everyone can feel good about the choices they make. But everyone cannot be right from his or her own perspective all the time, because sometimes the moral grounds of those different choices are not just different, but opposed, such that both choices cannot be morally correct. If everyone were right from his or her own perspective, then no one would ever feel moral ambiguity. The sense of *ambiguity* is of being torn between opposed perspectives both of which cannot be right but which each have

compelling reasons in their favour. Perspectivism is lazy because it gives up just at the point where hard intellectual work becomes necessary. How can concern for the well-being of the poor be reconciled with respect for their dignity and bodily integrity without condemning the person who needs a kidney to death?

There is no solution that can reconcile the interest of the buyer in purchasing bodily organs with the dignity and bodily integrity of the poor person. One must decide: either the power of money is allowed to reach through the skins of the poor to extract their organs, or the dignity and bodily integrity of human beings is of paramount importance, and immediate steps taken to redress the pressing material necessity that forces poor people to consider their bodies as objects for sale (the pittance that poor organ sellers actually receive could be covered by the richest nations and corporations of the world without any real effect on their balance sheets), while long term projects of social, political, economic, and moral transformation develop.

Philosophy cannot keep everyone happy. It must lead thinking to decisions that oppose some courses of action as intolerable and unconscionable. I would not eat my cats to stay alive. Nor would I purchase the organs of another human being.

Plato argued in the *Phaedo* that philosophy is preparation for death— contemplation in life of the necessity of death allows us to conquer our fear of it, even if death is oblivion. Everyone must practice philosophy to this extent: they must meditate on the finitude of their lives and accept it, if for no other reason (although it is a very good reason) that they do nothing intolerable and unconscionable to others for the sake of preserving themselves a few moments longer. Once one anchors one's understanding of the value of one's own life in the relationships it has with other equally valuable lives, one will conclude that there are things one simply cannot do to preserve one's own life. Rather than delude oneself into believing that buying the organs of a fellow human being is good for the seller, one might use what days one has left to fight for alternatives so that no one must choose between being able to eat and being eaten.

## If A Nurse Dies in December, Does Anybody Hear Her?

Originally Published 11 December 2012

If it bends, Alan Alda's obnoxious character in *Crimes and Misdemeanors* says, it is comedy, but if it breaks, it is tragedy. What is it called when a nurse who thinks she is giving an update on the Royal Uterus's condition to the Queen but is actually talking to a couple of Australian DJ's kills herself out of shame for her mistake? I think I will conduct a poll, along the lines of the Toronto Star's website, which asked readers on December 9th: "Who is to blame?"

Blame there must be. Single someone out. Exorciate them. Run them through the world wide web's mill of moral judgement and grind their chacter to dust. Who to blame, though, and for what transgression? Throw everyone involved into the whirlwind and let them take turns being flayed. First, have a go at the nurse—stupid, unprofessional, etc. However, she rather spectacularly turned the tables on her accusers by killing herself, didn't she? So next up, vapid gossip mongers/celebrity hounds/virtual busybodies/e-morality police, hang the DJ's (as The Smith's once suggested).

**INSENSITIVE! BULLIES!! KILLERS!!!**

Cue the remorseful tear stained apology. Tune in next week. Will they ask Jesus for forgiveness? Will the Queen absolve them? Will Prince Philip emerge from his Brezhnev-like stupor to offer his take? How about Cate and Wills? Will it complicate her pregnancy?"

What is certain is that no one whose dim-witted obsession with "the Royals" helps to fuel global celebrity industries will do any soul-searching. No interest, no prank call, no inappropriate disclosures, no suicide. Trace the causal chain.

But then, why bother? It is quite impossible to imagine that the death of a mere overworked nurse, just trying to help a colleague who was away from her desk by answering a phone, will turn peoples' minds back towards reality. The spell these well-manicured layabouts cast is too strong. I was in Glasgow a few days after the death of Diana, the "People's Princess," and George's Square was two feet deep in decaying flowers. A surreal sight (and smell) I assure you, in the centre of a city not known for royalist sympathies. Her death was supposed to make a difference, recall. Just as the First World war was the war to end all wars. Last I looked, wars still blazed around the world and there were more eyes fixed on Kate's mid-section than on the atrocities in Syria. One might have thought that the Jacobin's quite material proof of the mere humanity of monarchs would have freed people's minds once for all from the hold that this garish, obsolete pagentry exercises. Neither the Jacobin *coup de tete* nor the progress of democracy disrupts the show very much. The answer to the question "why" is beyond my powers of discernment.

So hundreds of millions will no doubt be captivated by second by second monitoring (maybe if we are lucky, we can score real time ultrasounds on Youtube) of the mitosis of his or her highness. Watch its delicate, never to be scarred by labour hands form. Look!! Its fingers

curl as if to grip a scepter! Look, it has dropped the scepter and is making vast scooping motions, as if to draw millions of pounds of UK tax dollars into its maw!

Thus is assembled, cell by cell, another anachronistic parasite. I am not insulting the developing little one, as I speak strictly scientifically. The child on its way is a creature who will be kept in stupendous luxury because of its “royalty.” Yet, that “royalty” contributes absolutely nothing of any substance back to the world on which it feeds. And that is the defintion of a parasite- a creature whose nature is to live off the nutrients of its host body and give nothing back.

Why will there be no final turning away from this idiotic spectacularization of the most banal event of all— human reproduction? Because it would spell the end of TMZ and Inside Edition and Entertainment Tonight and every boring scripted “talk show” and CNN and all the other 24hour “news channels” and multiple Aegean stables worth of net-based horseshit. And so every trick in their psychological aresnal of the advertisers and promoters and “newscasters” will be brought to bear to sustain the fascination. Was the world really worse off (it was only 20 years ago) when we had to wait twelve hours to find out what was happening? Now, there is no escape, no respite.

No escape, no respite, no where to hide. That is certainly what Jacinda Saldanha must have felt in the seconds before she killed herself.

There is a brilliant Bob Dylan song, “Who Killed Davey Moore?” Davey Moore was a boxer who died after a fight. The song asks the eponymous question over and over to different constituencies that had a stake in the match: the promoters, the fans, the gamblers, the referee, the sportswriter. One by one they declaim their innocence.

As will all of you whose vampire hunger for news about people who do not give a fuck about you, who do not know you exist, who live off your earnings, who holiday in countries in which you could not afford to buy a beer, who live in palaces and castles and command control over yachts and planes and horse drawn carriages, and who speak in accents that it cost more to cultivate than you will make in ten life times. What on earth do you think you can learn about these people? What is your slavish fixation accomplishing for you?

Wake the fuck up!

# Hunger Games

Originally Published 23 August, 2012

My philosophical work is unified by the goal of understanding the metaphysical and social conditions of reconciling unity and difference, solidarity and individuality. I interpret conceptions of nature, social institutions, and humanity as frames which define spaces for experience, action, and interaction. Through experience, action, and interaction people become that which they are. These spaces can be evaluated along a continuum that ranges from oppressively exclusionary, in which the life-horizons of most people are confined to serving the ruling class and the value system that justifies their rule (think of a slave society as a paradigm) to coherently inclusive of all life- valuable experience, action, and interaction. In such a society free people would freely negotiate the use of natural resources and the governance of social institutions subject to two internal limitations: resources would have to be managed sustainably to ensure that at least as much life-sustaining and activity-enabling wealth was preserved for subsequent generations, and individuals and groups would have to treat each other as intrinsically valuable centres of life-value. To treat each other as intrinsically valuable centres of life-value means to refuse to exploit or be exploited. Subject to these two internal limitations, metaphysical and institutional frames are better the more space they permit for experiments in different forms of experience, action, and interaction.

All experience, action, and interaction presupposes life, and life presupposes that basic life- requirements are met. If the aim of philosophy is to understand the metaphysical and social conditions for maximizing the space of human experience, action, and interaction, it must comprehend the fundamental conditions, the set of real life-requirements, for on-going life- maintenance, reproduction, development, and enjoyment. This principle is fundamental to life- value onto-axiology, systematically elaborated by John McMurtry, beginning in *Unequal Freedoms*, (Garamond, 1998), and culminating in [What is Good, What is Bad: The Value of All Values Across Times, Places, and Theories](#). Life-value onto-axiology gathers together and organizes in a coherent body of philosophical argument, at once critical and constructive, the shards of insight strewn across the history of philosophy and science, East and West, which express, in partial, one-sided, and distorted forms: the objective relativity of needs (life- requirements), the instrumental role needs play in the development of life-capacities, the intrinsic value of life-capacity expression and enjoyment, and the enjoyment of experience and action, in its intrinsic value and in the contribution it makes to the well-being of others, the purpose and meaning of life. These shards are reconstructed into a unified body of argument through rigorous definitions of the key terms: life-requirements and life-capacities, the explicit formulation of a universal principle of value ([“x is of value if and only if, and to the extent that, x leads to more coherently inclusive ranges of thought/experience/action.”](#)) and the ultimately regulating [life-coherence principle](#). The life-coherence principle asserts that legitimate forms of action and interaction must cohere with the general ecological conditions of on-going life- maintenance and the social conditions of universal and comprehensive life-development.

