THINKINGS 10

Collected Interventions, Evocations, and Readings:
2020-21

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Cove Photo: Giotto, Baroncelli Polyptych, Coronation of the Virgin, c.1334, Santa Croce, Florence.

Interventions Photo: Disused Machinery, Garson Mine #1 (The Old Mine), circa 1970, taken by Joe Brown.

Evocations Photo: Zug Island, Detroit, from Black Oak Conservation Area, Windsor.

Readings Photo: An empty Detroit-Windsor Tunnel, December 7th, 2020.

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Interventions

Neither a Bang Nor Whimper, But the End of Trump?

Originally posted 6 January, 2021

I must begin with an admission of error. Two months ago I did not believe those commentators who were warning that Trump would actively try to subvert a clear electoral defeat. For the last month he has been doing just that, peddling nonsense and feeding the addled has-been Rudy Giuliani to the legal wolves who swatted back every increasingly deranged law suit.

So I was wrong. But I did not know how wrong until this afternoon, when hundreds of Trump supporters charged into the Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of the Electoral College votes. I do not think it was a coup attempt, as the former Chief of Police of Washington worried, or an "insurrection" as an early headline on CNN asserted.

But it was a determined charge into the very heart of the American government which certainly would have ended up a "mass casualty event" had it been Black Lives Matter or Antifa doing the storming.

But what were we looking at? I agree with Van Jones, who said on air earlier today that we do not know whether we are looking at the end of the Trump era or its metastasis into a new and more violent but dispersed form.

Certainly the armed far right will not disappear: it has been a mainstay of American political life since the Ku Klux Klan was formed in the wake of the South's defeat in the Civil War. But will they continue to pledge support to the person of Trump? Or will they, like the Tea Party (whose former supporters must certainly fill the ranks of ever-Trumpers), detach policy from person and re-constitute their movement around a new leadership once it becomes apparent that nothing is going to keep Trump in the White House.

Trump's own future seems more clear. There is no way that I can see that he can repair the rift his incitement today will create with the vast majority of Congressional Republicans and the Party Establishment. Their legitimacy depends on the legitimacy of the institutions of government. Only the most ideologically brain dead will maintain fealty to Trump. How they will reposition themselves to take their distance from Trump while not alienating his supporters remains to be seen. If it were any other country one could imagine a split such as happened in Canada in the 1990's when, in the wake of the collapse of the Progressive Conservative vote after the Mulroney era, the right split into two parties: a hard-right Western Canada based Reform Party and a Toronto, Montreal, and Halifax based "red" Tory rump. The unique organization of American politics makes it extremely difficult for new parties to enter, but at the very least the hard right and more genteel Congressional wings of the party seem headed for a period of more intense conflict.

That might ultimately play to the Democrats long term advantage. As yesterday's unlikely twin win in the two Georgia Senate run off elections proved, the demographics of American politics are becoming younger and urban. The election map of the state was shocking: seas of red rural counties surrounding islands of blue. But those islands contain the majority of the population: well-educated, Black and ethnically diverse, tolerant, future-oriented, and creative.

But the Democrats will face their own challenges. The extraordinary scenes from Capitol Hill will launch a thousand boats with "reconciliation" emblazoned on their sails. Biden's centrist tendencies and predictable business, military, and Empire friendly Cabinet picks will grate on the progressive nerves of the left of the party who will feel: a) emboldened by the Georgia victory, b) threatened by right wing lunatics on the street, and c) suffocated by the Democratic Party establishment. Again, a split is unlikely, but certainly we are in for a period of heightened ideological conflict within the Democrats as well.

And the American ruling class? They rode out this summer's wave of anti-racist struggle by mouthing platitudes, signing diversity pledges, and otherwise carrying on as usual. Their workers might be dying of Covid-19 but they are getting by just fine, hunkering down on a cliff sides in Malibu or wherever their private jest might take them. Their hold over the American and global economy (i.e., the wealth and resources that well depend upon) has not been shaken in the least.

But the social and economic crisis is not going to end once the epidemiological emergency subsides. It will get worse as benefits are withdrawn, spending reigned in, and drastic cuts demanded (i.e.– the same policies that created the social conditions for the devastation that Covid-19 has caused). Then the real political fight for the future of America will begin under the shadow of the bodies the pandemic has killed. I fear that today's storming of the American Bastille will look comical in light of the conflicts on the not too distant horizon.

Two Souls of America

Originally posted 4 November, 2020

"It's coming to America first, the cradle of the best and the worst."

Leonard Cohen, "Democracy."

America is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and slave ships and the Trail of Tears. It is Radical Reconstruction and it is Jim Crow. It is the Seneca Falls Conference and violent anti-abortionists. It is The Black Panther Party and the Ku Klux Klan. It is Father Coughlin and Martin Luther King. It is Students for a Democratic Society and Professor Watch List.

America is Dancing With the Stars and Martha Graham, John Bon Jovi and John Cage, Norman Rockwell and Robert Motherwell, the Mall of America and the Chrysler Building.

It is a contradiction, like every society, but one whose conflicts cannot be contained within its borders. And those contradictions have to be coming to a head today.

Social contradictions make society dynamic, pose problems, and create space for change. But they also set different groups in mutually destructive opposition.

The 2020 election remains undecided as I write this morning, but whomever is ultimately declared the winner, the election served only to re-emphasize the absolute political divide carving America in two.

Why should anyone committed to radical change lament that divide? After all, change requires political clarity. While the election result is unclear, the value choices that confronted America were obvious. On the one hand, there was fear mongering, red-baiting, and xenophobia, and on the other side, the rhetoric of decency, openness and reason. Forget policy for the moment, and consider the campaign that Trump ran, the rhetoric he deployed, in the context of the state of the country, and then think: he received (as of 7:48 EST Nov. 4th), 66 million votes. Biden has received 69 million votes.

Think about the real political implications of these numbers. A majority of Americans voted against Trump's maliciousness, but *66 million* voted for it. Societies that are this fundamentally split are not headed towards a revolution of the "immense majority" against an exploitative ruling class, they are heading for some sort of destructive and unresolvable (in the medium term at least) civil conflict. This morning the United States (to my mind, at least) resembles the Ukraine in 2014 more than it does Russia in 1917: two political camps that cannot be reconciled with neither one capable of decisive victory.

If a rampaging pandemic, nationwide struggles against racism, a teetering economy, complete loss of international reputation, and burgeoning conflicts with China and Russia are not enough for 66 million Americans to decide not to vote for Trump, what would suffice? Moralistic hectoring is clearly not going to cut it if the lessons of material reality are so blithely ignored. Anyone who thinks that a Biden victory under these conditions is going to give impetus to the Left inside and out of the Democratic Party is dreaming. It will consolidate the hold of the conservative wing of the Democrats who will urge the need for caution, to appease the 66 million Trump voters populating the middle of the country. Anyone who thinks they see "winning conditions" for social democracy in a country so completely divided is living in a fantasy land.

In 1966 Hal Draper published one of the best essays in the history of American Marxism. His "Two Souls of Socialism" contrasted the tradition of Socialism from Above (technocratic social democracy and Stalinism) with Socialism from Below (international workers' struggles for their own emancipation). His country has two souls too: slavery, Manifest Destiny, and the almighty dollar on the one hand, and a vast array of popular social struggles for freedom and equality on the other.

Neither Republicans nor Democrats are mechanical expressions of either side, and the individual political motivations of 120 million people cannot be simply inferred from the object of their vote. Political motivations are not always internally coherent or rationally articulated. At the same time, Trump has openly and avowedly courted white supremacists, demonized immigrants, red-baited the Democrats, bungled the pandemic response, *and received 12 million more votes than he received in 2016*. That is 66 million reasons to worry that those voters are locked into a commitment to their side come what may in social reality. Not everyone who voted for Trump is a white supremacist or racist, but all of them cared more about maintaining their commitment to their side than breaking with it for the sake of an alternative which clearly and consistently rejected xenophobia, racism, and unbridled capitalist exploitation of the earth and labour.

Moral and political argument is not going to do what social reality has failed to accomplish: wake his supporters up to the fact that Trump has America on the wrong path. Whomever ultimately wins the White House is going to inherit a nation that cannot continue on its present path but has no clear way of changing. Hope that the intensification of existing divisions will produce a clear cut victory for progressive forces seem hopelessly naive.

The Deflationary Theory of Trump

Originally posted 20 November 2020

I never worked so hard in a graduate school class as I did in Barry Adam's class on 20th Century Analytic Philosophy. Amongst the many problems that I sincerely tries to understand, (while not really caring about the problem), was Quine's version of the so-called "deflationary theory of truth" To this day I still do not really have a firm grasp on the stakes of Tarski's famous example from which Quine developed his argument: "Snow is white is true iff snow is white." Something to do with truth not involving a comparison between natural language and a metalanguage– but has anyone other than a logician thought that it did?

I think for most people– and for most philosophers– truth is a thing of the world– something we have to prove, as Marx said. (Pragmatists developed that insight). But that might also have been the point. As I said, I never really understood what was going on. It could well be the case that Quine was arguing– but then he should have just said so– that truth is just the way of the world, what happens, and not a correspondence between a conventional sign system and the world.

If that is what he meant then the practical implication is to just pay attention to the world: if it is snowing, put yer fucking boots on. For the past four years Trump has been functioning as a political metalanguage and now that he is going, Americans will have to shovel the accumulated snow. For four years critics of Trump have been chanting that "things are wrong because Trump is President." Now they are going to have to face facts: things are wrong because things are wrong.

What is wrong and why? Readers of the blog will not be surprised by my answer. The depth problem– the one that the liberal left is consistently silent about– is that a small minority class owns and controls the natural resources that everyone needs to survive. Because they control that which everyone needs to survive, they force the rest of us to sell our ability to labour in exchange for a wage. Labour is exploited to produce social wealth, most of which is appropriated by the class whose ownership and control over natural resources grounds their social power.

Isn't this just the picture that Marx paints? Yes, it is, but when we paint the problems of the world in idelogical terms of "capitalism" versus "socialism" we get stuck immediately in an absolute opposition between political camps. Instead of arguing with opponents we shout at them. The other side does not listen but shouts back before both sides get tired and revert to preaching to the converted.

Getting underneath the political labels will probably not solve that problem. However, it does remove one rhetorical barrier to argument. If we can stop thinking in simplistic terms: capitalism=bad and socialism=good, then we can confront one another on the terrain that really matters: life-requirements and how best to distribute them.

At the most basic level that is all any society is: a way of producing and distributing what we need. Since the late neolithic period, most human societies have been structurally unequal: some sort of working class has been forced to produce for the luxury consumption of some sort of ruling class. Earlier hunter-gatherer societies avoided this structural inequality, as did some, but not all, later indigenous societies. But equal or unequal, every society must be a form of cooperative labour of some sort. If it were not, there would be no one alive to criticise or promote change.

Social relationships and institutions are of course much more complex than this picture, but sketchting it in simple terms emphasizes the real stakes of of political struggle. Does the struggle contribute to solving the most important structural problem any group can face: lack of control over its means of life and life-development?

Setting fire to franchise outlets and macho posturing in front of the cops do not contribute to that struggle. The money is not in the Starbucks but circulating around the world in electronic signals that decide the fate of millions. Street spectacles do not worry the ruling class, because they are no where near the action, and their wealth is not hemmed in by makeshift barricades. They laugh at the drama, and then make money off of it selling product.

Shouting slogans at people having a beer will certainly not convince them to join the cause if they are not already part of the movement. Spray painting hammer and sickles on politician's garages is childish anachronism. Chanting for ICE agents to come out and fight is politically retrograde adolescent bravado. Antifa should be happy that the armed forces of the state do not come out and fight with the full force they could bring to bear: what exactly would a sling shot or fire cracker do against an Apache helicopter? a fully armed platoon of Marines? A B-52?

While the media (mostly the right-wing media) wastes time hyperventilating about small groups of naive Antifa agitators (it would not surprise me if their ranks were thoroughly infiltrated by the cops they want to abolish) much more important debates about serious institutional changes are underway in the United States. These debates will not get anywhere without patient, organized mass mobilisation and political *argument.* Some of these debates are about public institutions that have long been parts of countries with effective social democratic parties (public health care, for example). Some are specific to the history of the United States (the debate around reparations for slavery). Along with ambitious plans like the Green New Deal, discussions about a renewed commitment to progressive taxation, and perhaps even Guaranteed Basic Income projects, these debates move public scrutiny beneath the level of slogans and stories to what really counts: an understanding of who controls what and why.

Progressive taxation, the Green New Deal, reparations, public health care, and GBIs can be institutionalised in ways that do not fundamentally transform the structure of ownership and control over life-resources. They can all be sold as in effect ways to bolster consumer demand by putting more money in the pockets of ordinary Americans. If the ruling class is assured that it will get its money back in the end, they can be convinced to go along with the reforms (as they were, despite vociferous opposition, in the 1930's by the original New Deal). In Canada and the United Kingdom, social democratic parties came up with the ideas for programs like public health insurance, but it was generally ruling class parties that implemented them.

The ruling class is good at playing the long game, and so must the Left be. It has to think of public institutions not in terms of income support that bolsters consumer demand for the sake of revitalising capitalism, but as first steps towards socialising ownership and control over the means of life. Take the Green New Deal. If the US federal government is going to invest massively in new energy infrastructure, it should own and control it as a national public utility. Otherwise, energy production will still be in the hands of the Enron's of the world. Not even Big Oil is strong enough to accelerate the geological forces that produce oil. Eventually, it will run out, and they know it. Once that point approaches they will only be too happy to become proponents of solar energy. The point is: now is the time to start building public options that actually change the foundations of society:

Where there is collective control over life-resources, the material conditions of social and individual freedom are secure. Where the material conditions of social and individual freedom are secure, citizens can decide how particular problems about resource use can be solved through deliberative commitment to the best solution (and not party or faction interest). The best solution is the one that most comprehensively satisfies the needs in question. When collective distribution problems are solved through deliberative commitment to the most comprehensively need-satisfying solution, individuals are freed to live the lives the want to live.

In exchange for their contribution to the common wealth, individuals will appropriate the goods they require to become the persons they want to be. In order to build the sort of movement it will take to build this new society all traces of the obnoxious moralism and unbearable self-righteousness that sullies the public pronouncements of too much of the contemporary Left must be rejected. The struggle for a just society is not a moral crusade. Being part of that struggle does not entitle anyone to preach to everyone else what they should find funny, or beautiful, or worth doing. As Nina Simone sang in "Mississippi Goddamn: "You don't have to live next to me, just give me my equality."

The great achievement of modernity is to free individual minds and bodies from subservience to tradition, fixed roles, and suffocating conformity to group opinion. The point of struggling to free resources from ruling class control is to free ourselves from having to listen to boring prigs who think they know how everyone else should live. It is most certainly not to subject ourselves to left wing versions of these intolerable simpletons. In other words, the struggle for a need-satisfying society is a struggle to secure the material conditions that everyone requires to become the persons that they want to become. Concretely, that means being able to associate with those with whom we choose to associate, to love whomever we want to love, but also to listen to the music we want to listen to, to laugh at the jokes we want to laugh at, to read the books we want to read, and let others do the same. It means thinking for ourselves, arguing in favour of the positions that we think best answer the demands of the given moment, listening to others who disagree, and striving together to reconcile those differences rationally and calmly.

Bombs for Biden

Originally posted 26 May, 2021

If anyone were naive enough to expect that American policy towards the Palestinians would change as a result of the election of Biden, the events of the past two weeks should have disabused them of that hope. The last major military flare up between Hamas and Israel occurred under Obama's watch, in 2014, and he watched the Israeli army and air force level much of Gaza City and kill over 2000 residents. Biden cannot match Obama's soaring rhetoric, but his practical commitment to shield Israel from its responsibilities under international law is on par thus far.

I thought all the evil in the world was Trump's fault.

I hesitate to argue that this latest conflict was invented by Israel precisely to gauge the ability of Biden to control the left of the Democratic Party, but one should never underestimate the calculating cynicism of the ruling class in general, and Benjamin Netanyahu, Likud, and the far right ultra nationalists who support him in particular. I do not know if Netanyahu is a cat lover (I hope not), but it would be understandable if he were: he has lived at least 9 political lives by now. While he yet might be undone by domestic corruption scandals, he will certainly not be forced from the stage by anyone in the Biden administration. You have to feel pretty good when the American president calls you by your nickname as you rain bombs on a civilian population which lacks all means of air defence.

The cynic in me suspects that Netanyahu might have been testing Biden because the conflict was clearly deliberately provoked by Israel. As if threatening to expel more families from East Jerusalem was not provocation enough, attacking worshipers in the Al Aqsa mosque during Ramadan was certain to cause mass resistance. Debates about the "moral equivalence" of different groups use of political violence are tiresome and besides the point: groups use violence as tactic or when they have to, morality has nothing to do with it. Still, for those who want to condemn Israel and Hamas equally, ask yourself: what exactly would you do if you were sitting at home having a beer, watching the hockey game, and a squad of armed soldiers kicked down your door, threw you out of your house, and installed a new family on the couch where you were sitting?

Hamas may be militarily stupid for provoking armed Israeli response, but what real, concrete alternative do they have? As I noted in my post on the 2014 conflict, Palestinians have tried armed conflict and they have tried peaceful civil disobedience. Both are met with armed violence by the Israeli state. No human being has to tolerate decades long calculated, deliberated violations of their dignity. Sometimes one has to assert their humanity by fighting back, even if it means certain military defeat.