My own interpretation and development of this system has taken the form of using it as the metaphysical and moral basis for a [reconstruction of the Marxist understanding of socialism](#). At

many points throughout Marx's work, from his early philosophical writings to his mature political economy, the idea that life-support and life-development are the foundational values served by socialism, emerges. However, this understanding of life as the foundational value of socialism is unevenly developed. It is often confused with the development of productive forces ungrounded in anything like the life-coherence principle, and made contingent upon the revolutionary interests of the working class alone, with no systematic articulation between the class interests of workers and [the human interests of other oppressed groups](#) (and certainly not the life-interests of non-human animals). Of course, the work of later Marxists has gone a long way to overcoming these inadequacies (which derive from Marx's historical context). Still, even in the best of this work there is often no rigorous distinction between human life-requirements and use-values and no internal limitation specified to the legitimate, good, forms of capacity expression (see for example, Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature*).

The goal of socialism reconstructed according to life-value principles is a democratic life-economy. As democratic, decisions as to the use of resources will be made by the associated members of society in the expressed interest of all members, and not, as at present, the particular interests of the owners of private money and fixed capital whose social power allows them to externalise the costs of their investment decisions without universalizing the benefits. As a life-economy, democratic decisions as to how to utilise natural and social wealth will be consciously limited and governed by the life-coherence principle, not as an external coercive force that limits democracy, but as a principle of material rationality constitutive of a sustainable democracy.

The claim that the world at present cries out for a progressive transformation of society in the direction of a democratic life-economy is not rooted in a dogmatic philosophical conceit or any esoteric argument. The need emerges from the overt and undeniable contradiction that defines the structure of value at work across the globe: the contradiction between the life-interests of everyone, and the interests in the maximization of private money-value appropriation that drives the global ruling class. Do not turn to my work for proof of this contradiction, just read the business press. A most *a propos* example occurred recently in a story in *The Globe and Mail*, telling of a future in which rising food prices will bring starvation to millions, but celebrating this life-catastrophe because it will bring millions of dollars to those who own food stocks.

In "A Portfolio for Hungry Times", (*Report on Business*, Thursday August 2nd, 2012, p. B7), David Berman writes: "Missed out in this summer's spike in corn prices? Not to worry. According to legendary investor Jeremy Grantham, those gains were nothing more than a warm-up act for what resources are likely to do in the coming decades. Mr Grantham, the chairman of global asset manager GMO LLC, sees a *dismal looking future for humanity* amid a problematic convergence of population growth, climate change and diminishing returns from such key ingredients as fertilizer. *But at least his views provide a big upside to investors:* Resource stocks look set to benefit from a long-term trend where supply cannot meet surging demand." (emphasis added)

Is there any argument that can challenge the basic claim of life-value philosophy that a society ruled by a value system in which a minority profits off of the starvation of millions of people, whose "leaders" celebrate this value system as the crowning achievement of human civilization,

has gone morally insane (i.e., celebrates as good that which is manifestly evil— making money off the brutal destruction of other life when alternative strategies for distributing and utilizing resources are readily available)? McMurtry terms this systematic moral insanity “life-blindness.” Those who judge right and wrong, permissible and impermissible, rational and irrational, good and evil, according to the ruling money-value system are structurally blind to the real harms imposed upon living things in consequence. They literally cannot see the damage that they do, even as they list the forms this damage takes.

Consider the example above in more detail. Berman *states* the life-catastrophe that awaits us, but cannot comprehend its causes, because those causes— commodification of life-resources and their conversion into money-value for investors— are affirmed as the overriding good. The point here is not that the increased returns on investment are compensations for others’ loss of life. The derangement runs much deeper: the increased returns on investment means that there is no loss, because the good is not life and life-development, but growth of money-value, regardless of the costs to life, which remain uncomprehended. The real damage to life is blocked from view by the anthropomorphisation of non-living system values, onto which is transferred value judgments that have real purchase only in relation to sentient beings. So Berman tells us that “stocks” will benefit from increased resource scarcity. But stocks do not “benefit.” Stocks go up or down in money-value. Living beings benefit or are harmed by the principles that determine resource uses.

To expose this moral insanity is not the same as to argue that everything about existing liberal-capitalist society is opposed to the shared life-interests of human beings. Any adequately dialectical understanding of history— and life-value onto-axiology operates with a dialectical understanding of history— reveals that the given state of any social formation is a function of struggles, not only over resources, but over the principles that govern the institutions that produce and distribute those resources, as well as over the concepts and values that structure the self-understanding of the people whose actions and interactions create, sustain, and change those institutions. That which its opponents try to dismiss with the demon-word “socialism” is really nothing more— but also nothing less— than the principle that the institutions which determine individual lives should in turn be governed by the collective decisions of those individuals. The life-value ground to socialism that I have worked to establish is nothing more— but also nothing less— than the principle that those collective decisions must in turn be grounded in that which is universally required for life-support, life-development, and life-enjoyment.

## II: Readings

## Readings: Deschooling Society, by Ivan Illich

Originally Published 26 January, 2013

Thanks to my friend and co-explorer Mireille Coral for suggesting the course that provided the occasion to re-read this text.

A body of philosophical work builds up by gradual accretion of influences the way sedimentary rock is formed from silt. At first, each book read, each conversation had, each experience committed to memory is an independent reality, its relationship to one's own thinking purely external. In the beginning, books and conversations and experiences are material *for thought*, content that comes from outside, other people's ideas, things in the world which one thinks *about*. One puts other names than one's own to these ideas and experiences. The young intellectual is a power of thinking but cannot yet sign his or her name to a work composed of ideas one can properly call one's own. But one's own ideas are not created *ex nihilo* in opposition to these influences, but through their compression into an emergent synthesis. Just as the identity of the specks of dust lose their individuality under the pressure that squeezes them into solid stone, so the sources of one's own thought lose their status as external influences as they are pressed and reshaped and molded by the different contexts in which they are put to work. A dim memory retains the trace of the original source, but its unique structure, its details and nuances, are lost through its being put to different purposes. An unexpected re-encounter with texts that were key influences thus always generates some ambivalence. There is the feeling of encountering something important again as for the first time, but also a certain disappointment as problems and tensions that were not initially recognised are discovered.

Re-reading Ivan Illich's *De-Schooling Society* twenty-seven years after I first studied it filled me with such ambivalence. The main argument that Illich advances against schooling continues to inform my practice as a teacher. His critique of quantified metrics of learning underlies my arguments against core elements of the re-structuring of contemporary public universities. At the same time, in the political-economic space we currently inhabit, some of his arguments seem to prefigure the rhetoric of bureaucrats and business leaders and administrators who are directing that re structuring. The critique of the bureaucratic authority of schooling has become part of my own thought, but I now also fear that aspects of his argument also anticipate the neo-liberal critique of public institutions.

For Illich, schools are antithetical to education, by which he means the development of new capacities, the growth of independence of mind, and the emergence of a new structure of personality. Education "enable[s] us to be spontaneous, independent, yet related to each other." (p. 52). Schooling, by contrast, is institutionalized training for a "life style which only allows us to make and unmake, produce and consume— a style of life which is only a way station on the road to the depletion and pollution of the environment."(p. 52).

Schools, like all “manipulative” institutions, function by producing structures of material and psychological dependence. Children are taken from home when they are four and five years old and subjected to a system of external discipline. External discipline is the antithesis of the internal discipline we need to learn and grow and relate and act as social self-conscious agents. The discipline of school, like the discipline of all manipulative institutions, forces us to obey the rules as ends in themselves and as means to succeed by the conventional standards of society. Students learn how to obey the rules because they are the rules and that they are the rules because someone with the authority to make them so has. Once this primary lesson has been internalised, people learn to tailor their demands and desires to those that can be satisfied by existing social institutions. ”Once we have learned to need school, all our activities tend to take the shape of client relationships to other specialized institutions … In school we are taught that valuable learning is the result of attendance, that the value of learning increases with the amount of input, that this value can be measured and documented by grades and certificates.”(p.39). Freshly armed with his or her certificate, the graduate enters the “real” world, where she demands that her qualifications be honoured in the form of a job that pays enough to sustain the high-consumption life-style she has been produced to demand. The “hidden curriculum” of the school institution, according to Illich, is social control via regulation of desires and demands. (p.32-33).

This regulation of desires and demands damages the capacity to live freely. For Illich, freedom is the unity of independence and mutualistic relationship expressed as the capacity for collective self-organization around problems of shared importance (like a healthy environment) or mutual interest (across the open spectrum of topics and practices in which it is possible for people to take an interest). Freedom is embodied in “convivial institutions,” which differ from manipulative institutions in that they evolve to meet real, rather than manufactured, shared needs. The rules they require do not manipulate, but enable free development: “The rules which govern institutions for use [convivial institutions] have mainly the purpose for avoiding abuses that would frustrate their general accessibility. … The regulation of convivial institutions sets limits to their use; as one moves from the convivial to the manipulative end of the spectrum, the rules progressively call for unwilling consumption or participation.”(p.55) To the extent that people succumb to the ministrations of manipulative institutions, they come to regard their own freedom as compliant behaviour in conformity with the demands of the institutions of manipulation. Studying, working, and buying in line with the rules of schools, workplaces, and shopping centres are mistaken for self-motivated free activity. People become incapable of deciding for themselves; they are only happy when they are doing what they are told.

The proof of this unhealthy identity of happiness and domination lies in peoples’ own demands that more regulations and rules and measurements to be imposed upon them. They become alienated from their own capacity to learn from their own experiences and interactions with others. They confuse— as the school institution demands— the conferring of certificates with understanding. “The institutionalized values school instills are quantified ones. School initiates young people into a world where everything can be measured, including their imaginations, and, indeed, man himself. … People who submit to the standard of others to measure their own personal growth soon apply the same ruler to themselves. They no longer have to be put in their place, but put themselves into the assigned slots … and, in the process, put their fellows in their place too, until everybody and everything fits.”(p. 40). This critique, alas, has had no effect on

the organization of education at any level, primary, secondary, or tertiary. That which goes by the name of “student-centred” learning in the contemporary university is nothing more than an amping up of this tyranny of generic measurement. Banal generalities, “learning outcomes,” substitute for and impede free, novel, individuated understanding. While it is understandable that government bureaucrats— who are not educators and whose passion is to destroy passion with charts and paperwork— are enthusiastic about numbers that signify nothing, it is incomprehensible how those whose vocation is to educate— to open mind, thought, and imagination to that which *has not yet been* thought or imagined and therefore cannot even in principle be measured by generic outcomes— would so easily succumb. (Although not everyone has succumbed. See for example the excellent article by [Frank Furedi](#) in a recent edition of the CAUT *Bulletin*)

“But if there are no metrics, teachers, how can we the managers, know if you, the educators, are doing the job the government tells you to do?”

The better question is: “how can you, managers, who claim to speak for students, (when the students speak for themselves they are either opposed or indifferent) reduce students to products of generic processes imposed at the behest of government “Quality Assurance Councils?” But if you insist on an answer to your question, it can only be: real student empowerment, learning, is not a physical substance subject to measurement by standards abstracted from the specificities of particular learning processes, because all learning is specific. We do not learn to write, we learn to write English or French or Cantonese, and we learn to write it poetically, or philosophically, or analytically. Learning is developing specific capacities to do specific things in specific contexts. Different people studying the same material learn different things. If that is true, then how is it even possible to measure anything worthwhile by metrics which abstract from the specificities of the course and the individuality of the students?

Learning outcomes, as Furerdi makes clear, have nothing to do with learning or outcomes, but with managerial discipline. They are part of a disciplinary regime imposed by governments purportedly concerned with how ‘tax dollars’ are being spent. If students demand only what the outcomes promise, they kill in themselves that from which the desire to learn derives: curiosity and willingness to grow through th discomfort of realizing the world is much bigger than you thought. Illich concludes that “school prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life … people lose their incentive to grow in independence; they no longer find relatedness attractive, and close themselves off to the surprises life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition.”(p. 47).

But if Illich’s critique of the alienating effects of the school institution still inspires my belief in the liberatory power of education, his critique of public funding for education gives me pause. In the circumstances in which public educational institutions find themselves today— their academic freedom, their finances, and tcollegeial self-governance under assault by governments, corporate interests, and senior administrators— his call to free education from public institutions altogether is deeply troubling. “Only by channeling dollars away from the institutions that now treat health, education, and welfare can the further impoverishment resulting from their disabling side-effects be stopped.” (p.4) Neo-liberal ideologues have seized upon this sort of language and have almost destroyed public education in parts of the United States, made welfare recipients lives an

even worse hell than they already were, and impeded a meaningful public health care system from developing, all without ending the poverty they claimed that such “reforms” would end.

To be sure, Illich’s ideas of learning webs and free associations of learners were not intended to re-enslave those liberated from the manipulative school to the omni-manipulation of the capitalist market.(pp.75-97). But he does endorse Milton Friedman’s idea of school vouchers, he does theorise early versions of charter schools, anticipates the world of on-line learning, and argues that teachers should bring their expertise to market and either find buyers, or go out of business.(pp. 6, 97-104) In one respect, these arguments are consistent with his vision of convivial education— people should learn by pursuing their own interests with others who have like interests, for the sake of expanding their understanding and imagination and ability to relate more deeply to the things of the world, and not for the sake of certification and securing a high paying position. Underlying his critique of schools, as I noted above, is a critique of high consumption liberal-capitalist life-styles. At the same time, his failure to rethink the public school as a convivial institution leaves him open to appropriation by self-styled neo-liberal school “reformers” bent on manipulation but selling themselves as liberators of students.

Institutions can certainly be disciplinary prisons for imagination and creativity, but they can also be shelters from the social dynamics which threaten to instrumentalize imagination and creativity in the service of money-value growth- exactly what Illich does not want to happen. Yet, his one-sided critique of the school institution fails to see the threat that the free market relations he defends pose to the pedagogical values he champions. To de-institutionalize learning in today’s political economic environment would almost certainly mean that teaching would fall completely under the control of on-line educational “entrepreneurs” who treat education as the programming of consciousness in the service of money value growth. Eliminating public educational institutions means eliminating a source of democratic counter-power rooted in a shared life-interest. It is not enough for individuals to know their life-interest and try to live it anarchically with others. Living in light of shared life interests requires regulations and policies and laws and institutions to serve and protect them. It is poetry to dream of a world where we do not need those protective institutions— and we need poetry. But the poets also need shelter from the storms that would blow away the paper on which they inscribe their dreams. Those winds have picked up today, not died down. De-school, by all means, but by making the school a convivial institution, not by destroying it altogether.

## Readings: A Late Quartet

Originally Published 11 November, 2012

*A Late Quartet*

Written By Yaron Zilberman and Seth Grossman

Directed by Yaron Zilberman

Windsor International Film Festival,

November 9th, 2012

How apt the term “film industry” generally is. Hollywood is synonymous with the mass production of vapid, beautiful people, insipid cartoons, and adolescent CGI-engineered fantasies— a boring squandering of potential. At the dawn of the twentieth century, film was regarded as the quintessential art of modernity, a revolutionary synthesis of image and narrative made possible by new technology. One hundred years on, even “critically acclaimed” films tend to bog down in clichés after twenty minutes. Seeing a film today that realizes the medium’s artistic potential— emotionally rich and intellectually challenging narrative unfolded through superb performance within a beautiful cinematographic space is powerful and uplifting because so rare.

Such is the pleasure of watching *A Late Quartet*. It follows the struggles of a group of four musicians (members of The Fugue Quartet) as they negotiate the trauma thrust into their artistic, familial, and romantic lives when their founder Peter, (played magnificently by Christopher Walken) is diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. The diagnosis is a wall against which his career as a premier cellist will soon crash. The other three members of the quartet: Robert (Seymour Phillip Hoffman), his wife Julliette, (Catherine Keener) and Daniel (Mark Ivanir) are forced to rethink their goals, their passions, and their relationships as they struggle to prepare for their last concert together.

The film is pervaded by a mood of delicious melancholy, its stories told with exquisite subtlety. Much is conveyed through looks and gesture:

Walken’s eyes in silent reflection tell of the spiritual riches of a life lived in service of beauty, but also the terror and sorrow of having to let it go;

Keener’s final embrace of her husband Robert, an astounding five seconds of acting, in which, her back to the camera, at once exhaling tension and tightening her arms around Hoffman, the viewer feels her character resolve twenty-years of ambivalence towards her husband;

Daniel standing in the doorway to Robert’s and Julliette’s daughter’s loft, all the passions he has sublimated through a maniacal practice regimen exploding out from his eyes towards Alex (Imogene Poots);

The camera cutting to a close up of Rembrandt's self-portrait in the Frick Collection, focussing on what looks to be a tear running down Rembrandt's cheek, immediately after Peter remarks to Julliette that the painting conveys both profound self-confidence in the artist's powers and gnawing anxiety about their ultimate collapse;

At its deepest level the film poses a series of questions about the nature, extent, and value of love. Can one love a collective entity (the Quartet) or is such a feeling always a displacement of feelings for an individual? Can one love another without desire for them? Is desire a sufficient foundation for love? When a privately enriching love between two people threatens a collective whose creations are loved by a public, which love should triumph? Must those who create together love each other in order to become great as a collective? Is loving one's self as an artist compatible with sacrificing one's ambitions as an artist? Must love for that which is past degenerate into nostalgia, or is it necessary for new creation?

The answers suggested or alluded to are never obvious and never so complete as to resolve the oppositions from which the questions were generated. One is reminded of Heraclitus: "The finest harmonies are composed of things at variance." The erotic energy that draws people together in artistic creation or in real love for each other, the film suggests, requires opposition and tension. Art is most beautiful and love most intense just at the point where those oppositions and tensions threaten to explode. Without the imminent possibility of disaster, there is an artifact, but no art, a relationship, but no love. Everything great is a coming together as pulling apart that never resolves itself into a fully reconciled whole.

The film itself unfolds in a way that mirrors its conclusions about art and love. Its tone is sombre, but punctuated at different moments by microbursts of anger, raw sexual desire, violent antipathy. New York City, where it is set, has never appeared so serene and at peace with itself, an almost inert snowy matrix within which great music and fraught lives are lived. It is a remarkably quiet film, pierced by sharp fragments from Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 131, the piece The Fugue performs in the concluding scene.

And a moving scene it is. Finally unable to keep pace, his hands slightly tremble, Peter stops playing in the middle of the final performance. He stands up and addresses the audience, informing them that they are witnessing his final concert, but that the quartet will continue with a new cellist. He leaves and she takes her seat. All the musicians close their scores, and resume playing, from the heart, as Robert always wanted but Daniel's fears always inhibited. At the back of the room Peter sits next to Alex, takes her hand, looks wistfully at *his* child, The Fugue, living on without him. Almost immediately he smiles, faintly, as if realizing (like Rembrandt in his self-portrait?) that the value of the artist is the work, and the more the work can live without the artist, the greater has been the achievement.

## Anonymous Beuys

Originally Published 15 January, 2013

“Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build ‘A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART’... EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the TOTAL ART WORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER.” (Joseph Beuys, Artist Statement 1973, first published in English in Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art* (ICA, London, 1974), p.48.