At the same time, its typical braggadocio notwithstanding, it is abundantly clear that Hamas will never win a military victory over Israel. Its response is the response of people who insist on the right to fight for their freedom, but however legitimate the source of their rockets, they will only even succeed in providing an excuse for the much more lethal outbursts of the Israeli army. From

the Israeli perspective Hamas is not a threat, but an escape valve, an excuse that can be trotted out on occasions which require distraction from domestic issues and the political need to build national unity. There is no military reason for Israel to not eliminate Hamas completely. But there is a political reason: it is useful to maintain a determined but weak enemy that can be attacked whenever circumstances dictate.

While the tactic of maintaining enemies to create national unity is an old one, something new did emerge during this round of conflict that may prove beneficial over the long term, even if the short term dangers it threatens are severe. Palestinians in the West bank and Gaza were joined in their struggles *en masse* by the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel. Their mobilization on the streets (as opposed to their political parties) clearly spooked the Israeli right. There were ugly, ugly scenes of riots and at least two incidents of lynchings. The most horrific political crimes in human history occur when opposed, ethnically identified groups square off over contested territory. Hence the danger of on-going inter-ethnic violence within Israel, a danger which puts the Arab citizens more at risk than Jewish Israelis.

There is also hope in the rising of the Arab-Palestinian citizens. What the people of the West bank and Gaza desperately require are effective allies. The BDS movement has been an important international mobilzing tool and proof positive that Palestinians would prefer a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But it has shown no signs of achieving anything more than rhetorical victories. While students and a relative handful of supporters in Europe and America participate in boycotts, states around the world are lining up to do business with Israel. Foreign Direct Investment in Israel increased by a factor of 3 between 2018 and 2020. There is no indication that the world's leading countries will abandon Israel they way they abandoned South Africa, helping to end the Apartheid era there. The historical ties cemented between Israel and the United States during the Cold War, when Israel ensured that Soviet-backed secular Arab nationalism would not impede the flow of oil, are too strong. The so-called Squad represents the hopeful emergence of a new left-wing in the Democratic Party, and they made the right arguments, but they were ignored by Biden and the military leadership and do not have anywhere near sufficient forces to bring about a change of policy. A majority of Americans now disapprove of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians, but Americans are not going to rise up in politically significant numbers to demand a Palestinian state. The Arab countries talk loud but cut deals with Israel. The UN remains as it has always been: useless to the Palestinian struggle for statehood.

The Palestinian people are thus on their own. A consciously constructed series of political alliances between Palestinians in Gaza, the occupied territories, Arab-Palestinian citizens in Israel, and Jewish allies (such as the human rights organization B'Tselem, which recently declared that Israel policy towards Palestinians is apartheid, full stop), is perhaps the best hope to launch a new phase of the struggle for statehood. That said, the challenges in the way of success are daunting. Everyday more settlers arrive, more outposts established, more Palestinian land lost. How a successful Palestinian state can be created in the West bank as it is currently composed is beyond me. How a one state secular solution could be made acceptable to a majority of Jewish Israelis or forced upon them is even more of a mystery to me. The land awaits the emergence of new creative intelligence amongst the young activists carrying on the now nearly 80 year fight for statehood and human dignity.

Oscillate Wildly

Originally Posted 21 September, 2020

Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner: Covid-Style

As I was finishing up my morning bike ride along the Detroit River a few days ago a small group of students from Assumption High School– it must have been a gym class– came down the path. It brought back bad-good memories for me: Bad: being forced to jog. Good: jogging just far enough up the hill to get out of sight of the gym teacher and stop for a cigarette.

Our class would stretch out along the streets near the school. The long lean strides of the healthy students soon carried them out of sight of us smoking, artsy fartsy stragglers. There did not seem to be any smokers amongst the six students in the class (kids these days!) and their teacher was keeping a close eye. They were not wearing masks and she had to remind them to "keep their social distance." But these were teenagers: running on gregarious energy, they accordioned in and out– drawing close to giggle and gossip, stretching apart under the pressure of the teacher's admonishment, drawing back together.

This push and pull of bodies is an appropriate metaphor for the situation in which we find ourselves. As Covid cases rise again, some states have already opted for a second lockdown. Australia is the worst case scenario, imposing and enforcing new restrictions with such authoritarian glee that one understands how libertarians are born. One does not have to be Robert Nozick to think that [arresting pregnant women](#) for posting information about an anti-lockdown rally on Facebook is totalitarian over-reach.

In Ontario, the propensity of young people to socialise in large number is being demonized as the cause of the resurgence of cases. Part of me is heartened by their youthful commitment to gather to dance, drink, and make new friends: youth is exploration, pushing of boundaries, and insouscient disdain for the future. They above all need something to enjoy. Their lives are being doubly weighed down by the crisis. Socially, they are being asked to not do what they above all most need to do: meet new people and forge new connections. Economically, they are paying now (as employment opportunities vanish) and in the future (the capitalist solution to the crisis will take the road of more automation and more precarity, reducing opportunities for people at the beginning of their work lives.) If the future is bleak, they might as well make the best of the present.

Nevertheless, hedonistic resistance poses difficult problems that lead to the heart of perennial issues in political philosophy. I want to discuss two interlinked issues here. The first concerns how we understand the relationship between democracy as a form of collective choice and socially irrational outcomes. The second concerns how we understand the value of democracy.

The liberal and libertarian conception sees democracy as instrumentally valuable: it protects the freedom of individuals to choose their own lives. The social (and socialist) conception of democracy sees it as valuable because it gives political expression to deeper social bonds of caring and mutual concern. I am going to argue that the problem of collectively irrational choice is a function of the liberal interpretation of democracy, but can potentially be solved by the social and socialist conception. Avoiding perpetual oscillation between lockdown and relaxation will require strengthening democracy in the second sense, not more draconian and authoritarian regulation and restriction.

Elitist critics of democracy from Plato on have argued that the problem with democracy is that cannot prevent collectively irrational outcomes without violating its democratic principles. Their criticisms assume that the point of the people ruling themselves is to remove all constraints on their individual goals and activities. However, if the only motivation for collective action is to unshackle individual choice, democracy will– if these critics are correct– undermine itself. The sum of rational individual choices can be collectively irrational and socially destructive.

The pandemic offers a vivid illustration of the argument. If there are no constraints on gathering, individuals will choose to gather, inadvertently but necessarily creating the conditions for the spread of the virus. If the number of cases spike, the likelihood of a new lockdown rises, which threatens people's ability to do what they are choosing to do: gather and party. Individually rational decisions generate collective outcomes that undermine the aims of the individuals whose choices generate the problem.

The liberal and libertarian democratic solution is to deny that there is a *political* problem. Democracy means rule of the people, rule of the people means eliminating constraints on individual choice. Free individuals are free to choose and are only responsible for themselves. If their choices make them sick, so be it. If everyone chooses to gather and the virus spreads, so be it. Nothing in the principle of rule of the people rules out collectively irrational outcomes. If people are willing to pay the price of their choices, there is no problem. From this perspective, the threat to democracy is paternalistic and authoritarian constraints on choice. Public health emergencies are not politically relevant unless people choose to make them relevant. On their own, they cannot justify coercive measures: only individual choices are legitimate. Thus, if individuals choose to gather without taking precautions, there is no democratic solution other than to let them gather.

This interpretation of the democratic principle does not mandate that people heed good advice, or do what they are told by experts, or keep themselves safe at all costs.

We can see why elitist critics sound the alarm. Not only are collectively irrational decisions not ruled out by this interpretation, they seem guaranteed. Collective irrationality is simply a scale effect of uncoordinated individual choice. If one person chooses to drive on a freeway, they can sail to their destination unimpeded. But if 300 000 people all choose at the same time to drive to their destination because it is individually faster for them to do so, they cause a traffic jam and undermine their goal. The outcome is unintended, but follows necessarily. The elitist solution is to abandon democracy for some sort of aristocratic governance. In the past, aristocracy would have taken the form of rule by a hereditary, landed elite. Today it would take the form of rule by

scientific experts. The principle, nonetheless, is the same: the best (warriors, thinkers, …) should rule.

How can people committed to democracy save democracy from this conservative critique which, one must admit, has a point? It is one of the "troubles of democracy" that I explored in my recent book of the same name. If *democracies* allow people to make choices which generate traffic jams, or pollution, or destroy habitats, or allow the spread of a virus for which there is no immunity, then *democracy* is perhaps not the superior political form its supporters trumpet it as being. But the alternative has been tried in history and failed: the elites are never as smart as they think they are. Collective problems are so complex that they cannot be solved by small groups of even the sharpest minds. Technical problems can be solved by technical experts, but the coordination of individual choices by public policy and law is not a technical problem. As young people are showing, social action is motivated by needs and feelings that obey their own rationality and which resists constraints which appear externally imposed. That is why, historically, aristocracies ultimately face popular resistance and why young people are finding ways to gather despite the clucking of their elders.

The problem is: the arguments against unregulated gatherings are not just the envious admonishments of old people who don't care about having fun. Their really are irrational outcomes to these individual choices. Large swaths of the Southern United Sates exemplify what happens when this understanding of democracy is put into practice. While Trump is blamed for exerting some Svengali-like power over anyone who chooses to ignore mask protocols, the truth is rather that these choices are fully in keeping with the traditional American understanding of the connection between democracy and protection of personal liberty.

According to this view, the attempt to justify a public policy in the name of "science" does not make it less undemocratic. If there is a choice between democracy and science, democracy has to win out. If people choose to ignore public health precautions, that is their right. People voted with their feet and their mouths to circulate freely and breath deeply, unencumbered by masks. If democracy means rule of the people, and the majority of the people choose to disregard expert advice, that choice might be– in this case, is– collectively irrational, but it is not undemocratic.

But is that true? If we want to both reject the conservative-aristocratic critique of democracy and solve the problem of collectively irrational outcomes, we need a different understanding of democracy. I argue at length in the book that there is another democracy possible. In this view, the aim of democracy is still to maximise the space for individual self-realization, but I start from the assumption that, as Marx put it, "the individual is the social being." if that is true, then our individual life-horizons are bound up with the form of society within which we live. We cannot advance as individuals if our collective life undermines our health, our intelligence, or our creative abilities. Just as we must watch what we eat as individuals if we are to be healthy, so too, as a collective, we must pay attention to the outcomes of uncoordinated action.

Eating is pleasurable, but if we gorge ourselves at every meal, we will reduce our life-expectancy and thus also the amount of pleasure that we derive from eating. We do not need to become ascetics in response to the problem of over-eating, we need to rationally govern our choices, so that we can distribute the sensuous pleasures of eating over a longer life. Likewise, as a society,

we do not need to turn to paternalistic elites to impose rules on us: democracies enable us to govern our collective life according to materially rational and *freely chosen* rules.

The social or socialist democratic solution to the problem of collectively irrational choice is to re-interpret the conditions of individual self-realization. if we treat individuals as separate units and their interests as discrete and whole apart from all social relationship,s we open the door to the problem of collectively rational choice discussed above. If, on the contrary, we see individuals (as they really are) dependent and interdependent members of natural and social networks, then it follows that their quality of their individual lives will depend on the character of the networks. The goal of democracy is to manage the networks according to life-grounded standards. If we allow our individual choices to destroy the conditions of life, then we are certainly not self-*governing,* but self-*destroying.*

Democratic government is a practice of collective self-determination, but self-determination is a form of self-limitation. The connection between self-determination and self-limitation will be anathema to libertarians, and I understand their concern. We live in societies, but we are individuals with minds and goals of our own. The whole point of modern revolutions was to free individuals from arbitrary power. If democracy is opposed to individual freedom, it is just another tyranny (of the majority– de Tocqueville) and ought to be rejected as such.

I agree that arbitrary power ought to be resisted, but democratic power is the opposite of arbitrary power. Let us set aside the profound limitations of democratic power in actually existing democracies and consider an ideal-typical case. A community is confronted with a threat to its existence. All community members gather to decide on a collectively binding response according to agreed upon rules of procedure. They discuss fully and freely, hear all available evidence on different courses of action. A community that really is self-governing (as opposed to controlled by private interests or driven to the abyss by reified social forces) would make the decision that gives the community as a whole the best chance to survive.

Self-determination and self-determination are opposed only if we think of people as disembodied choice machines. If we start from the position that human beings are essentially social, then there is no contradiction between limiting one's own choices out of care and concern for others and the future. Self-limitation then sheds the appearance of requiring self-sacrifice and instead reveals its truth as the way in which dependent and inter-dependent bio-social beings realize themselves. The present situation thus calls for the cultivation of public intelligence and materially rational choices, not the re-introduction of externally imposed lockdowns.

Lockdown Anti-Logic

Originally posted 12 December, 2020

About one year before this rainy December Saturday news reached the world from China that a novel respiratory syndrome had emerged. In response, Chinese authorities locked down Wuhan. I remember very clearly an American epidemiologist denouncing the Chinese response as totalitarian and not the way to deal with (what was then a mere) epidemic. As it began to spread around the world the WHO worried that it might infect 100 000 people.

100 000 people!

I am not a Covid-skeptic. I am pro-mask, pro-social distancing, and pro-self-restraint with regard to the number of social contacts. I am not a skeptic about science. I accept the well-founded conclusions of natural scientific research. But science is not the word of God. It is not a tendentious social construction, but it is historical and fallibilistic. There are other ways of knowing and philosophy– in the broad and not the academic sense– has to have the final word on how we live.

I have also been perpetually depressed and periodically enraged by the impact of the pandemic. And now, one year on, as my city is poised to enter a second lockdown, I cannot shut my mouth and shut my door to the world of other human beings as I am being commanded to do. We are not only in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic, we are in the midst of a catastrophic failure of public policy to learn anything from the first wave. The result is a failure to invest where investment was needed to keep the most vulnerable safe, ensure that all the sick are treated, while still allowing (self-disciplined and rationally governed) social interaction in public and private space. Instead we get reactive, incoherent, and scatter-shot attempts to control the spread of the disease all washed down with paternalistic pleading to "do the right thing."

I have just returned from Canadian Tire. Come Monday, it will be allowed to stay open. I will be able to go the the liquor store (thanks be to God), but if I bump into a friend of mine, it will be illegal to invite them back to my place for a drink. 2000 workers per shift can stand on the assembly line at the Chrysler plant, but four of them will not be able to go across the road for a beer after their shift.

How can people tolerate this inconsistency and incoherence?

Two weeks ago I had to go to Toronto to attend to some family business. Toronto, recall is supposed to be locked down too. It took me two hours to drive from Richmond and Spadina downtown to my brother's house at Elgin Mills and Bayview in Richmond Hill because the traffic was bumber to bumper on the DVP– just as it would be without a lockdown.

East and Westbound in Toronto on Dec 7th, 2020

Toronto is not locked down, and nor will Windsor-Essex be locked down. Major corporations are allowed to stay open and people forced to go to work. Small businesses– the one's that lend variety to streetscapes and provide a venue for local goods and offer spaces for people to socialise will be forced to shut. For many, it will be their death knell. The urban landscape that will emerge from all this shit will be even more desertified and dominated by retail chains and franchises. Thank Christ I am not paying 3000 dollars in rent to live in a closed major city.

What is being locked down, in reality, are not cities, but people's social lives. The public health agenda, which continually drapes itself in the purple robes of SCIENCE, has from the beginning ignored the reality of people's social need to be with one another. Apparently there are no psychiatrists or psychologists in the employ of public health: one hears next to nothing about the mental and emotional toll of isolation. Indeed, most of what one hears from public health officials is unscientific moralistic drivel about "doing our part" and "stopping the spread" and that we are "all in this together.

Science of any useful form must grasp systematically and integrate coherently all sides of a phenomenon and justify itself with evidence. What does the evidence suggest?

To my eyes, it suggest a massive failure on all levels of public policy. We were similarly admonished in March to self-isolate, which people did for 6 nearly intolerable weeks. Then we were told that SCIENCE had discovered means to re-open safely. So society "re-opened safely." Then we heard criticisms from some epidemiological circles that global lockdowns do not work, that we need to contact trace and isolate cases with surgical precision. In Windsor, the public health unit has admitted that it lacks the resources to do contact tracing. Had adequate investments been made, the second wave might not have been averted, but the response could have been far more effective.

And now I am being told that I have to go into a second fucking lockdown!

This second wave is real, but it was predicted with shocking accuracy in the summer, *and nothing was done to prepare!* Everything that we supposedly had learned about how to deal with the virus was out the window and lockdowns from Melbourne to Mississauga were re-imposed.

Amazingly, the lockdowns are being justified once again on the grounds that if cities do not lockdown, the health care system will be overwhelmed. I do not dispute this claim. But why was nothing done to increase capacity when this second wave was predicted in the summer? Why does a leading industrialized country with a thriving pharmaceutical industry not have the capacity to manufacture vaccines? Why are hundreds of millions of dollars going to Air Canada to not fly to the East Coast and not refund tickets while elder care facilities are still starved for funds? Disgracefully, these facilities are still the epicentre of outbreaks, including one in Windsor that has seen 85 patients and staff infected at one facility.]

There are staggering failures of public policy afoot, but instead of dealing with them, we have to listen to more bleating admonitions to stay at home and cancel Christmas dinner with your extended family. Perhaps people should wheel their turkeys over to Canadian Tire and have dinner while strolling the aisles. Surely there is some implement on sale there that would allow grandpa to pass the stuffing from six feet away.