### **Excavating/Interrogating The Abandoned Packard Factory, Mt. Elliot and East Grand Blvd, Detroit.**

Can artistic and social evolution advance through distintegration of the disused structures of 20th century industrial capitalism? Can there be a non-intentional art that emerges from collective letting happen over open ended timeframes?



(Packard factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Joseph Beuys, Natural History)

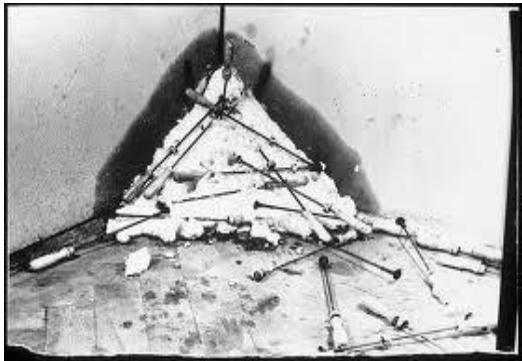
Beneath the hard but careful geometry of Albert Kahn's architecture a more organic structure is revealed by the process of structural decomposition: a reminder that all construction proceeds from the earth. The re-bar and concrete seem to yearn to recapture the freedom from human purposes they once enjoyed as un-used natural elements.



(Packard factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Joseph Beuys, Fat Corner)

Can we read this space as an instance of a total art whose context and content cannot be traced to any one decision, vision, goal, or project, born of an accidental dynamic, a synthesis that fully is in one moment, and fully something else— yet also the same— at the next? An open dialectic of building up and breaking down, inscribing and rubbing out, natural force and cultural symbol.



(Packard Factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Joseph Beuys, The Prisoner)

An art that is at once performance, presence, and document, formed of picturesque vistas of beautifying decay,



(Packard Factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Jospeh Beuys, I Like America and America Likes Me)

the ever changing chromatic fields produced and reproduced by taggers asserting a radically individual identity but succeeding aesthetically only as a moment of an unconscious, collective painting,



(Packard Factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Joseph Beuys, Art=Capital)

and monumental piles of rubbish made sculptural by scale and context.



(Packard Factory)



(Packard Factory)



(Joseph Beuys, The Pack)

Unlike the aesthetics of its first incarnation, which were surely impressive but subordinate to the functional reality of the factory as site of capital accumulation, and unlike the usual fate of industrial ruins— to be redeveloped into lifestyle preserves of those who can pay— the anti-beauty that results from this structural devolution serves no instrumental purpose. The dynamic aesthetic synthesis depends upon participants— vandals, taggers, garbage-dumpers, awed wanderers, and documenters— to tolerate on-going disuse for “productive” purposes, an implicit resistance to the re-absorption of the site by circuits of capital accumulation.

### **III: Evocations**

# **Long Day's Journey Into Fuck You Centre**

Originally Published 14 February 2013

I have a one hour bus trip ahead of me. I was going to bring the paper, or a book, but decided I would just sit still and pay attention to the cross-section of my city the bus route carved. I was on my way to see my old friend play in a women's hockey tournament. It made me nostalgic for arenas and childhood team mates and bitter cold, the kind that crunches and snaps; a time when I had never heard the word philosophy or thought anything about politics or of the socio-economic conditions in which people struggle to live their lives. But those conditions were there, and I was in them, and as I grew older they impressed themselves upon me more and more, drawing me—without my knowing, for many years, where I was going - to the intellectual-political space I now occupy. Geographically, I am at a different latitude, temporally, in a different decade, intellectually, more awake, but in the midst of a socio-economic catastrophe I have experienced before.

## **University Avenue**

The old man's walker took up about half the aisle. At the next stop an older, fraiser, more bedraggled and stooped-over man, also using a walker, boarded. With great effort he paid his fare and struggled onto the bus, but the other man's walker blocked his way. The first man smiled, the second man narrowed his eyes and stared aggressively. He angrily jabbed his walker into that of the first man, doing no damage to the machine, but killing the gleam in the seated man's eyes that told you he was kind. Defeated, he did what he could to make way. But he was old and frail too, and there was not much room for manoeuvre. The second man gave up and slouched into a seat directly across from the first. Not a single word was spoken.

A smile is the most perfect invitation. Is there anything sadder than to see it reflected back inverted, as an angry scowl? But a hard life hardens. Sadness is for poets.

"Can I see another's woe and not be in sorrow too?" asks Blake. No, not if you really see it, or so I have argued in the past.

So be sad when you see pain, or be indifferent, as you like, since it makes no difference. The second man was tired and bent and broken by age and illness and poverty and he cannot live his life over. Tomorrow he will have to do this again. I will not be there to see it, but it will be the same. How could it not be?

## **Ouellette Avenue, Wyandotte to Erie.**

Every city has one, a bus stop where all the misery and addiction and ill health and anger and despair gathers. A man in a greasy Michigan State jacket gets aboard, followed by his girlfriend in a red track suit. The man looks like he has not slept in a decade; his eyes threaten to fall right out of his head. He shuffles up the steps and begins some inane conversation with his partner.

The aggressive old man wants to exit. The driver tells him to wait, that he will move up the street a bit to a more convenient location. The man seems not to understand and grunts angrily, extinguishing the same gleam in the bus driver's eye that was in the first old man's. The driver stops the bus a second or two later, a few dreary meters from the corner, and silently helps the man off the bus.

Capital leaves those zones it has milked of life and reconcentrates elsewhere. It drives out the neighborhood well-established, forces long time occupants to the periphery, creates noise and traffic and pollution and congestion. But it also generates intense urban energy whose seductions are difficult to resist. You want to be a part of it, even though you know that the price it exacts is constant disruption, dislocation, "creative destruction" exploitation, and alienation.

None of that here. The only thing worse than capitalist exploitation is the impossibility of finding a job in which to be exploited.

When capital leaves it leaves behind the old and the ugly and the brutalized and the severely damaged and the sick and the angry to fend for themselves. They cannot see the social forces that have abandoned them. They only see each other, so like a cat swatting at its reflection in a mirror, they savage one another.

On the main streets boarded up buildings decay and decay and decay— an architecture of hopelessness. Some of these buildings have been empty since before the 2008 crisis began. It is certain that they will not be renovated and put back to work anytime soon. Block upon block goes by— closed restaurants, closed clubs, closed stores, windows grimy, doorways piled with trash, the decrepitude amplified by the massive grey damp of the day.

### **Techumseh and Lauzon**

The Fuck You centre is in the middle of the middle of nowhere. They couldn't even build it right on the corner? Or, at least have it face the main intersection? Is it embarrassed? Is that why its face to the corner is its massive refrigeration units and not a sign announcing what it is? I search for a means of access and wonder whether I am in the right spot.

Clearly no one thought anyone would ever take the bus and walk from the corner to the arena. You have to be meth-head poor before you take public transit here, and this dun suburban box was clearly designed with the car crowd in mind. The sidewalk on Lauzon ends about 50 meters north of Techumseh. No matter how slushy the shoulder is, I have to walk in it, because the alternative is clearly to get run over, and I still do want to see the game.

Tomorrow I will take a walk and see a ferocious man, frustrated, screaming and cursing to himself and kicking over trash cans. All the way down University, from Rankin to Church Street, the trash cans and Post Office boxes have been knocked over.

The aircraft hanger they are calling a pool blocks my view of the Art Gallery.

## Liner Notes

Originally Published 18 July, 2012

New ideas are interventions that allow us to reconfigure the world. While they are assembled out of pre-existing materials (words, musical notes, images, mathematical functions) that which makes them new is not easily explained in mechanical terms. If the novelty were reducible to a mechanical explanation, it would not be real novelty. But the history of human practices seems to confirm not only the reality of novelty in all fields, but the way in which novelty arises from ideas that shape themselves in mind, but are not initially shaped by mind. The testimony of people who have experienced the inner connection between receptivity and creativity supports this interpretation.

Lee Ranaldo, discussing the process of musical creation in the liner notes to his new album, expresses this inner relation clearly. "The thing is, for me, it's the *process* that's the most fantastic part. *Seeing these things shaped outta thin air.*" (emphasis added)

Ranaldo touches upon an experience that is at the heart of every genuine creation: the idea which governs the work does not appear to derive from any deliberate mental act on the part of the creator. The idea for the song arises "outta thin air." But so too the idea for the philosophical essay, the painting, and, I presume, the scientific experiment or mathematical model. The activity of creation—shaping, editing, refining, revising, polishing—follows upon passive reception of the idea. The work presupposes a willingness to first let the novel idea inscribe itself in mind. Idea formation occurs within the mind, but its origination seems not to be a conscious act. "A thought comes when "it" wishes," writes Nietzsche, "not when "I" wish." (*Beyond Good and Evil*, section 17)

I love liner notes and candid photos of bands in the studio, as well as all manner of other fragmentary, unpolished accounts of creative people discussing or documenting the process by which they create. They transmit to me some of the difficult to marshal energy that surrounds invention and drives it forward. My love of these notes and pictures and lists of acknowledgements and details of where the album was recorded, are, I think, the final impediment to me digitizing completely my music collection.

But the technophile will respond, "That's absurd. You can download the liner notes and photographs as easily as the music. Unless you have an argument to make against the quality of digitized music you are just manifesting an irrational attachment to some old form of thinghood. Why must there be a physical something occupying space in order for you to value it?"

I suppose that there is much truth in the technophile's objection, but the irrationality of the attachment to the arrangement of physical objects in space does not make it any less real, or valuable, to the one who values it. This hanging on to physical objects when it would be so

much more rational, from the standpoint of space utilization, just to rip all my cd's and albums onto a hard drive, is no doubt also nostalgic. My history is bound up with the history of these objects; part of it would be lost if those things were no longer publicly displayed in my living room.

But there is more to my hanging on to objects than irrational attachments to old media or nostalgia. I am also concerned that a certain sense of 'public' is being lost as more and more things that used to have a distinct, physical, material presence in our lives- including other people- are transformed into files on a harddrive or virtualized avatars. In material public space things are vulnerable to the chance encounter, to the unobserved observation, to the unintentional disclosure. To be in public means to relinquish a certain degree of control over your persona, over how you appear to others and how they judge you as a consequence of their interpretation of your appearance. Presence in a material public space and a certain form of personally and socially valuable risk have been historically linked. One has to develop a certain strength of character to expose oneself to unexpected judgments; there is a certain tension and excitement to not knowing what one will encounter when one ventures beyond one's home. Prepare as much as you like, you could be caught unawares in an unflattering light, from an unflattering angel, or be overheard saying something you did not intend anyone else to hear, and then you have to learn how to deal with it.

Despite all the talk of how digital media is essentially social- and I accept that it does extend social relationships and connections in important ways- it also transforms the risky nature of public self-manifestation. Public space does not disappear- in a sense, it becomes ubiquitous- but not as a matrix within which people willingly expose themselves to the chance encounter, the embarrassing disclosure, the random coming across of unexpected things- but as a frighteningly complex constellation of private micro-universes in which everything is managed for the sake of constructing a tightly controlled presentation of self in everyday virtual life. Advertising is a paradigm example of what I mean. The billboard occupies public space, otherwise it would not be an ad, but its appearance and its message is the product of pure calculation. The micro-universe of one's constructed web profile obeys the same instrumental logic- what is there is there for others, but it all serves a pre-conceived idea of who one wants to appear to be.

With books in a library or cd's on a shelf the self exposes itself freely to others' judgments. But you can only see what is on someone's harddrive if they show you. And show you they will, no doubt- but there is something too calculated and controlled and instrumental about this sort of sharing. Everything on the basis of which you might form an opinion of someone else is so stage-managed it threatens to turn all social interaction into an audition. The phenomenon of oversharing might be real, but what critics miss is that the sharing is always a consequence of strategic choices on the part of the sharer. Hence the end of the risk of the unplanned encounter/disclosure/expression/insight? And also the passivity necessary to receive the idea for something new that lies in wait for its opportunity to shape itself through us?

## The Destruction of Space

Originally Published 27 September, 2012

The most decadent program in the history of television has to be the original Japanese *Iron Chef*. For the delectation of Chairman Kaga— a millionaire so *outré* he makes Elton John look like a suburban house husband— each week a celebrity chef battled one of his “Iron Chefs.” The two chefs had sixty minutes to turn that week’s ‘theme ingredient’ into a multicourse meal never before seen or tasted. Absolutely no expense was spared. Who knew that Swallow’s Nest (not the imitation overcooked noodles from your local Chinese takeout, but the real thing— congealed saliva of an Asian swallow that has to be painstakingly collected from tree tops) was worth several thousand dollars? Like all excess, the spectacle was at once irresistible and repulsive.

But why reminisce about an eccentric Japanese television show? Because it was *Iron Chef* that first got people watching the Food Network, and it was the Food Network that got everyone thinking that they are a gourmand. Once everyone started to think of themselves as a gourmand, every delightfully crummy neighbourhood restaurant reinvented itself along one or another culinary trend line. Once every delightfully crummy restaurant started to reinvent itself along one or another culinary trend line, sacred junk food began to succumb to *haute-cuisinization*.

Every time I take a walk in Toronto I am subjected to another papered over window promising the grand opening of a restaurant serving “gourmet” poutine, or “gourmet” grilled cheese sandwiches, or “gourmet” hot dogs- sorry, I meant “Franks.”

These abominations are the prog-rock of the food world— pretentious, over-thought, aesthetically incoherent. Just as rock music did not benefit from half-assed orchestral scores and poorly sung operatic verses, so too the simple pleasures of unhealthy food are destroyed by dressing them up in *foie gras* and truffle oil. Rock music has its own aesthetic legitimacy— fast, loud, hard, sweaty, angry— and so too does the comfort food of the people. Like rock music at its best a grilled cheese or a hot dog is a strictly do it yourself affair- no credentials required to cook it, no ingredients that you cannot find at the corner store needed, no depreciation of its real value through ironic appreciation of it as kitsch accepted.

It is by thinking about this last point that we can begin to untangle the real problem at work in contemporary urban culture, a problem of which *haute-cuisinization* is but a symptom. The city today is being overwhelmed by commodified irony; the negation of cool through its reduction to trends which become brands before they have time to breath. Underground culture is strip-mined of its novelty, oppositional content, and danger, made safe for the suburban urbanites living a sanitized dream of city life by difference-seeking vultures in the employ of the architects of life-style and fashion. The later novels of William Gibson, in particular *Pattern Recognition*, lay bare the contemporary fate of subcultures still trying to define themselves according to the exclusivity of ‘those who are in the know.’ They are obsolete. Everyone already knows. It is on Facebook. It has been tweeted. It is on a grainy cellphone video on Youtube. The self-constituting, self-sustaining subculture has become impossible in the age of real time global communication and determined trend hunters. No longer can anything remain hidden from the many by the few who created it and the friends with whom they first chose to share it. Urban

culture has become pure surface upon which market values, ever higher market values, are inscribed. Punk, poutine, and Picasso: its all the same, an "ecclectic" neighborhood, "edgy" but at the centre of things, and a great place to raise kids too!

"Excuse me?"

"No, don't worry ma'am, those are just photographs of the junkies that used to live around here. That building is now a day care and espresso bar. And the day care is cool with the kids from same sex couples too."

My objection is not to tolerant and diverse neighbourhoods, good coffee, and the kids of all different sorts of families living in the city. My objection is to urban amnesia and cultural expropriation.

Almost every groovified haunt of the urban suburbanites was once *literally* edgy, that is, on the edge. They were neighbourhoods on the perimeter of functioning urban socio-economic life; spaces abandoned by capital and re-appropriated by artists. Creativity, not 'creative capital' flourished in their dark, neglected streets. People with no money but insuppressible ideas created, through their own labour: lofts and studios out of the post-industrial vacuum, artist run spaces and cooperative galleries, book and record stores. They fashioned a neighbourhood from their own desires without asking permission. They kept alive ancient bars in which they mingled with what few workers still eked out an existence at some soon to be shuttered factory; they built new performance spaces and formed the bands that played there, and filled after hours clubs that you found out about through the social media of the time— word of mouth and hand made flyers furtively passed around the bar just before last call.

Slowly, surreptitiously, this mostly unremunerated creative labour breathed life into the dying pockets of North American cities. From the Bowery in New York to King Street West (sorry, Liberty Village) in Toronto, artists sowed the seeds of their own destruction. How could they have known that they were being watched from afar by speculators and real estate agents and urban planners ready to transform their world into a 'lifestyle?' The colonisers were about to be expelled. But it was not the native workers returning to claim what was once their workspace. No, they had long since disappeared, and the wealthy *arrivistes* claiming this *terra nullis* in the name of capital and urban renewal had no nostalgia for dirty industrial labour (unless it could supply a catchy name for a condominium— The Foundry, or .... you get the idea).

## The Immorality of Biography

Originally Published 8 October, 2012

While reading reviews in *The Toronto Star* and *Slate* of a new biography of David Foster Wallace, I was reminded of what I find so objectionable about the genre when it concerns dead artists. It is not just that biography objectifies its subject, but also — and more— that it claims an authority over its subject. The subject, because dead, is no longer capable of speaking in his or her own name, is not present to contest the contentions of the author, is no longer free to agree or disagree with the conclusions the biographer draws from the psychic artefacts excavated in the process of research.

Howsoever serious be the aim of the biographer, any tale worth telling will have to unearth at least some skeletons in some closets, shed at least some light on some darker desires, and give new voice to at least some things said which the speaker almost certainly would wish to remain forgotten. Any artist who had no skeletons, no dark desires, and never said anything they ought not to have said would also lack the inner complexities, tensions, and torments that drive a person to live a life others find worth writing about and audiences find worth reading about. Yet, just because any worthwhile and readable biography must be an archaeology of the contradictions of the artist, it has to— even if unintentionally— exploit the life under consideration. The subject of the work cannot but be a means to the ends of the author- money from book sales, to be sure but, (to my mind) even worse- to speak as a moral authority on the truth of the person.

Is that not what all such biographies claim— to be uniquely capable of speaking the truth of the artist because positioned to consider his or her life as a fixed objective whole, a unity of public and private achievements and failings? And does this claim not reduce the value of the art to the character of the person? And does this reduction not usurp the power of the *oeuvre* to speak its own truth, and the truth of the person in so far as she or he is an artist?

The subject of biography is by defintion reduced to a specimen for psycho-social-aesthetic dissection, first by the author of the book, then by the tut-tutting public always eager to pass moral judgement on those who devoted their lives to creation and not to being swell neighbours. The entire enterprise seems compromised by a consumerist demand for intimacy with someone the ‘reading public’ did not know and cannot know. It is based on a lie: that reading stories about someone is equivalent to knowing that someone. And this lie gives rise to the conceit in the reader that he or she knows that someone better than that someone knew him or herself.