The fact of the matter is, had health care capacity been increased, social distancing measures and mask wearing protocols rigorously practiced, and the most vulnerable adequately protected, this new wave of lockdowns– or, better said, attack on people's social needs and mental health– would not be necessary.

I am not arguing that we should ignore Covid. America and Brazil are terrifying examples of what happens when millions of people untether their decision-making capacity from attention to material reality. But either social distancing and masks work or they do not. If they do, they work equally well in Pharmasave and Phog Lounge. If I can work six feet away from someone, surely to Christ we can have a drink six feet away. And if I can wander to wilds of Costco with strangers I can certainly have 5 friends over for a drink and a fire in my house.

What is the scientific explanation for allowing work gatherings of hundreds and thousands of people, and banning two people from different houses from getting together?

And why do people not shout and demand answers to these questions?

Until people are vaccinated, this virus will spread, lockdowns which are not really lockdowns or not. Real lockdowns such as we have seen in Australia are totalitarian and inhuman. No elected official has been put in office to eradicate disease and death: we must live with disease and death. If you don't like life on the mortal terms it is offered, call God for a refund. The Hippocratic Oath does not say "save everyone no matter what the cost to everything else." It says "do no harm" Attacking people's need to gather and socialise and connect is by any sane measure harm.

People need to exercise restraint and be reasonable. But they also need to re-assert their rights to socialise and connect. Death is inevitable, misery and loneliness are not.

Existential Injustice and Life-Value

Over the past decade I have been working out what I have called a "materialist ethics." The orienting idea is that regardless of what people might believe or hope might happen after death, life on earth is the only life that we *know*. Have faith in what you will, earthly life must be valued in terms of the needs, interests, and capacities of human beings. Like all creatures, we are born and will die and have needs that link us in a web of life and to each other. We are harmed if our needs go unmet and are typically afraid to die. Nevertheless, we are also intelligent and creative. We can solve social problems and use the resources we produce to satisfy the needs of each and all. Our struggles to satisfy our needs and to change societies prove that we value our lives. But valuing life means more than desiring its perpetuation come what may. It means that we strive to build good lives.

Materialist ethics thus takes up an old problem: what is the good life? and tries to answer it in terms of practices of living. The conditions of life on earth draw us together and force us to work to satisfy our needs. Need-satisfaction is the most basic condition of good lives. If we are systematically deprived of that which we need, we are harmed, and the more we are harmed, the less it is possible to actively enjoy life. Life-cannot be enjoyed unless our needs are satisfied, but just satisfying our needs does not mean that life will be good. In order to be good life must be enjoyed. Life becomes enjoyable, I argue, when it is meaningful on the one hand and sensuously pleasurable on the other. There are thus three elements to good lives: need-satisfying social relationships, meaningful contributions to our world, and sensuously enjoyed experiences, relationships, and activities.

The primary way in which we contribute to our world and create meaning is through work. I am using "work" in a broad sense (coincident with what Marx meant by "non-alienated labour). Work in this sense is not wage labour but the practices through which we shape our world and ourselves in conformity with life-valuable goals. The object of work can be material reality, social institutions, or ourselves. These practices are work because through them we conform our gestures and actions to the goal: we are not arbitrarily free to do as we please but must bend our will to serve the goal of improving life in some way. The food that we eat grows because the farmer goes to work in the fields, social problems are solved because people devote time to political movements for change, and we forge friendships and mutually satisfying relationships because we learn to understand what others need from us and work to make ourselves into people who can provide it.

But if life were only about working to satisfy needs something essential would be missing. We are not robots genetically programmed to eat, work, and reproduce. We are sensuous-intellectual beings who understand (when we reflect on it) that we only have this one life to live, and if it were not enjoyable, the most important element would be missing.

Sensuous enjoyment is the all-round feeling of satisfaction or consummation that arises through relationship to and connection with something which is not-self: the natural world in its beauty

and sublimity, the works of human creative intelligence, and especially and above all, other human beings. Sensuous enjoyment is not intellectual. It is not an idea but an embracing experience that integrates through and feeling, self and world. When we sensuously enjoy an experience or activity time seems to stand still: we wish that experience to go on forever (even though when we reflect on our reality we know that time flies and life ends).

But sensuous enjoyment is also a problem for social beings. We experience and enjoy life as individuals but our lives are bound up with the lives of others. The social institutions that enable us to produce and distribute the resources that we need and establish the frameworks for all other social interaction also impose differential powers of access to those resources. Social life is marred by material inequalities which damage the lives of people who suffer from their consequences. Ideologies normalize certain invidious hierarchies, demonize victim groups, and vilify certain forms of relationship. We can define social injustice in general as any institutional relationship that actively denies the shared reality of human needs and imposes and justifies hierarchies of access to the goods, institutions, and relationships that all humans require to avoid harm, create meaning, and sensuously enjoy our lives.

Social injustice is a function of class power over the resources base and social institutions upon which our lives depend. Every socially unjust institutional structure tries to justify itself by claiming that it is natural, i.e., organized not in accordance with the particular interests of the ruling class but timeless truths. Philosophy and political movements can change socially unjust relationships by exposing the naturalization of social relationships as ideological mystification that serves ruling class interests Undermining the justifications paves the way for social changes that enable the more comprehensive satisfaction of the needs of each and all.

But even if social injustice were conquered once for all by the discovery and realization of an institutional form that abolished all invidious hierarchy and material inequality, we would still face a deeper problem that I call "existential injustice." Existential injustice is the limit imposed upon good human lives by the temporal character of human life. Our lives move from birth to death, from past to future to an end and there is nothing political movements can do about that fact. Our experiences are limited by lifetime, but our capacity to imagine is not: we can project ourselves indefinitely into the future and imagine an unlimited number of things that it would be good in principle to experience. The injustice is that our imagination generates fantasies of good experiences that our intellect reminds us we will never experience.

There is a second and more concrete form of existential injustice that the on-going Covid pandemic exemplifies. If the general problem of existential injustice is a function of the temporal character of human life, the more concrete form is a function of the historical nature of human society. Just as the individual mind can imagine more than the person will ever experience, so too human societies confront crises more complex than a given level of social intelligence, technical capacity, and oppositional political power can solve. Our problems are experienced by people living in the present, but the solution lies in the future. The temporal and historical aspects of existential injustice intersect in the lives of those unfortunates who suffer the harm but die before there is a solution. Since good or bad for individuals depends upon their being alive to experience them, the future solution of a problem does not and cannot redeem the suffering of those who died before the problem was solved.

Covid has not only killed two million people, it has also forced almost everyone to curtail their social lives in ways that have imposed real harms. There are social justice issues involved, but also, I think, elements of existential injustice. Every potentially good experience that people have to forego to mitigate the spread of the virus is a permanent subtraction from the goods we could have experienced. If we restrict social interaction we subtract from the richness of existing lives. In a finite life foregone goods cannot be made up by subsequent goods, because we cannot live lives in reverse. If we miss out on an good experience it is gone forever. On the other hand, if we do not restrict anything the virus will spread rapidly. Higher rates of infection will cause a greater number of deaths, permanently robbing those who died of the possibility of having any experiences at all.

Existential injustice cannot be solved because it is baked into the temporal and historical character of human life. If it cannot be solved it must be accepted. We accept it by living with the costs that any choice imposes. Thus far, most people have accepted the need to restrict ordinary social intercourse for the sake of mitigating the spread of infection. I awoke this morning to the end of the lockdown in my area of Ontario. I was not pleased with the move into a second lockdown, but I accepted the decision of the government and public health authorities. But no sooner have the restrictions been lifted than those same public health authorities are warning of the possibility of a third wave. Even worse, Prof. Sir Ian Boyd, a member of the UK SAGE group has warned that the UK (and by extension every country in the same boat) could experience lockdowns for "several years."

Let us think about these worse case scenarios for a moment in light of my reflections on existential injustice. We must be alive to enjoy living, obviously, but at the same time we must acknowledge the inevitability of death. Pandemic or no, anything we do brings with it the threat of accident and death. At some point we must simply choose the action of living and disregard the threat to life. Suppose Sir Ian's speculations are correct: ought we to accept the legitimacy of rolling lockdowns into an indeterminate future?

I think the answer to this question is political. Democratic societies cannot be ruled by unelected panels of experts and remain democracies. We have to decide for ourselves, through deliberations that weigh all relevant factors, what level of risk is ultimately acceptable. Here is a relevant argument to consider: a) life will end, b) all good and bad in life is a function of experience and activity, c) lockdowns severely restrict experience and activity, and d) the good in the name of which they justify themselves– preventing death– does not, ultimately prevent death, because everyone born will die of something. I think that this argument leads to the policy conclusion that the time has come to abandon the lockdown strategy and live with the virus and the consequences of doing so. That does not mean we should abandon all public health measures (limits on indoor gatherings, masks, etc), but the complete cancellation of free social interaction has to end.

Australia and New Zealand prove that the quest to eradicate the virus completely is both quixotic and unacceptably authoritarian. If they are going to close their major cities every time there is a single case they will most likely be doing so for decades or centuries. Enough is enough: Covid will join the pantheon of other respiratory diseases that kill a relatively small number of the people that they infect. We need to distance and vaccinate and hope herd immunity controls and

eradicates the virus. But if it becomes endemic, can we continue to live social life through a computer screen? I say no. If the majority disagrees, then I think that the existential injustice will be that we allow the emergency measure to restrict the activities that make life worth living for the sake of an impossible to realize goal: preventing death. There are innumerable threats to life and we have to take them seriously, but since death is ultimately unavoidable the we have to learn to *live* with them.

What is Selfishness?

Originally posted 13 January, 2021

Since I became a self-conscious individual I have hated any sort of external authority claiming the right to impose a structure of rules on me 'for my own good.' I could never and still cannot stand being told what to do. I do not love a man in uniform. My criticisms of the lockdown strategy against the spread of Covid-19 have deep roots in my psychological-political history.

But this goddamn virus is real and takes no time to get out of control if it is given the least space to spread.

Much as I hate being told what to do, I also understand that our individual lives are bound up with the lives of others. We cannot live and develop as particular people if we ignore the interests of others and the need for social institutions and rules. Here Donne and Marx concur: No one is an island; the individual is the social being.

Nevertheless, our social nature cuts both ways. We have responsibilities to act so as not to endanger others, but we also have the collective right to satisfy our individual needs, including the need to maintain social relationships and friendships amidst the pandemic.

Thus, while I recognize the necessity of limiting many aspects of our pre-Covid-19 social lives, I do not agree with the way in which the second lockdown has tried to shift responsibility for stopping infections onto the backs of individuals. Unlike some of the more lunatic anti-lockdown protestors (whose denial of observable reality makes legitimate questioning and criticism more difficult) I have never disputed the reality of the virus, its severity, especially with regard to the elderly and poor, the need to wear masks and practice social distancing, and the need to be disciplined in the conduct of those aspects of our social life that bring us into contact with other people.

My arguments have focused on three problems. First, and most importantly, I have insisted that the Covid crisis is not simply a medical emergency caused by the evolution of a new pathogen, but exacerbated by decades of cuts to public services, and especially health care institutions. These cuts have reduced hospital capacity to a bare minimum. Desperate rearguard actions like lockdowns thus become inevitable because the needed hospital capacity does not exist. However, this lack of capacity is not due to lack of resources, but because the money needed to pay for them has been redistributed to the rich in the form of tax cuts.

My second criticism is again directed at governments. At the beginning of the second wave in September some doctors were hopeful that another provincial lockdown would not be necessary because, they hoped, we had learned important lessons from the first wave. For example, infectious disease specialist Dr. Sumon Chakrabarti argued that "a full lockdown like we saw in March is very unlikely because that was a time when we saw this tidal wave coming and we had nothing else to do. But at this point in time we can see the wave forming. When it's small, we

still have lots of time to do targeted interventions." Dr. Chakrabarti and others' hopes were dashed because the government did not apply the lessons learned in the first wave. It left elder care facilities vulnerable to outbreaks, it did nothing to systematically increase hospital capacity, and decades of resource starvation left local public health authorities without the means to do the rapid contract tracing so essential to preventing the virus from getting out of control again.

The third focus of my criticisms has been on the inconsistencies of the application of the lockdowns on the one hand and moralistic individualization of responsibility on the other. Before reiterating and expanding upon these arguments, let me concede that some inconsistency in response is to be expected. Governments, scientists, and citizens were confronted with the rapid spread of a virus for which there was no treatment and no immunity. This pandemic was not the world's first, but historical lessons only take one so far. Everyone has been learning on the fly. To demand total consistency across jurisdictions and between every particular response would be unreasonable.

That said, there are internal inconsistencies that must be pointed out and criticized. Quebec has gone further than other Canadian provinces and has added a curfew on top of the lockdown measures already in place. The Premiere, Francois Legault, has defended it from [criticism] on the grounds that it will encourage people to stay home. Yet, he allows skating rinks to stay open, but only until 7:30. There are also exceptions for workers who must work nights. The inconsistency in these sorts of cases cannot be explained by reference to authorities lacking information and points towards another dimension of the lockdown-curfew strategy.

I do not believe that lockdowns are a conspiracy against "liberty," but they are certainly attempts to individualize responsibility for the pandemic. An Ontario doctor, [Susy Hota], while criticizing the Ford government for not being draconian enough in its second wave lockdown, argued that we either intensify the repressive measures, or learn to live with the spread of the virus. She was referring in particular to the threat of hospitals being overwhelmed, but the choice she poses has a general significance. Right from the very beginning of its global spread, the question of how we are going to live with the virus, not whether we can or want to live with it, should have been foremost in every policy maker and physician's mind. Even with the vaccine it is likely that the virus will be with us for many years, if not forever. Hence the question must be squarely posed: how long is it reasonable for people to drastically curtail their social interactions with others in the event that the virus never goes away?

Is this question motivated by selfish concerns? That is a possibility. But what is selfishness? I think that selfishness is best understood as a form of denial of the social nature of human beings. A selfish person thinks of themselves as consumers of resources that they have no obligation to help produce and in shares limited only by their own desires. Correspondingly, they think of others as wholly separate beings who have the right to manage their own lives as they see fit but have no claim on their time or sympathies. In the context of the pandemic, a selfish person would reject the legitimacy and resist the imposition of any and all demands to limit their social relations and interactions.

That position, while prevalent amongst anti-maskers and never shutdowners, is not what I have advocated. My position is that we do need to govern ourselves and our contacts more stringently,

but that this must also be balanced with recognition that social relationships friendships, and movement in physical space are real needs. Satisfying needs is not selfish, because if we do not satisfy them, or we are prevented from satisfying them, we are harmed. No one should be expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of an abstract social good; social goods must be realized in the lives of each and all.

Well, my critic might rejoin, that is fine as a philosophical abstraction, but in the concrete reality of the pandemic it is impossible to realize our social needs without spreading the virus and causing more harm overall than would be the case if we accepted the most stringent possible lockdown. I would respond by asking what "the most stringent possible lockdown" means. Are Canadian advocates ready to accept literally being locked in their homes living on centrally distributed rations? I doubt it. Therefore, we are all in broad agreement that no matter how stringent the lockdown, it will fall short of self-imprisonment. So then the question is practical: what range of activity is compatible with slowing the spread of the virus to manageable levels while vaccines are distributed, and how can those permissible activities be safely managed?

A complete answer to that question would require information that authorities either do not have or are not communicating effectively: why has the spread of the virus intensified since new restrictions were put in place? Furthermore, it requires an old question to be answered clearly anew: do masks and social distancing work, or do they not? While it is difficult to determine from the [Ministry of Health](#)'s website the precise causes of infection in the second wave (it uses generic categories like "Community Spread," "Workplace Outbreak," and. most unhelpfully, "Other,") the paucity of media reports of flagrant violations of mask wearing, social distancing rules, and limits on indoor gatherings leads me to speculate that most of the new infections are workplace and home related. Vulnerable workers have to go to work where they either spread infection acquired at home or become infected and bring it home. If the answer to the first question turns out to be that the majority of transmission is work-home related, and the answer to the second question is yes, masks and social distancing work, then I would argue that it follows that social interaction between small numbers of people outdoors or indoors with appropriate social distancing should not be restricted or forbidden. If being outdoors drastically reduces transmission rates, then why issue a 'stay at home order' to dissuade people from getting together outside? If masks work, then what grounds are there for forbidding small groups of friends from gathering indoors if they space themselves and mask up? The same holds for restaurants and bars if occupancy is tightly regulated and screening for symptoms takes place. (Infections went drastically up, not down, after bars, restaurants, and other small shops were closed).

I predict that if governments stopped lecturing and moralizing, and instead presented a plan that acknowledged the reality of our needs to socialize, re-emphasized ways of doing it safely, and then encouraged us to meet only in small numbers, mostly outside, or spaced out if indoors, the plan would be much better received and more disciplined behaviour would follow. Large numbers of people are voting against the lockdown with their feet: they are not openly defying it, but they are occupying the spaces the lockdown permits them to occupy, and shaking their heads that the government does not really shut things down but then urges everyone to stay at home. A truly draconian shut down would be intolerable. The new restrictions put in place yesterday do not strike me as in any substantive way different from what has been in place under the "grey"

threat level. The solution is not more inconsistent admonition but a rational and coherent plan that restricts large scale gatherings, allows non-essential workers to stay home without loss of income, gets children back in class as soon as possible, allows us to socialize in small numbers, ups hospital capacity, and above all, increases the rate of vaccination.