Just as one can only learn to do by doing, one can only know by knowing. If one was not a relation, a friend, a colleague, a lover of the subject of the biography, one is not in a position to pronounce upon that person’s reality and truth. If the author shared some form of intimate relation with his or her subject, do they not betray the intimacy they were accorded during the person’s lifetime by revealing things the subject him or herself chose not to reveal to everyone, indifferently of their relationship to him or her? And if the author did not share any sort of

intimate relationship, can they really assemble the truth they claim to present in the book from the personal traces left behind, no matter how meticulous the research ?

Biography reduces the artistic achievement to a function of family history, psychological trivia, inner turmoil, professional jealousies, and so forth. It may even be true that art, in the making of it, can be reduced to such a constellation of forces. What is not true- but which is assumed by the biographical reduction- is that the aesthetic value of the body of work can be understood by these psychological and sociological criteria. Any art that has any aesthetic value at all must outlive the artist. To the extent that it outlives the artist, it also, by definition, outlives the specific material, social, and psychic forces that were at work in the artist when he or she created it. Does anyone inquire about Sophocles' relationship to his mother? How does Goya's relationship with his father affect the terror [Saturn Devouring his Son](#) continues to evoke?

## Passages From Death to Life

Originally Published 23 October, 2012

Thoughts Walking in Buffalo, From Forest Lawn Cemetery Through The Albright–Knox Gallery.

Where are you taking me Lord? Let me stay in the earth, where it is warm with life.



Heaven is so far off, and empty, and cold.

I do not understand. To what are you so attached? Look, the flesh is mostly empty cavity,

imprisoned, hanging in space.



(Chaim Soutine, Carcass of Beef, Albright-Knox Gallery)

But you are wrong. It is sentience, movement, animality, need, desire, aggression, drive; leashed to a spectre of something higher.



(Francis Bacon, Man Walking Dog, Albright-Knox Gallery)

Its ghostly intelligence gains substance by giving form to the elements,  
filling space with structure and meaning,  
grounded on earth and ore and fibre.



(Robert Rauschenberg, ACE, Albright-Knox Gallery)

But still, your form giving depends on such violence,  
Endless opposition:  
Black-White,  
Movement-Stasis

Health-Sickness

Country-City

Man-Woman

Empty-Full

Silence-Music

Peace-Anger

Labour-Leisure

Master-Servant



(William Kentridge, Other Faces, [still from the film] Albright Knox Gallery)

But all whom this flesh embraces hope that one day

the sharp lines of conflict

become the gracious folds of dance.



(Arshile Gorky, The Liver is the Cock's Comb, Albright-Knox Gallery)

So now that I have given voice to the flesh

perhaps you will leave me to my home,

down here,

amongst the other bodies,

the warmth of whose connections you,

without flesh,

cannot feel.

## Hell full as number of self-righteous Christians turned away from heaven skyrockets

Originally published 9 July 2012

There was massive confusion in the afterlife yesterday as the souls of self-righteous Christians queued up at the gates of hell after having been unexpectedly turned away from heaven. The unanticipated increase in the number of Christians refused entry to heaven has filled hell “absolutely to the rafters” according to a spokesperson for The Devil, forcing hell to refuse any new admissions.

Speculation amongst the souls as to which of them is to blame for the sudden change in policy in heaven was rampant, but reliable sources indicate that the real cause of the trouble was a bumper sticker in Windsor, Ontario. Apparently, the Holy Spirit was suffusing itself through the largely Catholic city when it encountered a bumper sticker that read, “Christians aren’t perfect, only forgiven.” The third moment of the Trinity was concerned about the presumptuousness and arrogance of the implied claim that forgiveness and access to heaven are somehow guaranteed to Christians.

Upon its return to heaven the Holy Spirit reported this discovery to God, who then began a more extensive review of the attitudes of Christians worldwide.

To Its alarm, God found that a sense of entitlement was rife amongst self-professed believers. While the spokesperson denied reports that God had to be restrained from wiping out humanity for a second time, she did confirm that the Omnipotent one “was not amused” and felt it was time “to send a strong message” to Christians. In a terse press release God stated that “being omniscient, I have known for all time the outcome of every sporting event. I do not care if you make the sign of the cross before every at bat. Do not kneel in the endzone after scoring a touchdown. I also take no interest in your personal hopes, relationships, political systems, conflicts, or wars. I do not look like you. I have no body. I do not get up in the morning and shave. ‘Made in my image’ means that you are rational, free, and expected to sort out your own problems. I have already heard your prayers, they will not be answered, as I am by nature impartial.”

Intercepted on his way to his weekly croquet match, Jesus was asked about his Father’s stunning decision to close heaven, at least temporarily. “Well, we just thought it was time to remind people that there is a difference between labeling yourself something and actually living in accordance with the spirit of the Gospels. I wasn’t telling tales when I said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Too many people are interpreting my commandment to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ to mean ‘love yourself, and your neighbour only if she is just like you.’”

Outside the gates of hell, there was anger mixed with disbelief. “This is bullshit,” a strapping young man who identified himself as the soul of C. J. Randall, formerly of Gulfport Mississippi, told our reporter. “I thanked God everyday for bornin’ me in America. I ain’t never jerked off

in my whole life, and now that pussy in the robes over there's tellin me that because I weared one of those "God Hates Fags" t-shirts that I ain't gettin inta heaven."

Just inside the gates of hell a loud argument could be heard between three arch-angels sent to negotiate a re-opening with Satan. "Listen, man, my hoofs are tied," Satan was overheard to say. "I didn't build this goddamn place. I was exiled here, remember? I was assured it had infinite holding capacity, and now it's full. So hey, sue me, I'm only inhuman."

As the day wore on the hopes that the extra souls could be housed temporarily in Purgatory were dashed. The Director of Heavenly Relations for Purgatory reminded everyone that Purgatory, a wholly owned subsidiary of heaven, was not for those condemned to eternal torment, but reserved for souls requiring additional penance before ascending into heaven. "The word from upstairs," the director said, "is that these souls are beyond salvation. Unfortunately, this decision means that they cannot enter Purgatory either."

"While we feel for the souls who have not been allowed access to heaven, we are neither allowed to nor are we equipped for the housing of the damned."

# The (Im)Morality of Enjoyment

Originally Published, 20 March, 2013

The problem is, that despite everything, all the harming, destroying, and killing; despite all the routinization, instrumentalization, exploitation, alienation, poverty, violence, and war, it is possible to love, laugh, look forward to things, and enjoy being alive. How is that *possible*? How can it be *right*?

The possibility of enjoyment amidst a world of suffering requires the means to procure space and time apart from the victims and the social forces that create them.

“That evening, a little tired, you wanted to sit down in front of a new cafe forming the corner of a new boulevard still littered with rubbish but that already displayed proudly its unfinished splendors. The cafe was dazzling … the gas burned with all the ardor of a debut.” (Charles Baudelaire, “The Eyes of the Poor,” *Paris Spleen*, p. 51)

One hides away, as is necessary, because one only has one life, the value of which includes, *demands*, enjoyment of as much of that finite span of time as possible. Happiness is a conscious state. As social self-conscious beings, our conscious states are affected by the object of consciousness. If the other who is the object of one’s consciousness is suffering, so one will suffer through being conscious of the state of the other, to the extent that one pays attention. Hence the need for shelter.

“One should always be drunk. That’s the greatest thing: the only question. Not to feel the horrible burden of Time weighing on your shoulders and bowing you to the earth, you should be drunk without respite.” (Baudelaire, “Get Drunk,” *Paris Spleen*, p. 74).

Intoxication is not a chemical state of the organism. It is a suspension of time-consciousness achieved through compressing the subjective universe to the moment of pure enjoyment. “You’re kidding! It’s that late?” the friends say to each other after an evening of food, drink, and conversation. Drunkenness is the alleviation of the pressure of *having* to do something, to execute some routine, to be present *somewhere else*.

It is this momentary escape from time-pressure to which moralists object. For the moralist, one must always be busy somewhere else, engaged in some world-related project.

But is the moralist not correct? If it is true that enjoyment depends upon closing oneself off from the suffering that one knows is still out there, does it not also involve a refusal to live up to one’s responsibility to *work* to alleviate the causes of suffering? The same social forces that cause suffering for some also create the sheltering space of enjoyment for others. One cannot help but be implicated in the suffering of others because one cannot escape membership in society. One’s delight in the intoxicating co-presence of things and friends thus seems an immoral refusal to acknowledge the same demand for enjoyment of those excluded.

"On the street, directly in front of us, a worthy man of about forty, with tired face and greying beard, was standing holding a small boy by the hand and carrying on his arm another little thing, still too weak to walk ... They were in rags. The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and those six eyes stared fixedly at the new cafe with admiration..." ("The Eyes of the Poor," pp. 51-52)

In the face of the suffering other one's responsibilities become clear. The good fortune one enjoys in having the time to withdraw from caring is a social product; one remains, therefore, a member of society even in the most blissful moments of withdrawal from it. To be human is to be social, to be social is to be bound in responsibility to others, and to be bound in responsibility to others demands that one live, primarily, outside the walls within which the possibility of happiness is actualized.

But that means the constant risk of unhappiness, because of the unavoidable encounter with hungry eyes demanding, legitimately, a seat at our table.

Responsibility: to invite all who need food to share our table?

Happiness: to eat our fill with those whose company we enjoy and who enjoy our company?

How can one be happy if responsibility demands that we allow anyone who asks to sit down?