Outside of a coherent systematic response, insisting on ever more stringent lockdowns wrongly individualizes responsibility and also causes manifold forms of harm. It ignores that not all people are equally able to stay at home, and side-steps the issue that some people are far more disadvantaged by the lockdown than others. The education of the children of the rich who have access to computers and high speed internet is less severely compromised by on-line classes than the children of the working class and the poor, who might have to share computing equipment between a number of children and lack the high speed connections necessary to facilitate real time conversation. Religious ascetics who choose solitude for spiritual purposes will not mind the imposed isolation, but they are few and far between. For most people, healthy social contacts and friendships played out in shared physical space are needs every bit as real as our needs of oxygen and water.

Selfishness means demanding more than one's share because one thinks one's self more important and valuable than others. Insisting on the right to (safely) meet one's social needs is not selfish.

The Language of Politics and Shared Life-Interests

Originally posted, 5 July, 2020

The nation-states of North, Central, and South America were produced through a complex set of processes and struggles over the past 500 years. Their current shape is the product of the structure of the indigenous societies that pre-existed European contact, colonisation, the slave trade, genocidal war against indigenous peoples, indigenous resistance, coloniser led anti-colonial revolutions, inter-European wars which enlisted different indigenous allies on different sides, slave revolutions, cultural genocide on one hand and cultural interaction and creolisation on the other, industrialisation, myriad social conflicts and struggles for democracy, equality, an end to oppression of all sorts, and most recently (in Canada) reconciliation. No one thread can be pulled out as the sole and exclusive truth of this history.

It is a history of domination and death, but also a history of resistance and survival. It is a history of destruction, but it is also a history of creation. That everything which has occurred within this history occurred subsequent to colonisation does not mean that the meaning and value of every institution, political principle, cultural practice, person, and object is reducible to the original oppressive intentions of the colonial project. Practices, institutions, people, and their creations have contradictory relationships with their origins. Universal value always emerges from a particular context, and that context is often one that initially serves the interests of some and denies the interests of others. When social life is dominated by a particular set of interests the solution is to overcome that domination, not pretend that every trace of its history can be erased.

New directions do not begin from a zero point. Every society inherits and builds upon its past, learning and preserving some aspects and rejecting and leaving behind others. No societies are without contradiction and limitation: The Garden of Eden and noble savages are both myths. Contemporary struggles against the legacy of colonialism have to avoid a left Manicheanism that sees everything "European" as colonial and evil and everything indigenous as good. At this point in history, different cultures are intertwined and we all confront global threats to survival. Different groups of people share different histories of oppression, but the work of politics is to dig down to the common life-interests that could unite people against the forces that threaten the future.

However, moving forward together demands that the descendants of the original European colonists deal with the real and not ideological history of colonialism. Immediately upon arrival, Columbus regarded the indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean as a surprise and a curiosity. They soon came to be regarded as an impediment in the way of Spanish appropriation of the precious metals laying beneath their lands. Problems turning indigenous peoples into productive workers gave impetus to the slave trade. There is no doubt and there can be no denying that anti-

Indigenous and anti-Black racism is endemic to the historical development of North, Central, and South America. Colonisers wanted the lands and resources of Indigenous nations and African men and women were enslaved to work the mines and fields to produce wealth for export back to Europe. Later waves of immigrants would create a new working class, vastly increasing the size of settler populations. These populations were themselves internally divided by ethnicity. As Chinese or Jewish immigrants could attest, newly arrived groups could find themselves targeted by Anglo (and in Canada, also Franco) xenophobes who considered themselves the creators of the "New World" and wanted to ensure that later arrivals knew their place. These attitudes live on today in the rising right-wing reaction to the increasingly widespread demands in Canada and the United States to remove monuments to figures important to the colonial history of the countries.

The right-wing backlash is predictable, but must not sidetrack us from the important *political* questions that the struggle over statues and monuments raise. These questions are difficult and not best dealt with through twitter-sniping or two minute news reports. I do not intend to solve them in this short post, but to try to frame the central problems clearly.

For the rest of this essays I will focus on Canada and the United States. In both of these countries, four groups with very different relationships to the colonial project live together. The first group is compromised of Indigenous nations. In Canada, with the exception of the Beothuk, these nations still exist and are in the midst of a political and cultural resurgence (Glenn Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*). The centrepiece of this resurgence is the demand for sovereignty over their traditional lands, recognition of the integrity of their laws and customs, and enforceable respect for the treaties they signed with the British Crown. The second group are the descendants of enslaved Africans exported against their will and still targets of racist violence. Any sound explanation of the dynamics of the economies of the countries of North, South, and Central America must start from the displacement of Indigenous lifeways, the theft of their resources, exploitation of their labour, and the plantation system that relied upon enslaved African workers. The third group is a motley collection of settlers, refugees, and immigrants (who still arrive by the hundreds of thousands) under varying degrees of duress from different parts of the world. The lines of global social conflict can be traced by examining the ethnic identities of these groups over the years: the Irish fleeing starvation in the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish people fleeing pogroms in the early twentieth, Syrians fleeing civil war today. These groups become part of the colonial history of their new countries, but are hardly responsible for it. Those responsible for it comprise the fourth group: the original waves of working class settlers who left the metropolitan countries voluntarily in response to the promise of land and work and the (usually) minor members of the military and ruling classes that founded liberal-democratic countries like Canada and the United States. The latter are the MacDonald's and the Jefferson's of North America whose monuments are now under renewed scrutiny and criticism.

We cannot change the processes through which settler-colonial states came to be. We can, however, investigate and explain the forces that drove their development, and the relative degrees of responsibility for the violence of the colonial project. While no one who chose to come to a settler colony in its early days can be absolved of all responsibility for the displacements their presence imposed on the Indigenous population, the primary causes of

colonialism were the expansionary drive of the capitalist economy. The racist attitudes of individual Europeans towards Indigenous and African human beings were not the cause of colonialism. If Columbus had not sailed west, someone else would have. He did not sail West because he was a racist, he sailed west in search of new trade routes, and he was searching for new trade routes because of the increasing importance of international commerce to the economies of the European Atlantic seaboard.

The racist attitudes that soon took shape at the heart of the colonial project were effects, not causes, of the social and economic processes emerging in the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe that pushed traders and explorers out to sea in search of precious metals and resources. The goal was not to prove European superiority, it was to secure those lands and resources. Doctrines of European superiority and white supremacy bubbled up in the cauldron of conflict that westward expansion caused. Everyone who became part of that expansion bears some responsibility for its effects on indigenous society, but it was not undertaken in the interests of European peasant and workers but their rulers, political and economic.

Colonisation served the the interests of the ruling class of the Atlantic states of Western Europe. Thus, it is is not helpful to paint colonialism in primarily cultural terms: as a European project designed to impose white supremacy on the rest of the world. It was a project of the capitalist classes of Britain and the Atlantic seaboard countries of Europe to expand markets and access to resources for the sake of augmenting their own wealth. Their ideologues invented white supremacist ideologies to justify the breathtaking destruction of life that slavery and colonialism caused.

That said, it is also true that working class whites can adopt racist ideas, as indeed they have and continue to do. Solving the problem requires more than moralistic condemnation of the symbols of the colonial past. It requires critical understanding of what purposes those ideas serve now, how they are inculcated, and what structural changes need to be made to social institutions and wealth distribution to overthrow those ideas once and for all. Part of the struggle to overthrow racist ideas is an honest, holistic assessment of the history of settler-colonial societies. Part of that honest, holistic assessment is a revaluation of key figures of the colonial history of these countries: the 'heroes' of the creation of liberal-democratic capitalist nation states of North, Central, and South America. If there are sound political arguments against the continued presence of a monument, it should be removed.

What do I mean by "political" argument? Political arguments are structured by universalizable values. They do not simply assert that a course of action is right because some person or group thinks it is. Rather, they contend that a certain course of action is right because it realises a universal value to which the society has committed itself. Democratic societies claim to be egalitarian. If, nevertheless, some groups are exploited for the sake of increasing the wealth of another group, social criticism consists not in liberals suddenly expressing "outrage" at a situation that has existed for centuries, but exposing it, explaining it, demonstrating how it contradicts the principles that are supposed to govern society, and demanding structural changes that resolve the contradiction between principle and practice.

When political arguments succeed, opponents are convinced and change their mind. Where political arguments are sound but do not succeed, they justify struggles against opponents who have proven to be inconsistent with the principles they nevertheless claim to accept. Either way, support for a set of policies is anchored in universal values which, when properly realized, ensure that every group and individual gets what they need to survive, develop, and create themselves according to their own projects and purposes. Universal values are not the private property of particular groups; they are at the root of just societies that ensure that every group gets what is owed to it as a collective of human beings.

Anti-racist ideas are not better than racist ideas because Black people espouse them; Black people espouse them because they are better than racist ideas. They are better because anti-racist principles ensure that all racialised people get the resources that they need to live freely and fully, while racist ideas justify their on-going domination. Their implementation, therefore, is demonstrably better for all, because they rule out exploitation on grounds of race and are thus in everyone's shared interests. The particular interests of racists in maintaining racism cannot be coherently universalized, so they cannot defeat the anti-racist argument.

Political argument degenerates into "culture war" caricature when it loses coherent connection to universalizable values and becomes a shouting match between opposed groups both convinced they possess the unvarnished truth and anyone who disagrees is evil. When the language of politics– justice, equality, freedom for all– degenerates into unproductive name calling, proponents of the better argument need to take care that they do not allow their opponents to drag them into unproductive spectacles. There are good reasons for removing many monuments, but as one very small part of a movement that will have to grow much bigger and more centrally organized if it is going to be able to transform the deep structures that cause oppression, exploitation, alienation, and environmental destruction. Social media mania for unthinking statue toppling risks sidetracking the most important mass movement in the last 20 years. The political dangers of getting sidetracked are not trivial: Richard Nixon won both the 1968 and the 1972 elections.

The political argument in favour of removing statues must be rooted in the experiences of Indigenous people and the descendants of enslaved Africans whose voices were not heard during the creation of the liberal-democratic nations states of North, central, and South America. As always, well-meaning white youth need to take care that their zeal to become allies does not become a narcissistic sideshow. Fighting the cops for the sake of fighting the cops will not build numbers and momentum. Statue toppling and platitudinous sloganeering is much easier than building the movement we will need to topple the real source of racism, exploitation, and environmental destruction: the drive of the capitalist economy to expand money-value at the expense of life-value. That capitalist necessity is the mother of its invention of ever new ways to divide and conquer. Culture wars are a distraction that serves its interests because it makes the focus the relatively unimportant symbols of oppression and keeps our attention away from the decisive question of who owns and controls the resources, wealth, and labour upon which lives, and good lives, depend.

Difficult Solidarity

Originally posted 9 September, 2020

If it is true (as Marx wrote, that ruling classes never give up their power willingly, and (as we have learned subsequently) that race and sex are connected but independent causes of domination, then it seems to follow that the groups who benefit from racial and sexual oppression will no more give up their power willingly than the ruling class. The consequences of this implication for building a unified movement against capitalism, racism, and sexism have not been fully appreciated on the left.

If we treat race and sex the same way that Marx treated class, as structures of power of a superior over a subaltern group, then it follows that ruling sex and racial groups will not give up their power without a fight. If this conclusion is true, it immensely complicates, if not completely destroys, the possibility of building a unified movement against the deep structures of exploitation, alienation, and oppression. It would mean that the social forces which Marx and Marxists have insisted carry different people beyond their differences to a clear-sighted understanding that capital is the enemy of *humanity* will run aground against the rocks of white, male privilege. Workers might be women and men, black and white, and all exploited and alienated as such. But the white men will be paid what W.E.B. DuBois called the "psychological wage" of thinking themselves members of the master race (and sex). And if Marx is correct that groups do not give up their advantages willingly, white men will not give up their psychological wage without a fight. If that is true, does i not follow that the struggle against structural injustices will devolve into a war of all against all rather than evolve into a Rainbow Coalition?

The historical record would seem to bear out the pessimistic view. In the twenty-first century, it is impossible to ignore the darkest chapters in the history of the left. When race and sex were not outright ignored, they were actively attacked as sectarian deviations from the class struggle. Or, where they were considered as politically relevant, they were cynically played upon as sources of new members for a struggle that would not centrally concern the interests of Blacks or women. (Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* is a brilliant literary example of how the American Communist party exploited race in the 1930s for its own purposes).

But there was worse than cynical exploitation. Great swaths of the European left agreed with liberals that colonisation was essentially a beneficial civilizing process, while the American Trade Union movement actively excluded black workers for decades, and failed utterly to represent their interests thoroughly when they were admitted. The same holds true for women workers. Unless blacks and women organized in their own interests, those interests would still be ignored or attacked today.

At the same time, unity has not proven impossible. Here we need to distinguish two opposed forms of unity. On the one hand, unity has been *demanded* on the basis of abstraction from all differences. The problem with this type of unity is that the social implications of differences do not disappear just because a political movement is constructed on the basis of a more general

identity. It is true that we are all human beings and that all human beings have shared interests (in breathing clean air, in eating healthy food, in being able to find meaning in life, in enjoying sensuous pleasures). However, where there are discrete histories of oppression, oppressed groups are denied access to these goods *because* of the characteristics that mark them as *different.* Movements against the harm of need-deprivation that abstract from its specific causes will almost certainly (like the American Communist Party in Ellison's novel) reproduce the forms of exclusion within their own ranks rather than overcome the structures of deprivation in society as a whole.

However, the problem caused by universal identities achieved by abstraction from differences does not mean– as postmodern social critics argued– that universal values *as such* are the root of oppression. On the contrary, the root of oppression is the exclusive control over life-sustaining and life-developing resources by a minority class that exploits them to increase its own wealth. Social power is rooted, ultimately, in control over that which everyone needs to survive, freely develop themselves, and sensuously enjoy their lives. This private and exclusive control is typically justified by appeal to arguments that maintain that those who are deprived of that which they require are to blame for their deprivation, because they lack the talents and characteristics requisite to success. In the most overt racist and sexist versions of this argument, the very humanity of the racially and sexually subaltern groups is denied. The solution is not to reject "humanity" as a normative ground that encodes fundamental interests that a just society must recognize and satisfy, but rather the opposite: militant insistence on the humanity of historically oppressed groups.

In an important recent book (La Dignite ou la Mort: Ethique et Politique de Race) French Africana philosopher Norman Ajari links the struggle against racism to the struggle of Black people for human dignity. These struggles expose the traditions of European philosophy and politics as racist, because they asserted values like dignity while systematically denying it to colonised and enslaved Blacks. At the same time, by exposing the limits of the European conception of dignity, the philosophy and politics of the racially oppressed make the value whole: the true universality of dignity is realized in struggle against the forces that deny it to the victims of racism. The problem with European philosophy he argues (echoing Fanon) is not its values, but the fact that it did not extend those values to the Black human beings it dehumanized. It takes the struggles of the dehumanized to prove to European philosophy what a true universalization of its values would require.(p.26)

How else are we to understand the *wrongness* of racism than as an active, violent *dehumanization* of Black human beings. Ajari is rightly skeptical of ideological uses of universal values, but nevertheless insists upon the universal value of human life: a value denied to African and other colonised peoples. Racism is not just a set of attitudes and beliefs, but it is a social and historical structure that systematically prevents Black people from accessing that which they need as human beings to survive and develop their capacities. As Anthony Montiero argues, racism cannot understood apart from its "economic foundations and the exploitation of labour for profit." If Monteiro is correct, then racism cannot be overcome by overcoming racist attitudes.

That is not to say that racism has not perpetuated itself via an ideology of white supremacy. At the same time, responses to racism that see anti-racist struggle as directed first and foremost

against "whiteness" are, I think, problematic. A recent issue of [Viewpoint](#) magazine brings together a series of essays, beginning with W.E.B. Dubois' pioneering explorations of whiteness as a historical concept and extending into the contemporary work of Marxists like Asad Haider who are grappling with the problem I am working through here: how to build a unified movement that can overcome exploitation, alienation, and all forms of oppression, when the function of different histories of oppression is to divide human beings into discrete and warring camps. None of the essays believe that "whiteness' is some biological or empirical property but rather a social and historical structure of power over Black people.

Now is not the time to focus on whiteness. And yet, if our movement hopes to abolish white domination, we must at least ask what whiteness means. We should be clear on its history and effects on our social existence. Neither endless introspection among white people, nor corporate handbooks on diversity, nor a purely moral recognition of white supremacy's evils can provide such clarity. We need to examine whiteness as a *political* problem.

Fair enough. But this conclusion strikes me as, in many respects, a subtle academic argument.If whiteness is a political problem, does that not eman, in practice, that it is a structure of control over universally required resources that systematically deprives Black people of that which they need? if that is what whiteness as a political problem means, then would it not be more practically straightforward and theoretically accurate to simply focus on the racist dynamics of capitalist society, making "whiteness" an effect rather than a cause? The object of anti-racist struggle would be the racists structure of exclusive control over universally required resources?

Just as the problem with capitalism is not the identity of the capitalist, but power over other human being's lives, so too the problem of racism is a problem of power over Black people's lives, not the identity of racists. White people are of course the source of racist attitudes and actions, but the struggle is not, in the first instance, against people, but power. That is not at all to let any racist person off the hook or ignore the importance of critical self-reflection on the part of individual white people: power does not act on its own, it must be enacted by people who build and defend the institutions that dominate other people's lives. One cannot struggle against institutions and not struggle against people. That, indeed, is the real message of Marx's quotation from which I began.

But capitalists are not targets of struggle because they are capitalists, but because capitalism is demonstrably harmful to human life-interests. The goal is not destroy them for the sake of destroying them as people, but to remove them from power to stop the harm the system causes. By the same reasoning, racists are not targets of struggle because they are white, but because they are racists, and racism is deadly to its targets.

If one makes "whiteness" as a political problem the target of struggle, what is the goal? An end to white supremacy? Of course. But what does an end to white supremacy look like. Black nationalist separation of black communities from white? Black capitalism? Or some form of as yet unrealized and unfulfilled universal equality between people? If that is the goal, then does it not make more political sense to focus squarely on racism as the problem, not whiteness? "Whiteness" is politically problematic because it is the product of racist thinking and practice. In order to overcome it as a political problem, racism must be overcome. Keeping the focus on

racism keeps the focus on structures and social dynamics which serve some people's interests at the expense of others, but does not demonize every member of the identity group nor project on to every member forms of culture and ways of thinking that they do not all share. Those who– as Marx intimated– will not give up their power do indeed become objects of struggle: but the goal is to create the social conditions in which everyone can satisfy their needs and pursue the life they want to pursue: as members of self-organizing (rather than essentialist-identitarian) communities and as self-creative individuals.

The realization of the goal of human freedom depends upon creating institutions which satisfy the concrete natural and social needs of all people. The fundamental impediment to achieving that goal is the control of the world's resources by a minority class whose members are overwhelmingly white and male. The destructive effects their lives impose on others are functions of the system-dynamics that they serve. By exploiting labour and the earth for profit, they reduce everyone to a dehumanized thing– racialized groups (as Ajari noted) most of all. The more dehumanized the group, the more their human needs are denied, but also, as a consequence, the more their struggles prove the existence of those human needs. These needs are thus the material basis of possibility of solidarity: but only if those who have been paid the "psychological" wages available in a racist society refuse to accept them any longer in exchange for refusing to recognise the humanity of others. False feelings of superiority must give way to heading the call of shared humanity that rings out in anti-racist struggles.

What is History?

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Viewed at the highest level of abstraction, history is the ever on-going process of creating and reconfiguring the human world. If there were no change, there would be no history. Strange, then, that the self-appointed guardians of history attack critics of racist monuments for being anti-historical revisionists. One could reasonably respond that the preservationist view is unhistorical, because it treats history as a fast-frozen past and not as it really is: an on-going process of change.

"History" is not the past, over and done with, congealed in monuments and artifacts, but the living process of creating the human world out of the giveness of nature and the social inheritance from earlier activity. If freedom means anything, it means that living people decide their own future. No one would think it reasonable to *force* future generations to live with the technology of preceding generations. One hundred year old houses are charming; one hundred year old wiring systems are dangerous. It is wonderful to preserve the house, rash to preserve the wiring.

History is the house and monuments the wiring. The argument that the demand to remove racist monuments is anti-historical is in fact self-undermining, Every monument has its own history: there was a time in which it did not exist. If there was a time in which it did not exist, then the values that it was erected to commemorate are not universal or eternal. The historical character of monuments just means that they mark a *particular* event and set of political, social, economic, and cultural conditions. By their very nature they are impermanent: when the circumstances in which they were erected changed, their meaning changes, and when that meaning can no longer be accepted as universally valuable, then present generations have every right to take them down.

Who would sign a house contract that obliged the purchaser to keep knob and tube wiring and rusty plumbing? Likewise, who would sign a social contract (so to speak) that obliges one at birth to forswear all efforts to change power relations even when they are demonstrably oppressive to some groups? The demand that racist monuments be removed is thus not anti-historical or preciously politically correct, but historical through and through. It stems from a critical disposition towards the present motivated by the hope that structures of oppression be overcome. This demand is thus not at all about denying the past, it is about recognizing that problematic aspects of the past continue to impede the good of people's lives in the present. No one is going to forget the American Civil War if mass produced statues of Confederate soldiers are removed. We make history by trying to solve problems, and racist monuments are one expression of historical legacies of domination. People who care about history want to make what *will be*, not preserve every aspect of *what was*.

None of the monuments that activists are targeting have any artistic merit that transcends their political function. Hence a counter-argument to the effect that removing racist statues is

analogous to the Taliban's destruction of the ancient Buddha statues in Afghanistan or Rome's destruction of the Temple of Solomon following the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE are unsound. Artifacts of genuine artistic significance speak to us in a human language beyond the limitations of the cultural context and political forces that produced them. If anyone were to argue that artifacts of serious artistic value be destroyed because they reflect the problematic ethical and political context in which they were created, they would rightly be charged with not understanding how some creations can exceed and surpass their contexts of creation.

Art is precisely a particular creation that surpasses its conditions of creation, including the political beliefs of the creators. Medieval cathedrals were built to celebrate the glory of the Christian god and to enhance the political and economic power of the towns where they were situated. Still, their beauty can be appreciated by anyone. I have never met anyone so philistine and dogmatically atheist that they take offense at the structure and demand the removal of these supreme architectural achievements. One does not have to be Christian to stand in awe in the apse of a Gothic cathedral or be Muslim to be moved by the cool serenity of the Alhambra.

But what does one have to be in order to think that the statue of Teddy Roosevelt towering over an Indigenous and a Black man that should stand forever in front of the Museum of Natural History? Even if it were not offensive, it has no more artistic claim for permanence than an old warehouse that has outlived its usefulness.

Thus, I think those who are demanding or actively removing those statues that do nothing but lord racism and colonialism over their contemporary victims are innocent of the charges of historical revisionism. Iconoclasm can be a good thing when it is pointed at the right icons and when it stems from a critical-minded understanding of the past.

If there is a danger at work in the mindset of the statue-topplers, it is that they often sound as though they are on a mission to retroactively moralise history. I do not mean that I think that they believe that removing a statue removes the crimes that it commemorates, but rather that they can sound like they believe that history has been nothing but a crime, and that the future must begin from a morally pure *tabula rasa.* History is contradictory: steps forward have proceeded by stepping on people. Both aspects are true: people have been grotesquely abused throughout history, and they should be commemorated and acknowledged. At the same time, works, principles, and institutions with real universal value have been created.

Ideological justifications of progress typically ignore the victims, either by denying that they existed, denying that they suffered, or justifying violence as the price that must be paid to help them overcome their "backwardness."

Critical understandings contest and expose the one-sidedness of ideological constructions. By giving voice to those who were silenced, a more complex, rich, complete, and true understanding of history emerges. But giving voice to suppressed voices is distinct from the moralising claim that the truth is wholly on the side of the victims and that every achievement rooted in an oppressive history is in reality oppressive. The truth is the whole, as Hegel argued, and the whole is contradictory.

Critique must avoid degenerating into one-sided victimologies on the one hand or saccharine platitudes on the other. Victims are also agents, and agency is a human capacity that can be exercised for good or ill. However, because the capacity to transform conditions of existence is something that human beings share, it is the deep foundation for the principle that activists need to distinguish between that in our inheritance from the past we should preserve and build on and that which we should reject and change. Institutions and principles which enable us to act freely, as social individuals, even when they emerge from a history that has also been oppressive, are the foundation for struggles for more comprehensive freedom. Those which do nothing but justify oppression are the problems to be solved by change.

Confederate heroes are one thing, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington are another. While both should be condemned for their positions on enslaved people and indigenous people, the liberalism they espoused requires more complex treatment. Their contribution to the "Story of American Freedom" (Eric Foner) cannot be understood if they are simply dismissed as racists. They were: but they were also revolutionaries who inspired the French Revolution ten years later. And the contradictions and truly universal implications of the values of the French Revolution were exposed and brought to light by Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the San Domingo Revolution. He did not reject the values of liberalism but proved, in the most decisive way possible, that they demanded the abolition of slavery– something no Constitution save the Haitian proclaimed. This revolution of people who had been subjected to slavery proved that liberty, equality, and fraternity are not European or white or African or Black ideas: they are human, and everything depends upon interpreting them consistently.

We can go further: in the dying days of the French Revolution, Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals arose and proclaimed the need for a new, social revolution to complete the (failing) political revolution. And that doomed experiment prefigured Marx's conception of socialism as the outcome of a revolution against property, not politicians. In different forms, socialist values inspired and helped shape anti-colonial revolutions throughout the twentieth century, while those same revolutions forced Marxists to understand the realities of racism and national oppression.

Critical understandings of history must be equal parts *critical* and *empirically adequate* to the complexity and contradictions of their object. Ultimately what matters is writing the next chapter of human freedom, but that process will be impeded, not well-served, if young activists ignore the inextricable tangle of good and bad, not only in the past, but also the present, and not only in others, but themselves too.

Corrosion of Conformity

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No one can see where exactly the world is going, but it becomes more apparent by the day that we are at a moment (but these moments can last decades) of transition. Even before Covid-19 precipitated the largest wave of job loss since the Great Depression, global capitalism was running out of options. The relentless exploitation of the earth and human labour was hurtling us towards a climate catastrophe for which it had no solution. There is no technological fix for a system that needs to continually grow upon a planet that stays the same size. There is no reconciling the justifying values of freedom, equality, justice, and individuality with a social reality defined by exploitation, racial oppression, astounding inequality within and between nations, all stitched more and more precariously together with police violence at home and military violence abroad.

Even before the global explosion of protest against racism, millions of people were politically on the move. Young people were demanding structural economic change for the sake of their future health and happiness. In France, the Yellow Vests mobilised week after week to expose soaring inequality and the failure of unions and leftist parties to do anything about it. On the Mediterranean and the Rio Grande, refugees and stateless people fought for a foothold and secure future in Europe and North America. In Canada, indigenous people brought the nation's rail lines to a standstill as they protested the insanity of new pipelines to move to move oil sands crude.

For a few weeks, Covid-19 paralyzed everything. Since May, in response to to the appalling murder George Floyd in Minneapolis, millions are on the move again. In Portland, there have been demonstrations for an astounding 60 plus nights running. The explosion of the racial contradictions of American and global capitalism has put paid to the myth, spun by Trump and other right-wing populists, that they would make their nations great again. They have proven to be devoid of solutions for the problems threatening complex life on the plant and oppressed and exploited groups within their own societies. Trump has delivered that which he was elected to deliver, for those who paid the bills: tax breaks and another conservative Supreme Court Justice. It is true that until Covid-19 struck, unemployment was at record lows, but the nation's factories were not repopulated as he promised. Instead, the jobs were precarious, low-paid service economy gigs now vaporised by the pandemic shut down.

It is above all the struggle for an end to racist violence, military policing, government by incarceration, and for substantive equality and democracy that has exposed Trump for the C-list entertainer he always was. It is almost painful to watch him flounder, mechanically repeating the mantras of 2016 in a very, very different 2020. It is unimaginable (almost) that he can recover the necessary political momentum needed to won November's election.

At the same, the still developing struggle around the legacy and actuality of racism in America daily exposes the contradictions within the Democratic Party. More than his mental alacrity, Democratic supporters should by concerned by Joe Biden's history of support for 'law and order'

legislation. A still emerging left in the Party is pushing in the right directions, (Rashida Tlaib has refused to endorse him) but I suspect that they will be further marginalised by the Democratic establishment once Biden wins. That will set the stage for a nation-wide version of the conflict we are seeing break out in Portland, Seattle, and Chicago between the most radicalised segment of the protestors and Democratic mayors. In all three cities the mayors' efforts to show solidarity with mobilised youth have resulted in their being chanted down and their homes picketed.

What does that conflict portend? I cannot say, and perhaps no one can at this point, but the danger is that without any political organization in which the struggle can be unified and oriented beyond the immediate demands to defund the police and refund community support networks (both excellent demands, to be sure), the movement will succumb to exhaustion or repression. I am not going to speculate about a future which remains uncertain, but instead conclude by reflecting, as I have in other posts and publications (especially *The Troubles with Democracy)* on the problem of political organization

Political energy is a powerful force, but like all energy, it must succumb to the Law of Entropy. Unless there are concrete successes, people burn out and drop out. Excited by their power to survive vicious police onslaughts night after night, the radicalised youth of Portland and other cities feel that they are on the verge of toppling the whole edifice. Good on them. But the more sober reality is that the compulsive targeting of a symbol of state power and the now nearly ritualised political dance between themselves and the cops is ultimately a threat to, rather than proof of, their political vitality. Protest, like war, is politics by other means and, like wars, protest must end. If you have to keep protesting forever, that means that none of your demands have been met. The more radical the demands, the more people you need behind them. In order to bring more and more people behind the demands, you need to work out a practical agenda in which diverse groups of people see a better world in embryo, in which they see shared human interests expressed in language that at the same time recognizes the concrete requirements of different groups. Politics is the social practice of working out the agenda around which people can struggle for a better world.

The issue here is not about violent versus non-violent protest. Nothing can match the violence that states can deploy when they choose. What are fireworks when compared to "bunker buster" bombs, Hellfire Missiles and carrier strike groups? The same people lamenting the street clashes in Portland authorized the wars that have killed hundreds of thousands of people across the Middle East, Central Asia, North and East Africa. At the same time, the state will not be ground down by localised nightly conflicts with the police. The police are not the structural problem. The world-destroying concentrations of wealth and resources in ruling class hands is. The roots of modern racism run straight through the expropriation of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, and the expropriation of European peasants. Right now, the owners of that property– the ruling class and the corporations that they control– are being let off the hook. Smashing a window is not the same as taking back control over the conditions of labour or the resources upon which lives depend. Corporations are tripping over each other to re-brand themselves as anti-racist, while they continue to superexploit labour in the Global South and attack workers rights and regulations at home.

For the most part, the labour movement has sat on the sidelines of the emerging struggles, and the Democratic Party is divided between an establishment that has been complicit with the racist violence it now denounces, and a more youthful radical wing. The emerging political space (everywhere, not just America) cries out for new political organizations that can unify the various actors and demands in a cohesive movement for structural change. The common interests which it must articulate and serve cannot be the doctrinaire formulations of a 'vanguard' of experts. The program of the organization has to be developed through dialogue, argument, and concrete thinking about which short term demands can create the widest opening for deeper structural changes.

Socialism in one country proved impossible, it goes without saying that socialism in one city block is not going to happen. But global struggles grow up from grounded different localities fighting the same sorts of problems. The youth of Portland are setting the example of the fortitude a future global left will need to win the long-term struggle against the deep structures of capitalist life-destruction. But fortitude alone will not win the day.

Stop Enabling the Bosses!…

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I have tried to stay out of debates about "cancel culture" because I do not think that, for the most part, they deserve the air time that they get. Too often they are nothing more than cherry picking local events to stoke breathless anxiety in the right-wing media.

That said, I have also been critical and will always remain critical of "left-wing moralism." I have openly rejected the argument that artistic expression (including comedy) should be censored on grounds that it offends some group or other. Offense: laughter. Where is the argument to show that one person's offense outweighs the other person's laughter? As I argued in an earlier post, fight back with the weapons used against you. If you are being made fun of, make fun in turn. When the Iranian paper *Hamshahri* sponsored an anti-Semitic cartoon contest to protest the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, Israeli artists spoofed it with their own anti-Semitic cartoon contest. Their point: Laughter really is the best medicine. We cannot listen and learn from others if we take ourselves so seriously that we think we are all that matters. Humour is the road that leads us outside of ourselves.

We need to learn to laugh together about our idiosyncrasies and differences. People who laugh together do not kill each other; they become friends. Humour, along with music, has always been a friend to oppressed groups. I do not want to live in a world governed by dour buzz kills who are "shocked" and "outraged" by anything that they find "problematic." To the left-wing guardians of the nation's morals: your platitudes do not speak for everyone, including everyone on the left and whatever community on whose behalf you have elected yourself spokesperson. There is a much bigger world beyond the censorious circle of your Twitter followers and it might disagree.

But to each their own. I am not on Twitter because I like to have time to think issues through. If others feel the need to broadcast every twitch of their neural fibres, then that is what they should do. I won't be reading. What they should not do, however, is empower the bosses to exercise coercive and arbitrary authority under the cover of purportedly progressive values. Two recent cases, both of which concern educational institutions, are troubling.

The first occurred last week at York University in Toronto. A lecturer at York was removed from teaching because they refused to give a student in Myanmar an extension on an assignment. Other students at the Zoom meeting took screen shots of the professor's exchange wit the student and posted them, then demanded that the professor be removed from the class. Shockingly (or perhaps not) the administration complied with the demand, without any apparent due process.

One can disagree with the decision to not grant the extension and with the tone of the professor's remarks. However, no one concerned with academic freedom, collective agreements, and workers' control of their work can be indifferent to the actions of the administration. Professors have always had the discretion to grant or not grant extensions. The professor's comments on the Myanmar situation may have been factually wrong and unsympathetic, but empirical differences

and a hard personality cannot be allowed to become grounds for removal from the classroom. I cannot think of another instance (save in cases where an accommodation is required by the Accessibility Act) where a professor's refusal to grant an extension has resulted in disciplinary action.

Predictably, the York Administration justified its actions on the grounds of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. What this situation has to do with Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion is beyond me, but it is now the go-to excuse of bosses everywhere for summary dismissal of workers. Supporters of the very important struggle to diversify the professoriate should be troubled at the appropriation of an initiative from below by the bosses to justify arbitrary disciplinary power. Finally, students have to stop being complicit with the bosses. If there is a problem, organize to speak with the professor, do not run to the boss and demand that people lose their jobs.