"Not only was I touched by this family of eyes, but I was even a little ashamed of our glasses and decanters, too big for our thirst. I turned my eyes to look into yours, my love, to read *my* thoughts in them, and as I plunged my eyes into your eyes ... you said: "Those people are insufferable with their great saucer eyes. Can't you tell the proprietor to send them away?" ("The Eyes of the Poor," p.52)

Who can honestly say that they have not felt that they *deserve* a respite from the world, and resent as unjust the penetration of external demands into the space and time they regard as theirs to enjoy?

But why does one think that one deserves to enjoy one's life? Because one works, and because there is no other-world beyond in which loss of present enjoyment will be repaid.

"..if sometime you should happen to awake, on the stairs of a palace, on the green grass of a ditch, in the dreary solitude of your own room, and find that your drunkenness is ebbing or has vanished ... ask the wind and the wave ... the time; and ... all will reply: It is Time to get drunk! If you are not to be the martyred slaves of time, be perpetually drunk! With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you please." ("Get Drunk," p.74)

The question is, therefore, at what task must one work, and for how long, and how hard, to *actually* deserve the space and time free of external demands to which one *feels* entitled?

## On Beauty

Originally Published 1 March, 2013

“Since the fair and honorable is the opposite of the base and ugly, they are two.”

“Of course.”

“And since they are two, each is one.”

“That also.”

“And in respect of … all the ideas or forms, the same statement holds, that in itself each is one, but that by virtue of their communion with actions and bodies and with one another they present themselves … as a multiplicity of aspects … he then that believes in beautiful things, but neither believes in beauty itself nor is able to follow when someone tries to guide him to the knowledge of it … his life is a dream … the mistaking of resemblance for identity.” (Plato, *The Republic*, Book 5, 475e-476c)

This argument is as elegant as you will find in the history of philosophy. Take any pair of opposite concepts. If considered together the concepts are two, then considered separately they must each be one. It is the metaphysical implication and not the logical inference that has proven controversial. The metaphysical implication is that there is a realm of Forms, ideal, self-identical patterns, that function as the necessary ground for the truth of statements such as: “x is beautiful.” For Plato, Being and truth are essentially correlated. True statements correspond to real states of affairs. Truths (as opposed to contextually relative descriptions) are eternally true and must therefore be grounded in realities which are eternally unchanging. If it is *true* that “x and y are beautiful,” i.e., both manifest Beauty, but are, considered as empirical objects, different, then it must be the case that the Beauty they manifest transcends their physical differences. If there were no Form of Beauty it would not be possible to truthfully ascribe the same universal property to manifestly different particular subjects. We can truly judge a poem beautiful, a person beautiful, a song beautiful, and a natural landscape beautiful. Considered as concrete material entities, all these things are distinct from each other. Yet, “Beauty” can truly be predicated of poems, people, songs, and landscapes. Plato concludes, therefore, that “Beauty” is an ideal of perfection towards which nature and human artists strive in their productions, but in itself it does not look or sound anything like the beautiful things in which it is (partially, imperfectly) expressed.

Some may just dismiss Plato’s argument as extravagant, pre-scientific metaphysics, as indeed, in one sense it is. At the same time, there is a real problem from which our aesthetic judgements have not escaped. Dropping the predicate “beauty” from our evaluative lexicon would seem to be analogous to dropping freedom from the lexicon of political critique— in both cases that which would be given up is just the idea that forces us to take an interest in the object of evaluation or criticism. But if we want to a) retain the idea of Beauty, and b) apply it to manifestly different things: people, their bodies, their characters, natural environments, artistic

creations of all sorts, then we seem logically obliged to provide a universal definition that states precisely that which is shared by these materially different entities. Even though it is hard to think of beauty as anything not sensuous, its universal definition could not refer to empirical features of objects, for, as material entities, the subjects of which “Beauty” is predicated are different, requiring different concepts for their description. Thus, “x is beautiful” is not a *description of what x looks or sounds like*. It is a judgment that refers to a quality of the object as a whole, not a description of its parts. “Monuments of art, the stimulants of aesthetic reproduction, are called *beautiful things*, or *physical beauty*, writes Croce. “This combination of words constitutes a verbal paradox, for the beautiful is not a physical fact; it does not belong to things, but to the activity of man, to spiritual energy.” (*Aesthetic*, p.97). Physical facts are *described* (the painting is a composition that employs the colours brown, yellow, orange, and blue to represent a wheat field under an autumn sky); beauty is *judged*. The facts that are described exist independently of the subject that describes them, but beauty requires both subject and object, that which is judged and the judgment. The judgment is consummated the beauty the whole expresses.

It is not that the judgment “x is beautiful” brings x’s beauty into being. The judgment is elicited by its object, but not in the way that a conclusion necessarily follows from true premises. All judgments of taste are equally *necessary* (compelled by the object) and free (may be withheld by a particular subject). Logical inferences are necessary, but not similarly free. It was Kant who first grasped this paradoxical character of judgments of beauty: “The beautiful is that which, apart from a concept, is cognized as object of a *necessary* delight ... everything runs up into the concept of taste as a critical faculty by which an object is estimated in reference to the *free conformity to law of the imagination*.” (*Critique of Judgment*, pp.85-86). Although an experiencing subject is compelled by the feeling aroused in him to judge an object beautiful, and to legitimately assume that all other subjects will concur, there is no rule equivalent to a rule of logical inference which in fact compels such universal agreement. The delight that people experience in beautiful things is necessary (if x is beautiful, it will produce delight) but the necessity does not compel assent in the way that a logical proof does in one who understands its structure.

Kant helps move the discussion of Beauty beyond the idealism of Plato and Croce, by linking its definition to the sensuous experience it produces in us. Yet, a materialist aesthetics does not seem able to easily resolve the paradox lying at the heart of judgements of beauty. Reductive materialism would seem to fall victim to the argument Croce made above against confusing beauty with the empirical nature of physical things. No reductionist materialist could admit that there exists some property of a whole – “Beauty” – which emerges from but is irreducible to a definite arrangement of elements. For the reductionist materialist, only the physical elements exist, making the claim that some formal arrangement of parts *freely compels* the judgement that the whole so arranged is beautiful unscientific, and thus nonsensical. Moving from a reductionist physicalism to a Darwinian naturalism does not help either. An evolutionary account of beauty as appearance which confers reproductive advantage might make some sense when it comes to the beauty of bodies, but has nothing of *aesthetic interest* to say about the beauty of natural environments or artistic creations. Historical materialism is more helpful, in so as it allows us to develop a much more concrete understanding of the relationship between social organization and creative labour, but often the aesthetics associated with historical materialism have tended too

much towards ideological critique of the *content* of art works. Ideological critique of content is of course valuable (as are physics and an understanding of natural selection), but it does not help us understand the paradoxical universality of Beauty. Nor can more specific forms of art-historical or cultural criticism help. These tend to do away with generic categories like the beautiful in favour of nuanced readings of particular works in historical context. Their focus is not the aesthetics of the beautiful, but the socio-cultural environments in which works are created, the cultural codes they reproduce or transgress, and the processes by which they were made. Like ideology critique these de-codings can be immensely valuable guides to deeper understanding of the work as *work*. But just as geology does not grasp the beauty of the rock formation it studies, so too an understanding of the meaning and implications of the work is not the same as recognising its beauty. In fact, artworks— perhaps most artworks— have meaning(s) but are not beautiful just for having meaning. Those works suffer for not being so, for it is only beauty that allows them to live on once the contexts that makes them meaningful have changed.

We seem necessarily thrown back on our own experience, but with the Kantian mystery unresolved: Beauty is not the object of delight, it is the object of *necessary* delight. Marcuse tries to resolve Kant's paradox with what I would call the first steps towards a life-value understanding of materialist philosophy. For Marcuse, good and bad, right and wrong, free and unfree, beautiful and ugly are to be understood in relationship to the complex needs of the human being, understood as an integral bio-social unity. From the life-value standpoint, the same need can be satisfied in multiple ways. The need for protein can be satisfied with nuts and pulses or with meat. So too the need for Beauty. It can be satisfied with poetry or paintings or seascapes. The foodstuffs are different material things allowing different people to satisfy the same need for protein in ways peculiar to them; so too different types of natural formation and created artifact allow different people to experience Beauty in ways that speak most powerfully to them. All experience the same *necessary* delight in relation to those objects they find most stimulating to their individual tastes. “As desired object, the beautiful pertains to the domain of the primary instincts, Eros and Thanatos. The mythos links the adversaries: pleasure and terror. Beauty has the power to check aggression: it forbids and mobilises the aggressor.”(*An Essay on Liberation*, p. 26).

As that which checks and immobilises the aggressor, beauty both depends upon and expands the space in which life-capacities grow beyond their survival function. The experience of Beauty requires time and space— the exquisite muscle-tone of the cheetah is beautiful to the observer, not to the antelope about to succumb to the cat’s claws. Thus the delight that beauty arouses is not the same as relief from immediate physical necessity— “the care burdened man in need has no sense for the finest play,” writes Marx. (*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, Collected Works Volume 3*, p. 302). Beauty is that which is revealed to focused attention, in nature, artifact, and human form and character, when survival is not— at least for the moment— at issue, and we can focus on sensuous appearances as such. In order to experience the beauty in things, nature and people, “our thinking and activity [must be free] from calculating the ways in which things can be useful to us.” (*Materialist Ethics and Life Value*, p. 71). In order to be free of calculations of use, we must be secure enough in the objects of material need that survival from moment to moment is not a matter of immediate concern. Thus, the experience of beauty is a political problem: how to ensure to each the basic life-requirement satisfiers they require so that they can open their own senses to the things of the world as potentially beautiful, and not

just useful. The capacity to recognise beauty is not a problem of individual cultivation, but a problem of social organization: if the care burdened man in (physical) need has no sense for beauty, this is not because he is philistine, but because his life is constricted by poverty to the most narrow utilitarianism. He does not need aesthetic education in the abstract, he needs a society in which his fundamental needs are satisfied so that he can widen his own capacities for aesthetic experience.