The second situation comes from the UK. It concerns a secondary school teacher who, during a discussion on free speech, showed the Danish cartoons to his class. In response, a few dozen members of the local Muslim Community demonstrated in front of the school and demanded that the teacher be "permanently removed." Shockingly (or perhaps not) the teacher was suspended. There are millions of Muslims in the UK and the actions of a few dozen fundamentalists are allowed to determine the policy of the local school board. Not only is this another egregious example of arbitrary power, it also allows the most unreasonable and conservative voices of a complex community to speak for the whole. I am sure that somewhere in the Muslim world some comedian has told some joke about Mohammad or the articles of faith that some fundamentalists think should be grounds for dismissal (or in the case of Salman Rushdie) a death sentence.

Educational policy and pedagogical practice cannot be determined by the political mobilization of conservative parents of any religion. Conservatives should be free to mobilize and make their arguments and demands, but in no case can their beliefs become public policy. The Ford government in Ontario was brought to power in part by a loose coalition of conservative citizens from different religions "outraged" by Kathleen Wynne's necessary reforms to the sex education curriculum. So necessary were they that Ford, once in power, revived, more or less, the same reforms. But we are now stuck with his government for another two years. The politics of "outrage" cuts both ways, comrades, so best to stick to reasoned arguments.

There is one earth, thousands of cultures, and 7.8 billion people. As Leibniz might say, that means there are 7.8 billion perspectives on the world. Disagreement in inevitable and unsurpassable. We can learn to laugh and argue, or we can try to fire and kill each other into conformity. The latter is objectionable on numerous grounds, not the least important of which is that it does not work. When I was in Russia a couple of years ago my friend took me to an important Orthodox Cathedral. In Stalin's time it was an empty hole because he forced construction to stop. (Moscow's biggest swimming pool the joke went, because it was always filled with water). After the collapse of the Soviet Union the community raised funds and it was finally completed. Seventy years of forced atheism did not destroy the Orthodox Church. It is a powerful– and reactionary- voice in contemporary Russia. The point is: bad ideas cannot be forced out of people's heads. Should progressive voices argue that the church should be banned again? Or members expelled from employment? Or shot? Those means have been tried and they have failed.

The only solution is for every person and every community to learn to look critically — and laugh– at itself. Meaningful change across differences requires dialogue. Dialogue cannot even begin if one side, wrapped in sanctimonious conviction of the truth of its position, runs to the boss to complain about the other side who disagrees. We need to resolve our own differences and not embolden the bosses to fire our opponent because we lack the arguments to convince them.

…And Believing Corporate Bullshit

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If the so-called [Civic Alliance](#) of 200 + corporations is to be believed, capitalists have suddenly become very concerned about democracy:

We believe every American should have a voice in our democracy and that voting should be safe and accessible to all voters. We stand in solidarity with voters 一 and with the Black executives and leaders at the helm of this movement 一 in our nonpartisan commitment to equality and democracy. If our government is going to work for all of us, each of us must have equal freedom to vote and elections must reflect the will of voters.

I do not doubt that as individual citizens these corporate leaders are espousing sincere concerns. I would add that a world in which corporate leaders are speaking out against voter suppression is better than a world in which they actively promote it. But we also have to question what "democracy" means in a capitalist world and be critical, not of individual intentions, but the limitations imposed by the structure and dynamics of capitalism that they most assuredly also want to protect.

Defending voting rights in the 21st century is not especially radical. That is not to dismiss the reality of a long history of voter suppression directed primarily against African Americans, but it is to say that the principled battle for the vote has already been won. Defending voting rights is not therefore about extending democratic rights and processes into the economic system, it is protecting what has already been won by past struggles.

But the problem with democracy under capitalism is precisely that the economic dynamics generated by the "free market" militate against democratizing control over the resources and work upon which our lives depend. If we think of democracy only as a political system, then we will miss the ways in which capitalist market forces undermine collective control over our lives and rule out democratic management of our work places, prevent deliberation about the uses to which life-resources are put, how economic relationships with other nations are managed, and the overall purposes served by productive activity, locally and globally.

Capitalism, liberalism, and democracy have been locked in a complex and contradictory relationship since the English Civil War. On the one hand, the rising capitalist class of yeoman farmers needed a new set of legitimating principles to justify their increasing violation of feudal obligations. Individual rights became this vehicle and a new doctrine of equality (influenced by both Roman and Christian sources but still historically unique) their deep ethical justification. But these rights cut both ways. The anti-monarchical forces led by Cromwell had no intention of extending these rights to the majority of the population: they were justifications, as Locke would later argue in his epochal *Second Treatise of Government*, for private ownership and control of the earth. Only the industrious in England and its colonies deserved them: everyone else: peasant, wage worker, indigenous person, was regarded as a dependent. They perhaps were morally equal in an abstract sense (in the eyes of God), but there were no compelling grounds,

from a classical liberal perspective, to institutionalize this abstraction as equal civic and political rights.

Thus, as Marx showed (in On the Jewish Question) and Ellen Wood explained in greater detail (in *Democracy Against Capitalism*) liberalism was initially a movement of anti-democratic radical aristocrats. It become the liberal democracy under which we live today through a series of struggles (which have not ceased and continue today) not only for inclusion (under the banner of equal rights) but structural transformation. The material demands made differ according to the group leading the struggle, but what links the transformative demands of women, colonized and enslaved people, workers, etc. is an understanding of democracy not only as a set of constitutional rights, but more fundamentally a set of social relationships and practices. As I argued in *The Troubles With Democracy*, unless people collectively control their conditions of life, they cannot freely determine the principles according to which they will live together.

The liberal principle of equality has played an essential role in justifying these struggles form below, but it too is contradictory. The contradiction is central both to the differences between left or egalitarian liberalism and right or classical liberalism (or libertarianism) and between all species of liberalism and socialism. The basis of the contradiction is well known and I will not belabour the point here. Liberalism in general conceives of the economy as a sphere in which private interests rule. Left liberals accept the need for greater or lesser regulation of the economy and progressive taxation, but they do not call for a planned economy. Socialists do, either in the form of national economic policies that steer investment priorities or democratically planed, fully socialized economies (of a form that has yet to be successfully institutionalized).

Thus, before we accept the sincerity of the capitalist friends of democracy, let us ask them their position on progressive taxation. The horror, the horror of Trump, but are they advocates of repealing his tax breaks? What is their position on minimum wages? How about public health care (or even funding health care plans for their employees)? Would they accept re-directing tax breaks for private businesses to re-investment in public services and infrastructure? How about securities law and the banking sector: do they accept the need for regulations in the public interest? Do they encourage their workers to unionise? What is their position on the Green New Deal? Do they support nationalizing key sectors of the economy? How about workers control?

Voting is essential to any democracy, but so is being able to afford nutritious food, an education, health care; legal equality is essential, but so too is having control over your work life and time outside of paid labour to cultivate interests and relationships, or just breath clean air and be thankful that one is alive to witness the unfolding splendour of the universe. But if we push our corporate comrades on these questions we will soon discover that while they are all in favour of abstract equality, their tune changes when it cuts into their profits. Robust voting rights are essential and we can agree that their defence is in the interests of all citizens who believe themselves democrats. But let us not be fooled that the capitalists have suddenly become the friend of the common people. If they disagree, then let them prove their commitment by restoring to the *common wealth* the resources they appropriate for themselves.

Socialism: Contribution+Need-Satisfaction=Freedom

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The election of the Biden administration has set off a moral panic amongst the American Right that the nation is on the verge of socialism. They need not worry. While investment in infrastructure, police reform, and living up to its treaty commitments on climate change and refugees are welcome changes, they hardly threaten the existing structure of control over life-resources. The moral panic does, nevertheless, provide a welcome occasion to think about what socialism means at this point in history and how the current focus on political policy might be used as a pivot to build a movement for deeper social changes.

When the Right whinges about socialism as a nanny state, they implicitly treat the government as an independent force that exists above society and rules over it, more or less arbitrarily. They repeat the classical liberal understanding of government as a necessary evil whose proper function is to institute and defend fair rules of free interaction. In this view, everyone has a certain endowment of property and initiative (some more than others) and each person is responsible for negotiating the best outcomes possible given their respective endowments. Inequality is built into to the initial set up, but it is legitimate if the resources are legitimately acquired and if gains are the function of individual effort that does not resort to "force and fraud." (Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, Utopia*) All the government needs to do is to write "rules to keep fair play" (William Blake). What it must do above all is to refrain from *caring* about outcomes. As in poker, any outcome is legitimate that is fair, i.e., follows the rules. There is no injustice involved if one player is so much better (or more fortunate) that they clean out everyone else, take their watches, cars, and homes, and leave them destitute on the street. "Procedural justice" concerns the rule sof the game, not who wins. If everyone at the game knew the rules, abided by them, then the outcome is therefore, as the economists say, Pareto optimal (the resulting distribution cannot be made better without someone else– the winner– being made worse off, i.e., deprived of what they legitimately acquired).

Socialists, in this view, are soft-hearted people who feel sorry for the losers and step in to re-distribute income. Hence the criticism that socialism is a nanny state. The state substitutes itself for individual effort (and luck) and compensates losers for their losses. This compensation is the very essence of injustice, because a) it seizes by force the winners' property, thereby b) rewarding incompetence and weakness. Feeling sorry for losers and rewarding them for their losses ensures that the pattern will repeat itself. People will do stupid things if they know they will not suffer the consequences (moral hazard), so by promising to take care of the weak, socialists ensure that such weakness will perpetuate itself. The assumption is that we only take care of ourselves if we have to: if we can off load our responsibilities to others (the rich and the state which confiscates their property) we will.

Before coming back to the problem of this characterization of socialism as confiscatory state power, let's look more closely at the classical liberal idea of "procedural fairness" that underlies

the poker analogy. I agree that the poker game is procedurally fair because everyone knows the rules in advance and they do not pre-favour any particular player. One player might be better at calculating the odds of their hand winning than another, but this superior capacity is not due to any structural imbalance of power between the players. It is an individual difference of capacity. If weaker players choose to sit down with a pro and get taken for everything, they have no grounds to demand that the winner give everything back. They were not forced to play but chose to take the risk. They do in fact get what they deserve in this case.

Good analogies depend on there being a relevant similarity between the two things compared. In the liberal argument above, laws are compared to the rules of the poker game. Poker players know the rules and that they have unequal initial endowments. They choose to play. Some might lose big, but that is their problem. But laws are not at all analogous to the rules of games of chance. First, we do not choose the society into which we are born. Second, we are compelled to play by the existing social rules. Third- and most importantly– laws reflect the existing structure of power and are written by those with preponderant social power to regulate, legitimate, and perpetuate it. We can agree that the skillful poker player deserves their winnings where the rules are known, accepted by all, and do not unfairly advantage the winner. But we would not agree that the outcome is fair if the winner wrote the rules and forced everyone to play by them, knowing full well he has written the to serve their own interests. *But that is exactly the way it is with the basic laws of society.* The apparent procedural fairness on which the classical liberal's critique of socialism depends masks deeper structural inequalities of wealth (control over life-resources). In society, unlike in games of chance, the winners write the rules and force everyone to play in ways that ensure that they keep winning.

Socialism is not simply the re-distribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. That is not to say that reforms like progressive taxation and investment in institutions like public health care and education as alternatives to market provision wealth are not valuable. I have argued elsewhere that the principle underlying social democratic reforms is socialist: to each according to their needs. Moreover, even winning these limited victories requires political mobilisation and energy. Supporting progressive reforms can thus help build momentum and political power to move from progressive policy to social transformation of the structures of ownership, control, and use of basic life-resources. There are always struggles over needs, because if we do not satisfy our needs we cannot live.

However, socialism is not simply about need-satisfaction. The first part of the aphorism to which I referred in the previous paragraph (which Marx borrowed from the French socialist Eugene Cabet) is often forgotten: "From each according to their abilities." People cannot contribute on the basis of their abilities if they must commodify their labour power and sell it to any capitalist wiling to buy it (and suffer if there is no purchaser). The fundamental condition of socialist need-satisfaction is therefore freeing our need to labour (creatively realise our intellectual and practical capacities) from its commodified form as wage labour. Only then can our contributions to social life be free expressions of our talents rather than forced labour which we must perform because we need to money. Social democrats or left-egalitarians of the sort that are now in the forefront of the Democratic Party never discuss the need to free labour from capitalist control.

Capitalism is a system that produces profits through the exploitation of labour. Workers produce more value than they are paid in wages and the capitalist appropriates the surplus value and realizes it as profit when the commodity that workers have collectively created is sold. Until that exploitative relationship is overcome, there is no socialism. But if it were to be overcome, the result would not be a "nanny state." As Marx and Cabet's aphorism makes clear, what results would be an economic system based upon reciprocity (contribution to the common wealth and individual appropriation for purposes not of private profit but survival, development, and all-round enjoyment of life. In fact, if we note that contribution comes first (as it must, both materially– if no one contributes there is nothing to share- and morally– if no one is willing to contribute, people are still trapped within an egocentric conception of their own interests) socialism is the very opposite of a nanny state. The term is a pejorative because it implies that people who should be taking care of themselves are taken care of by others. However it is quite clear that once the universal life-wealth of nature is collectively controlled, and collective labour organized and governed democratically, citizens of a socialist society would be taking care of each other, not being cared for as if they were children.

It is true that socialism would be a "collectivist" society, but the collective element refers to the control over universally needed-life-resources (lands, waters, minerals, productive systems, the fruits of scientific labour, public institutions), and *not* individual beliefs, tastes, thoughts, choices about who to connect with and how one identifies one's self. The dogmatic excesses of over-enthusiastic woke youth are easy fodder for critics, but their fear-driven moralism is no more socialist than the thunder of tent revivalist preachers warning about the demons of dancing and alcohol. "Communism" has the unfortunate connotation that every thought must be cleared with the group before it is indulged (avoiding that connotation is the reason why I always use 'socialism' and never 'communism' in my work). But it is quite clear that for Marx socialism was about establishing the institutional conditions for the free exercise of our intellectual and creative capacities, not checking on-line to find out what we are allowed to think, or laugh at, or produce. "The free development of each," he and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, "is the condition for the free development of all."

Just as contribution comes before appropriation, so too the individual comes before the group. Humans have always always social *individuals*; capitalism makes individuality appear to be some sort of mysterious possession: my ego is somehow my property. But I cannot own myself because I am not two things. All of us are living, thinking organisms, organized in social relations, producing and reproducing our lives within a given set of constraints. Those constraints: the need to eat, get an education, etc, are satisfied or not by the social relationships that structure our lives. The more social relationships are organised to satisfy those needs, the better they are. We need to work together to satisfy them whatever the form of social relationships might be. Capitalist societies subordinate the cooperative dimension of need-satisfying labour to various forms of zero sum competition and the profit motive. Socialism aims to overcome both so that we can all contribute, and want to contribute, to the common wealth, appropriate from that store of resources that which we need to survive, develop, and sensuously enjoy our lives in relationship to nature and each other. But socialism would also furnish us with the free time to be alone if we wanted to be alone, to follow our own muse and create ourselves as unique individuals, a one of a kind production that lives and then dies, leaving the universe a little different than it would have been otherwise.

Let the Ideas Lead

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Creation is paradoxical. "To create" means "to bring into being." It is natural, therefore, to assume that creation results from an inspiration that comes from nowhere, that disrupts mechanical causal connections, that has almost mystical overtones and implications. In truth, creation is the result not of an inspired transcendence of the material world, but from hard work on it and within it. It is true that ideas are the seeds of creative action, but if we reflect deeply enough upon them, we will see that they do not arise out of an inspired nothingness, but from some problem that the world poses.

On the other hand, there is something peculiar about creative work that does involve a productive role for absence. That absence has two sides: on the one hand, although creation is always a response to a problem, we are not always clear about what the exact nature of the problem is. The less clarity there is, the more creative the work will be. On the other, because the problem reveals new layers of complexity as we try to solve it, the initial idea we formed about what the solution might be changes and develops through the process of working out a solution. Creative work is thus less invention *ex nihilo* and more working out the idea by following where it leads.

The key to success is not to force a solution, but to allow it to emerge. *Ascesis*, giving oneself over to the dynamic reality that confronts us, allowing a process to unfold, rather than mechanically steering it to a pre-determined destination, is necessary in all creative work. Hence the paradox: the creator does not invent but rather let's something novel emerge. The creative act is thus as much passive as it is active: if we try to steer an idea in a definite direction too soon, then we will simply repeat what we already know. If we let the idea shape itself in response to the problem that the world is posing, then new insight will emerge via the process of working out noted above.

I have been thinking about this problem in the context of the first six weeks of online teaching. Initially, I wanted to resist being forced out of the classroom and into cyberspace. I have long maintained that virtual reality was not conducive to teaching and learning. Teaching is not information transmission and learning is not information reception. Teaching and are social activities that unfold through question and answer, argument and counter-argument. I have argued (in a [paper](#) with Mireille Coral), that these social practices work best when teachers and learners make the effort to share the same physical space. There is no where to hide in a shared physical space: we begin to learn when we have the confidence to think along out loud and risk being criticised by others who have come to learn as well.

If I had hung on to this argument in the radically changed circumstances of the pandemic, then it would have been impossible to create the conditions for teaching and learning in my class. Here is where the reflection on *acesis* becomes relevant. Maximal freedom of action requires that one be able to tell the difference between the things one must fight against and the things to which one must accede. Warring against the later is an impediment to free activity because resistance is the wrong disposition. Creative activity always occurs within an unchosen framework. The frameworks within which action takes place are *productive* constraints: they concentrate the

mind and generate the ideas that our creative interventions work out. Abolition of all constraint would make creative activity impossible.

In the case at hand, the solution to my antipathy towards on-line teaching was literally to focus only on the ideas that bring the students and I together each day. I have to ignore where I am, the technological mediations, the actual solitude within which all of us are unpoetically dwelling at the moment, and see the ideas as the connective tissue that gives life to the proceedings. The relative success of the class thus far has re-emphasised a truth about teaching that I have been trying to understand and explain for at least a decade. The creative element in teaching is not so much how to frame a particular argument or explain a difficult concept, but rather how to frame the overall experience of the material under consideration such that students: a) want to investigate it and understand it, b) find their own way into the problem, and c) generate answers to their questions and solutions to the problems posed by the material, and d) enable them to better intervene in the world.

Thus, the challenge I faced was how to impossible frame the material without the face to face interaction which I have formally maintained was indispinsable. The solution was to stop trying to simulate the face to face and simply focus on the ideas. The virtual classroom disrupts the natural rhythms of conversation that evolve between people in the same room. All the non-verbal elements of communication disappear when there are only disembodied voices. The bright eyes of increased interest, the rolling eyes of disdain, the wandering eyes of boredom are absent, and the richness of the pedagogical interaction is lessened. The virtual environment lacks the intensity of argument in shared physical space. But the ideas, I have found, can still roam free and engage everyone's thoughts and interests. Because the ideas are leading, questions still arise, arguments still develop, problems of interpretation and application still arise.

I will return to the classroom at the soonest possible moment. The quality of communication in real world environments cannot be reproduced of simulated on line. Nevertheless, once I let go of the desire for in person teaching I realised that we could still accomplish the most important goal: to come together around the ideas of the class and explore their texture, their implications, their strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, one must not let go of a clear understanding of the differences, or start believing that there is no loss. But to insist on the absence of bodies in shared space to the detriment of the presence of the ideas that have to lead any worthwhile class is to fail as a teacher.

When the objective situation cannot be changed, the only alternative (as Stoics and Buddhists both argue in their own way) is to change one's self. But we do not change ourselves in the way a mechanic fixes a broken automobile. We change ourselves by understanding what the objective situation demands of us. We understand what the objective situation demands of us by paying attention to it as a problem and giving ourselves over to the ideas that arise from the situation. To force our own desires in circumstances where they cannot possibly be realised is to guarantee failure. Success demands that we follow the trail the ideas themselves will blaze if we let them.

Why I Hate Marking

Originally posted 27 April, 2021

It is not because it is time consuming, or because it is repetitive, or because I get bored correcting grammatical mistakes. It is also not because it tends to fix students' focus on the quantified outcome (the grade) rather than the process (the thinking, research, and writing) that produced the product, although that issue comes closer to the reason. It is not even that it is an imposed bureaucratic requirement of the institution which constrains too many student' cognitive freedom to explore because they think less about the importance of the problem they are exploring and more about "what the professor expects an A paper to be." The real reason that I hate marking is because it kills the individuality of the paper and the writer because it forces me to convert qualitatively different papers into a ranking based upon a generic, quantified schema. Looking at this schema, an external evaluator or administrator is supposed to be glean information about how "much" the students learned and how well they were able to communicate this learning back to me.

When I say "marking" I should be clear that what I mean is the act of assigning a grade. Qualitative *evaluation* of students' work is essential to any learning process, but there is nothing in the idea of evaluating (or criticizing, which comes to the same thing) that requires that a fixed marker that signifies nothing save your place in a ranking that no one else will ever care about be assigned to your work. Evaluation is the process of finding value, and a number or letter is not a value. A value (as I argued in *Materialist Ethics and Life Value*) is, in the most general terms, that in any object which makes it an object of care and concern. We want to eat healthy food because it has nutritional value, we prize art because it has aesthetic value, and so on. What then is "educational value?"

In general terms I would argue that educational value is that which in any course of study (discussing, reading, arguing about, writing about, experimenting upon, etc.) which expands the student's scope for self-conscious cognitive interaction with the natural and social worlds to which they belong. Someday I will think of a less clunky term than "conscious cognitive interaction." It lacks poetry but it does get my point across. We all sleep walk through the world to some extent, we cannot actively reflect, evaluate, judge, predict, or criticize at every moment. The value of education is that it motivates to activate our senses and intellect as much as we can, and under our own impetus. Self-conscious cognitive interaction with the world means that the more educated we become, the more we are able to not take things as they appear but inquire into how they became that way, what our experiences mean, whether there are problems with the way what we are experiencing is organized, and whether and how the situation can be improved by solving those problems.

The point that I want to make is that education is a form of self-activity whose value is to increase our capacity for sensuous and intellectual self-activity. The grade exists outside this living process but purports to communicate an objectively verifiable judgement about it. But if anyone becomes more cognitively alive to the natural and social world, they have become more

educated, whatever grade they might get. The "proof" that a person is educated is not disclosed by the grade, it is disclosed by how people live. If one becomes more confident about questioning the evidence of the senses and the authorities, becomes more discerning, reflective, appreciative, or critical depending on the case, and, perhaps most importantly, becomes more deeply committed to being an honest thinker willing to subject their beliefs to coherent standards of evidence and reasoning, then that person is educated. The A or the C do not tell us anything about how people will subsequently live.

So what good is the grade? It does serve a good, even though it does not tell us anything important about education. It justifies the exorbitant fees students must pay: it is a necessary condition of obtaining the product sold by the institution, the degree (and other ancillary benefits likes prizes, awards, scholarships, etc). These are goods, but institutional goods important in a world in which everything is distributed by competitive markets. If we changed that world, then the rankings and products would also lose their value.

Instead of rankings, can we imagine a world in which people are simply recognized as contributors? Why must some be regarded as "great" contributors and everyone else as background helpmates? In the immensity of cosmic time, everyone's contribution is relatively minor. How important will Newton have been in 400 billion years? I do not mean to suggest the absurdity that we always judge ourselves and each other on these enormous time scales. Rather, my point is that every person's life is ephemeral so what matters is not the "size" of the contribution but that everyone has a chance to make one and be recognized for having done so.

In the humanities, that contribution takes the form of moving the conversation in a different direction. Not everyone will be Plato, just like not everyone will be Newton, but so what: Plato was influential, but wrong on almost everything. What matters is that each of us pay attention and notice something that the others do not notice and share it. What matters is that we concentrate when we are reading, or listening, or arguing. When we pay attention we notice something that has been unsaid and say it. The human world becomes richer the more contributions are made. Many small contributions add up to a sum greater than any single contribution, no matter how grand. Social life becomes better the more everyone is enabled to contribute their ideas, does so, and is acknowledged for having done so. More contributions means the fabric of interpretations through which meanings are disclosed becomes tighter woven and more exquisitely detailed.

In that world people would not think of themselves as trying to outdo others but do their own task well (one point on which Plato was correct). There would be no rankings, no league tables, no childish prizes, perhaps even "better" and "worse" would come to be seen as anachronisms of a destructive, zero sum world. Evaluation of contributions would not be based upon whose attracted the most likes or reads or whose "impact factor" was highest. Anything that was novel, that opened up a new line of inquiry or even just registered a detail no one had yet noticed would be acknowledged and become part of the tapestry. People could focus on the object and not the subjective benefit cleverness or acuity might produce for themselves. The good for individuals would not be victory in a competition but satisfaction at having added to the wealth of meanings through which the world is made human. Education would be freed from institutions and return

to the streets and squares and open spaces where all over the world students and teachers originally met.

Walking Thinking

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Nothing frees my mind for the reception of ideas better than a solitary walk. Before an idea can be worked out through argument one must have an idea to work out. I cannot speak for others, but I have never "thought up" an idea. Ideas come to me from the world when my mind is not focused on anything in particular.

Ideas are not concepts, or definitions, or names of impressions. I think of them as vague suggestions of ways determinate thinking and argument might travel. Ideas in this sense are the shared origin of art, science, and philosophy. In arguments, vagueness is a vice, but with orienting ideas vagueness is a virtue: the space thinking needs to move freely.

Keeping the mind open to ideas might seem a simple matter: what is easier than just keeping the mind open? Again, I won't speak for others, but for me it is much easier to focus on the execution of routines, polishing up papers that are almost finished, or worrying abstractly about this or that potential problem than to relax the mind and see what comes.

If you open the mind to see what comes you must admit that you have not yet thought everything that there is to think about. More than that, you open yourself to the possibility that no new ideas will come to you. The confrontation with the empty, the silent, and the dark can be frightening.

Perhaps that is why, for me, ideas come to me when I walk. The physical exertion burns off nervous energy and the ever shifting tableau of sights and sounds is conducive to letting the mind wander. When the mind wanders, ideas are there to meet it. Most I let go, some stick with me. Their persistence is a sign that they might be worth working out. They become material for the next project.

The most important element of a successful project is that one allows it to gestate. The idea comes unbidden and it has to be allowed to take shape. Thought that comprehends problems and actions that solve them demand that thinking give itself over to time, to let thoughts take shape on their own before analysis and logical structuring provide the final polish.

Social media is an outrage machine, a sewer of ill-formed thoughts, over-wrought emotion, and platitudinous posturing because its users do not allow their ideas to develop. They are too anxious to let everyone know that they have an opinion. As I tell my students, I do not care about your opinions, I care about your arguments. But you cannot have an argument without an idea, and ideas take time to form.

The world needs more pauses. More silence would allow more of value to eventually be said.

The pandemic has spread silence across many Canadian campuses. Last week's stroll took my though my mostly deserted campus. I felt equal parts nostalgic for the rush of bodies hurrying to class and worried about the future of universities. Thoughts of the plight of my colleagues at

Laurentian amplified my concerns. While one must flag the long-term underfunding of Ontario universities and the incompetence or malfeasance of the Board as structural causes of the crisis, the other side is declining enrollments, especially in arts and humanities programs. Windsor faces similar challenges. Enrollments in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Science have been in steady decline since 2012. (When one looks at the data one sees a sharp drop in Humanities enrollment across the University sector in Canada immediately following the onset of recession in 2008).

When material reality seems stacked against you, you can always shout "intrinsic value." I am a philosopher and I agree that philosophy and the other humanities have intrinsic value. But the reality is that resources are finite and allocative decisions need to be made. I would assume that my colleagues in Engineering who are teaching upwards of 100 students in Masters classes would agree that Philosophy is intrinsically valuable, but I am also sure that they would add– and they would be correct– that that if there are hires to be made, they should be made in Engineering, because current enrollment trends are making their work loads unbearable. Unless students choose to study the humanities, their long term institutional future as stand alone departments seems in jeopardy.

The dire future for the humanities worries me. On one level, I make my living as a professor of philosophy. On another level, there is no substitute for philosophy, literature, and history as sources of meaningful insight into the complexities and contradictions of the human condition. On a third level, one works not only to pay the bills, but to contribute to the discipline, in the hope that there will future to pass on to a new generation of scholars who might solve the problems you were unable to solve. I feel the same with regard to future generations of students: not all student who take humanities courses major in the humanities; everyone would be impoverished if these departments were to disappear.

Or would they? As my feet moved and mind wandered I started to think about what is really valuable here: the institution of the university department, or the way of thinking cultivated by humanistic study. Art evokes, science demonstrates, and humanistic reflection interprets. Human thought and creativity require the cultivation of all three capacities, the university as presently structured houses all three, but tends to force students to choose one path to the exclusion of the other two. There are very minimal breadth requirements, but design by department encourages specialization while the ability to fully understand, evaluate, and appreciate the natural and social world requires the cultivation of all the abilities to feel and evoke feeling, to demonstrate and predict, and to interpret and convince. University should be organized so these capacities are developed in comprehensive and coherent ways. The university thus needs artists and scientists and philosophers, but does it need them to be housed in departments largely sealed off from and in competition with each other?

Do we want to educate students or do we want to replicate ourselves? The traditional departments are organized to attract and majors whom we tend to teach as if they will all become future professors. Yet almost no one will become a professor, and almost no one will make their living writing journal articles. Yet we focus on disciplinary content and drilling citation methods into students which are useless save for the production of academic articles which most will never write. We teach alone for the most part and look on each other as potential threats to "our"

enrollment. We compete when we are in fact all part of the same millennia long quest for understanding our real conditions of life: metaphysical, physical, social, and aesthetic-emotional. How might we re-organize our institutions and better cultivate all-rounded, integrated intellects if we started from this principle of cooperation?

I am not the first to pose the question, and I do not have an answer. It is an idea of the sort that I described above. I need to let it gestate. All change comes with great risk, but standing still in the midst of a crisis is even riskier. I am not talking about abolition of departments from above, but free self-transformation in light of an institutional ethic of sharing what we know and learning from others. How could the institution be transformed so that we teach collectively and stop competing for students.

Why should a class in medicine be taught by a physician rather than collectively, by a physician, a nurse, a philosopher, and an artist? Why should philosophy be taught by a philosopher and not by a philosopher, a poet, and a politician? Part of the answer is that the specialized division of social labour has forced disciplinary silos. Therefore, if we are going to transform universities we would also have to transform society. We would have to approach the problems that are currently treated by specialists as multi-dimensional complexes whose solution requires all-rounded intellects. Over time, specialization and specialist disciplines would disappear, but not the different dimensions of human intellectual capacity. They would live on, but in new synthetic expressions.

The Road to Hell is Paved With Court Decisions

Originally posted 13 April, 2021

While there is still much we do not know about the details of Laurentian University's insolvency case, the most important thing we found out yesterday: 100 faculty (tenured and contract academic staff) will lose their jobs and 60 programs will be closed. In retrospect, Laurentian's strategy was telegraphed in the late summer of 2020 when admission to a number of programs was suspended. While the Laurentian University Faculty Association (LUFA) raised alarms at the time, they had no idea– nor did the provincial or national associations (OCUFA and CAUT)– know that the administration was planning to file for creditor protection as a private business would in the case of bankruptcy.

Just how the administration was able to take a *public* institution through a creditor protection procedure designed for *private* businesses has yet to be disclosed. The outrageous silence of the provincial government through this entire affair leads one to suspect that high-placed government figures had to be involved. The job losses are the human face of the crisis and the most immediately concerning. The long term implications could be even worse.

As an Ontario Federation of Labour note on the crisis pointed out, public institutions exist because they receive public funding. Unlike private business, stable and predictable public investment in public institutions is supposed to shield them from the ups and downs of the economy. However, the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Any public institution (hospitals, local school boards, etc.) can now apparently be bankrupted through a political decision of cabinet. Every public sector employee in the province faces a new threat.

Although the proportion of provincial grants as a percentage of overall operating revenue in Ontario Universities has declined below 50%, universities remain publicly funded institutions. Or so we thought. Now one wonders whether this government has drawn the conclusion that since the majority of operating revenue comes from student tuition, the province's universities are no longer public institutions but some hybrid public-private partnership. The court seems to have agreed. Every step of this process has been expedited through the courts. Every step has been shrouded in court ordered secrecy. These cuts were approved at an *in camera* university Senate meeting where participants were threatened with massive fines if they broke confidentiality. This sort of railroading makes a mockery of deliberation and collegial governance.

It certainly seems like the fix was in and yesterday's job cuts are the last act of a drama written in advance by the administration and the government.

The government and the administration get everything they want, workers lose their jobs and students lose their programs. Low enrollment programs are eliminated, *without* the institution having to find new positions for affected faculty (as they would have had to do had the financial

exigency clauses of the Collective Agreement been relied upon to close the programs). Those clauses typically allow for layoffs by rank, not program, and so have the effect of keeping on higher paid senior faculty who have to be relocated in the event of program closures. Laurentian is breaking new ground: by going through the creditor protection process they can lay off as they choose, completely outside the Collective Agreement. Why wouldn't the provincial government encourage this sort of assault on collective agreements? Why wouldn't it encourage universities to eliminate low enrollment programs? What will happen once the pandemic pause passes and the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) between administrations and the government are revived? The government can create insolvency crises anywhere by cutting back funds based upon under performance as measured by the SMA.

The decision to lay off faculty comes just as provincial solidarity efforts were ramping up. However, these attacks could not have come at a worse time for the academic labour movement. Like other groups of workers, we too have been set at odds and in competition with each other, between universities and within them. Our ranks are divided between tenured and contract academic staff. Everyone feels the pressure of recession and tight budgets. There has never been a tradition of province wide or nationally organized fight backs. On line activism reaches people but it does not shut anything down. One blockade of Ramsey Lake Road would be worth a thousand blog posts. There is no one to blame for this state of affairs: workers in all sectors have been losing power to capital and government for decades. The winners behave like winners: they press their advantage.

This attack hits close to home for me. I was born and grew up in Sudbury. Although I left when i was 18 because I wanted to live in Toronto, it has never stopped being an essential part of who I am. My mother and uncles still live there, I still have friends that I visit when I go back, and I still feel most at home when I cross the French River into the District of Sudbury. I know that the community has fought hard, as it has always fought when it is threatened by the bosses. However, the University, as important as it is culturally and economically in the city, will most likely not galvanize the sort of heroic struggle of the United Steel Workers against INCO that consumed the city for 9 months in 1978-9. The world of work is more fragmented than ever, unions have been pounded into submission, everyone quite reasonably worries about themselves. The political paradox is that while it is rational in the short term to worry about yourself, it is irrational in the long term because it impedes the development of coordinated fight backs.