Survival demands attention to content (does this food contain the nutrient I need or not?); art criticism focuses on meaning, cultural context, and technique (is the given work derivative or avante-garde, does it reproduce dominant cultural codes or does it contest them?); aesthetic judgement focuses on the sensuous appearance (how does the object make me *feel*?). Beauty begins where the struggle for existence and technical talk ends. It is that which arrests talk and analysis as well as aggression in its demand to be looked at, heard, touched, *felt*. Beauty is the delight in those appearances in which— were we able— we would tarry with forever.

“Ha! A rush of bliss flows suddenly through all my senses! I feel a glow, a holy joy of life which sets my veins and flesh afire.” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, First Part*, p. 29).

# Art.World.Art

Originally Published 4 June, 2013

**Art.**

[Michael Snow: The Viewing of Six New Works](#)

Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

May 30th, 2012

Thinking along with Michael Snow perceiving

Three dimensions as

two.

Rectilinear geometry— abstract mathematical dead form;

yet here,

an organic dynamism;

transformation softens the edges.

Pure luminosity: violet, blue, green, yellow, red,

but come closer,

there is also texture, surface, a painted canvas.

But not.

Just light growing and shrinking to nothingness,

as somewhere Snow's eyes blinked all this into being.

But then not really,

because there somewhere was also a machine,

a constructed interface, mediating organ and its imagined percept,

making me think, when I just wanted to watch.

## **World.**

### [BMW Driven by Design Competition](#)

“Good design is not just about aesthetics; it’s also about a feeling. With this in mind BMW invited three Canadian photographers, in collaboration with the Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival, to shoot the world from within a moving BMW … The world looks a lot more inspiring from inside the artfully designed BMW.”

What did Adorno say?

Neutralization is the price art pays for its autonomy?

Did art not keep its part of the bargain?

For it is still neutralized,

but no longer autonomous.

But should one person starve for another person’s sense of integrity?

Sometimes one has to choose between being human and having good taste,

Brecht wrote.

I don’t think he meant what I am thinking now.

## **Art.**

### [Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller: Dark Pool](#)

Art Gallery of Ontario,

May 31st, 2013

Memory smells like a mold spore: that’s a universal truth

testified to by these:

dirty carpets,

piles of books,

old photos,

sagging furniture,

imaginary electronics,

and the whispering,

the whispering of

damaged children.

## Autumn Day

By Rainer Maria Rilke

Photos, By J. Noonan and J. Watson

Lord, it is time. The summer was so immense.

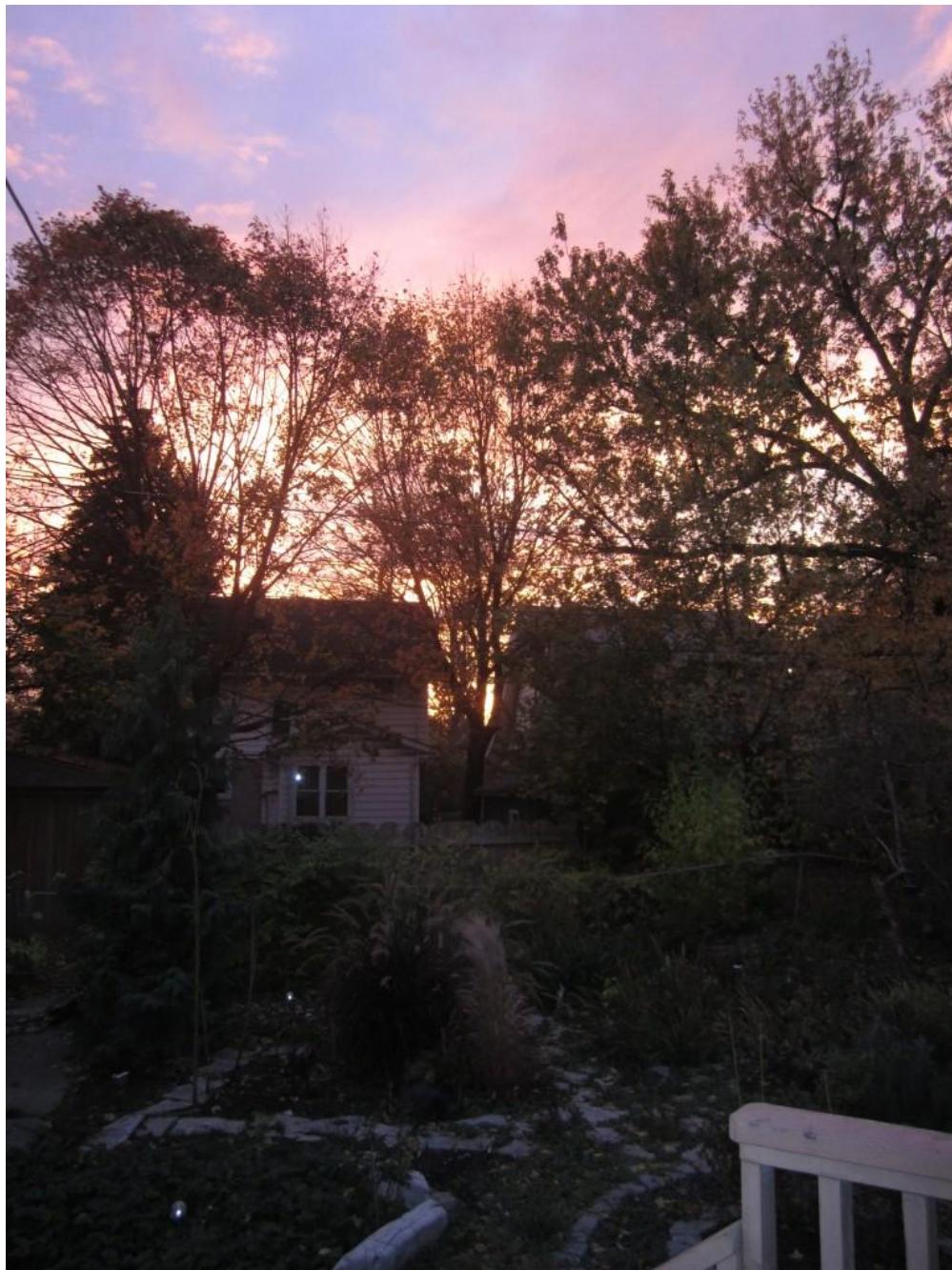


Lay your shadow on the sundials,

and let loose the wind in the fields.



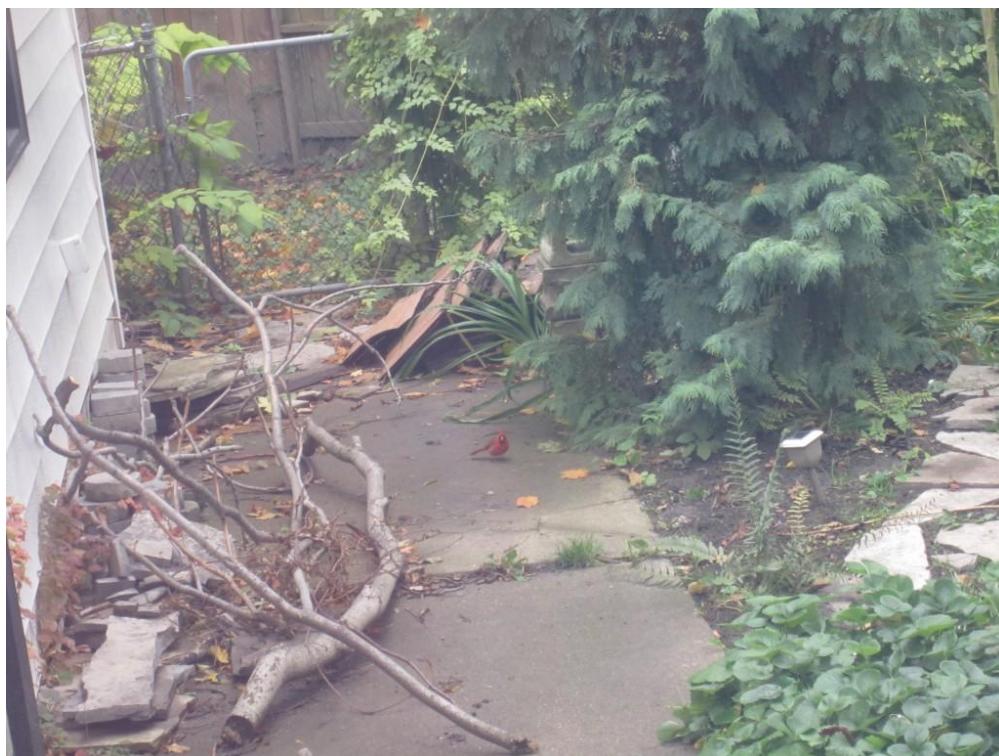
Bid the last fruits to be full,  
give them another two more southerly days,



press them to ripeness, and chase  
the last sweetness into the heavy wine.



Whoever has no house now will not build one anymore.



Whoever is alone now will remain so for a long time,



Will stay up, read, write long letters,



and wander the avenues, up and down



restlessly, while the leaves are blowing.