But no one can eat logical paradoxes and the threat of job loss in a world where everything depends on money is a powerfully effective disciplinary tool.

The seeming ease with which the Laurentian administration has orchestrated this maneuver around the Collective Agreement should have every academic and every public sector worker worried. It was not only my fellow philosophers who were axed by Laurentian, arts programs and many science departments and programs also went under.

If we want a post-secondary education system that is more than professional schools we are going to have to come together to articulate a new vision for the university system. Under funding is a reality, but so too is under enrollment in some programs and institutions. How can we create a cooperative provincial system with incentives for students to attend institutions with

unfilled spaces? How can we re-organize faculties and program offerings to attract new students, to post-secondary education generally, and to forms of inquiry (the humanities) that are facing declining enrollments?

We should not count on a change of government, welcome as that might be, to solve the problem. The under funding of Ontario universities began under the Liberals, and it was also a Liberal governments that created the SMAs and encouraged increased specialization and competition between universities. Others with more precise knowledge of the Laurentian situation will shed light on the particularities of the problems there, but the structural issues are threats and challenges to us all.

Evocations

A Brief Future of Time: For My Brother, Turned Fifty

Originally posted 11 August, 2020

As we drove to the old store so Steve could buy smokes, we tested each other: "Do you remember what that was; do you remember who lived there?" We both passed every test. But it was not until we were back at our mother's place, Steve lighting one of the cigarettes he just bought, that we were confronted with what the passage of time really means.

Looking across the street Steve exclaimed: "Wow, you can't see the high school anymore. Look how much the trees have grown." Then, out back, behind the fence, we noticed a small a forest had grown up where there used to be just grass. Then in the back yard, two pine trees that our neighbour dug out of the bush and planted decades ago have somehow grown into thirty foot trees with trunks three feet around.

When the growth of trees is the experiential basis of your comparative judgements, you have been on the planet for a not inconsiderable period of time. And when you think about that fact, you realize how the subtle changes going on all the time in the world accrete into structures that shape your horizon of possibilities. The processes are always operating, but only their long term results become objects of consciousness. The realization is jarring, because you are confronted with the reality that little in your world is under your conscious control.

That does not mean that we are inert spectators on our lives. We are always actively shaping the world. Before the trees could grow high enough to block our view, the elevated trains tracks that led to the mine had to be removed. And before the forest replaced the grass that used to grow behind the fence, there was no fence. These experiences are meaningful for my brother and I, but they are unintended consequences of decisions that were made for reasons that had nothing to do with us. The tracks were removed for economic and not existential reasons. Yet, that move, decades ago, permanently changed the street we grew up on, and re-framed our lives, making us aware how central those tracks had been to our sense of ourselves– as children in a mining town, as risk takers who used to jump off the trestle into high snow banks, as explorers gathering up the ore that would fall from the train…

As we went about our lives there was no time to think about how all of these features of the landscape that were normal to us at earlier points in time did not exist. We think about the tracks being removed; an earlier generation could reminisce about the tracks or the high school being built. We situate ourselves in our own time: fifty years is long enough to provoke evaluative reflections: "Wow, Jeff, look, you cannot see the high school anymore." But imagine if you were a tree, and what you would have "seen" as you patiently, inexorably ringed your way skyward. And what would the companions of every Sudburian's perambulations, the rocks, have to say after more than a billion years on the ground: "Wow, it seems like yesterday that the meteorite hit! Could it really have been two hundred million years ago? Do you remember when they started mining here?" What is more perspective altering than thinking back with the rocks is

thinking forward with them: they will be here for billions of years more, long after we have either died out or evolved into something else. And -as Primo Levi reminds us– our atoms will be here too, swirling in the ether or taken up into some other compound. But that thought does not comfort.

We are not trees or billion year old basalt or atoms. We are evaluating machines, and we cannot frame the value judgements that our lives force upon us in those time frames. If we could, we would escape the ego-centrism that makes us think that starlight works so hard over thousands and thousands of years to reach the earth just so that it can shine on us. But that nagging little "I" is not so easily de-centred, no matter what anyone preaches.

What goes on in between the dark from which we come and the dark into which we will go (Thomas Mann, *Magic Mountain*) has to be evaluated in temporal units that make sense to our maturation process: childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age, old age. And I realize, talking to Steve as he has his smoke, that one learns important truths not by studying philosophy but by living and making mistakes and looking back. These mistakes can be sorted into two categories: either we fail some*one* with whom we have a personal relationship, or we fail others with whom we share a public world by shirking our civic responsibilities. In the end, both are caused by selfishness.

But we should never moralise, either to other people or ourselves. Because we are so short compared to the trees, it is as sinful to ignore our own needs and goals and desires as it is to trample other people in pursuit of them. Read the philosophy and wisdom books of every culture or listen to their stories and you will see that they circle around the same problem: how do I reconcile my own desires to the reality of nature, other creatures, and other people. All the answers are variations on a theme: deny one or another pole, or you can strive for balance. There is nothing else in the entire history of practical philosophy.

The thought makes me feel that what I do is both supremely important and entirely useless and superfluous. Important, because we need to learn before it is too late what sort of questions to ask of ourselves when we face choices so that we do not fail others and our world. Useless, because philosophy comes too late: no one is going to be convinced, in the heat of the moment, by an abstract argument or technical proof that what they want to do is self-undermining. We need to go under in order to learn. Some of us do not resurface, and that is tragic, but I realise now that tragedies cannot be avoided, and that redemption is only in the lesson bad examples teach.

For those who are lucky enough to resurface after our mistakes, we should not feel guilty but live. No one needs to do "great" things in life in order to be reconciled to its brevity. Being responsible is enough. You will not save the world, so do not bother trying, and please spare the rest of us the tale of how hard you tried. In the language of our hometown: no one gives a fuck how perfect you think you are.

Just be responsible when you are called upon. For the rest: enjoy the view, your smoke, and the big beautiful spectacle of the world. After you have done your duty, you are allowed to sit, drink,

and ignore the world. Your name will not matter to you once you are gone. Your deeds, great or small will live on, but their impact, like the trees, will be imperceptible.

In Memoriam: Deborah Cook

In 2018 I published a book called *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life*. It started out from my reflections on our mortality. I originally conceived it as an argument about why death, terrifying as the thought of it might be, is not only a fact of life, but a necessary framework within which we can evaluate the events and experiences of our lives as meaningful.

The seed from which the book eventually grew was planted many years earlier, in a eulogy my friend and colleague Deborah Cook gave at a University of Windsor memorial for a colleague who had recently died. She quoted Hegel to the effect that death makes life whole. When a life has been made whole by death it becomes an object for others' reflection and evaluation: only at the end can we say what it meant.

One forgets about these small influences until something jars us from whatever we are immersed in and we are thrown back into our memories. Yesterday, as I was trying to find my way on- line for yet another Team's meeting, an email struck me as curious. It was from the Toronto Police asking for my help about a non-criminal matter. I was curious and a little alarmed, so I opened it. The Detective was trying to reach me to inform me that my friend and colleague of more than 20 years, Deborah Cook, had been found dead in her condo the day before.

The blows to my close circle of friends and family keep coming. This is the third person dear to me who has died since February. It is the misfortune of the living to have to memorialise those who die before them, to reflect on their life now lived and try to say what it meant.

If it seems presumptuous to take the whole of a life as an object of reflection, ask how much worse it would be– even though you would not be around to know it– to simply slip away without anyone noticing. To leave absolutely no mark on anyone or anything: would such a person even have been alive? Deborah left her mark on her circle of friends, her students, and the philosophical world. Deborah sometimes did her best to alienate everyone. Sometimes it seemed as if she might prefer to vanish without anyone knowing. But that was never really the case.

She was a trying friend– but true, too, in her own way. As a colleague she was more steadfast: she was always on the right side of the issues. She put herself on the line when, just before I came to Windsor, the university was being re-organized in an ill-conceived and ill-fated "restructuring program." Fortunately, she lived to see the deconstruction of the reconstruction. Philosophy was liberated from the monstrosity within which it had been imprisoned, in no small part due to her efforts.

I arrived in Windsor in 1998 from Edmonton after two years teaching on a limited term contract. I was hired here on a similar contract. The first time I met Deborah after my hiring (she was on the hiring committee) was at a department meeting. Something about her name rang a bell, and then, as we chatted, it dawned on me that she must be the Deborah Cook whose book on

Foucault: *The Subject Finds a Voice*, had played such an important role in my Ph.D dissertation, completed two years before.

Deborah was a philosopher of the minute and I of the expansive. Deborah poured herself into a text to parse it clause by clause, line by line, looking for the clues to original re-interpretation. I want to drag in content from everywhere and try it make it all fit together. But we shared an overall commitment to humanist values rooted in the belief that people are ultimately free beings capable of understanding and solving the problems that confront them.

Our long and and somewhat fraught friendship began with that first meeting in the Philosophy lounge where we used to have our department meetings. We were two academics from working class backgrounds who liked to drink, had short fuses, thin skins, and Irish tempers, but who both loved to laugh (as she once said, quoting Nietzsche) with "love and malice."

For the first two years I worked in Windsor we would have dinner every Wednesday. She loved to cook: an artifact of her time in Paris studying at the Sorbonne. She preferred white to red wine no matter what was on the menu at dinner. How that taste developed living in France I will never understand, but some quirks one must just accept. In her living room was a picture of her sitting on the steps of the Sorbonne, cigarette in hand, her eyes smiling with pride that she had somehow made it from Woodstock to Paris.

She would eventually sell her house on Randolph Avenue where we shared those dinners. Like so many other Windsor professors she moved to Toronto, hoping to find there what she lacked here. She purchased a lovely one bedroom Condo on Broadview. She loved the space and location. You could still see a sliver of the lake. The New Edwin Hotel and Jilly's had given way to hipster brew pubs and high end bakeries. She seemed happy when she talked about her life there.

Strangely, it was a only a few blocks away from the first apartment I ever stayed in as a visitor to Toronto. My uncle Jack, who also died this year, a day before my birthday, lived there. I visited him for the first time when I was 12 or 13. The first chords of the Sex Pistols' *Pretty Vacant* bring me back to that place every time I listen to the song. His roommate played it incessantly.

Deborah and Jack became fast friends until they had a falling out. And now they are both gone, six months apart. I spoke with her about a week before she died. I complained about on-line teaching and the stress of serving as President of the Faculty Association in these unsettled times. She counseled me that as bad as it might be it would have been worse to have tried to re-open the school. She worried about being isolated as case counts rose and the breezy, chilly, grey pall of Autumn in Toronto set in.

Today, however, it is glorious sunshine and remembrance of warm summer days past. I sit here trying to sketch another quick and inadequate memorial.

Hegel is correct: we deserve an evaluation. But wrong too: for how to sum up something as tangled and incoherent as a life in sentences and paragraphs?

Slainte, comrade.

All Saints' Day

You say: "Be in this moment."

The moment replies:

"I am time,

measure of motion.

I am life,

tantalizing,

fugitive.

I am this late October gale,

and spackled light

filtering through

black oak and hickory.

I am the break of the

grey-blue wave,

the crashing surf

that crushes stones

and makes the beach.

I am the reaching

of your hand for hers,

and the beat of your footfalls,

and the angle

of the sunlight

that paints you

in pleasing silhouette.

I am the movement towards the dark,

the ironic Eternity,

that seduces and destroys you.

I am Mood,

that crepuscular animal,

attuned to the falling and rising

of the light.

And I am

the turning between:

tension and release,

need and satiety,

silence and laughter

into which

all of your goods and wisdom

can be resolved.

The thirsty tongue

refutes

the exalted stupidity

of the question:

does the glass really exist.

Faust was not thinking of experiments

as he undressed Marthe

for the first time.

Richmond Street

Originally Posted, 18 July, 2020

… and it seems impossible … thirty years have passed … my hand … pulls the door closed … for the second last time … perhaps … I linger … one moment more … than I would have … … and try …. to relive 30 years in reverse … moment by moment … from here-now to there-then … but Mind … a cruel time machine … moves forward … even when thinking back … and quickly, too … no tarrying … hours, days, weeks, months, years … a memory-flash … all the spaces in between …compressed into a singularity.

I am what I have been … the past … consummated in this present.

…. and it seems impossible … once one set of things … has been moved one place … and another set of things another … the need to return … will have been satisfied … and this building … once a mystery to me … sooty Victoria brick … then … as if the city had a history … it loomed … as we strolled … in the mist … amidst no one … at 3 am … will become mystery again …

The corridors of memory seems longer … the thinner that time is stretched.

… and it seems impossible … I turn … resigned .. nothing more to be done … here… than to leave… descend the stairs … at the intersection … cars revving… as they always have … gunning for the pleasing curve … taking them West … across Spadina … engine roar used to rattle … the metallic Venetian blinds … now surely corroding … in some dump … today people …pretty no doubt…. climb the stairs … we used to climb… when it was ours.
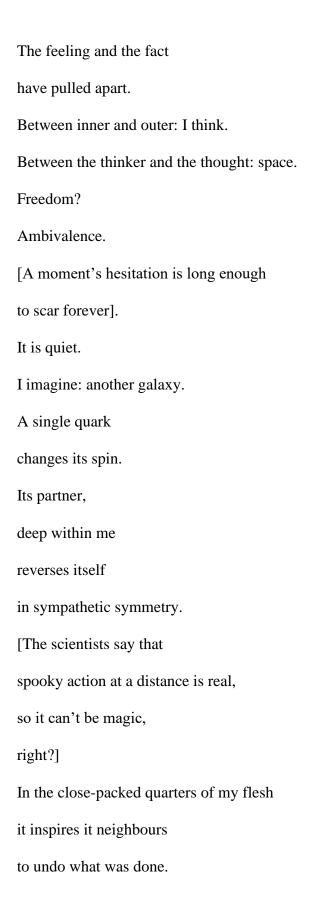
How things come … unexpectedly … full circle.

… and it seems impossible … you don't look like … the working class child of King and Queen … of my memory … and yet … through the alley … Winston's … somehow still there … but I remember … warehouses …the Salvation Army … Bon's and Jacob's …. and late night emptiness… when the city … could get almost dark and quiet …just before dawn… and the lunch counter … next door and downstairs … insipid coffee and American grilled cheese … I would wait … young … all around me … Viet Namese women chattering … but now … an ironic silence … the whir of sewing machines … returned to Viet Nam.

How things come … unexpectedly …. full circle.

Not What the Magi Said

Geometry does not lie.

But the heart

is not

measured in angles.

Tomorrow

the light

will begin to rise,

degree by degree.

But I feel

the darkest day

has yet to

begin.

[But doesn't it feel like that

every year?]

Trapped

between "should"

and "can't,"

you know

which will win.

[There is no negotiating

with reality].

The feeling and the fact

have pulled apart.

Between inner and outer: I think.

Between the thinker and the thought: space.

Freedom?

Ambivalence.

[A moment's hesitation is long enough

to scar forever].

It is quiet.

I imagine: another galaxy.

A single quark

changes its spin.

Its partner,

deep within me

reverses itself

in sympathetic symmetry.

[The scientists say that

spooky action at a distance is real,

so it can't be magic,

right?]

In the close-packed quarters of my flesh

it inspires it neighbours

to undo what was done.

I disappear.

Others are indifferent

to my absence.

Then peace.

[Time seems to flow back to me,

but

that is just a feeling].

Readings

Readings: David McNally: Blood and Money: War, Slavery, Finance, and Empire

Originally posted 25 August, 2020

McNally's *Blood and Money* is a fine-grained historical analysis of the interconnection between war, enslavement, finance, and money from classical times to present. In one sense, it is a new departure for McNally: his first major publication since assuming the Directorship of the Centre for the Study of Capitalism at the University of Houston. In another sense, however, it brings his career full circle, back to the historical examination of the origins of capitalism which guided his first major publication: *Political Economy and the Rise of Capitalism.* The old and the new are connected by McNally's abiding concerns with human labour as the key to understanding the development of human society and the foundational values of human life that underlie and motivate the struggle for socialism.

One cannot understand any of McNally's intellectual work without understanding his lifelong commitment to struggle. He combines the historian's attention to detail with the philosopher's demand for meaning. But the details of history become meaningful only in light of the deepest human demand for freedom. The point of studying history is to understand the mechanics of social change, but the point of understanding the mechanics of social change is to reveal the role that values play in guiding epochal transformations. No doubt societies break down of their own accord: but they only get *better* if people mobilise to make them so. Thus, for McNally, the origin and social function of money is not simply a historical curiosity that he wants to understand, it is a social problem that he wants to solve. The problem, as he states in the introduction, is that money and domination are inextricably linked: "in all class societies money is enmeshed in practices of domination and exploitation."(p.4)

That is not to say that money as such *is* social domination and exploitation. Money responds to a genuine social need that any complex society will have to solve: how do we establish equivalence of values between concretely different objects for purposes of exchange? Marx himself had to grapple with this question in relation to a future socialist society. (See his Critique of the Gotha Program of the German Social Democratic Party). The problem with money in class societies is thus not that it serves as a means of exchange, but rather that the system of exchange is embedded in a system of social and economic exploitation of labour backed up by armed state power. In these circumstances, the particular way in which money abstracts from qualitative differences between things (a loaf of bread and a litre of milk, though different, are both "worth" 3 dollars) becomes a form of violence to the things and creatures of the world.

This point is of cardinal importance to McNally's argument. He traces the arc of violence that connects the battle fields of ancient Greece and Rome to the European ships hauling enslaved people across the Atlantic to the leaky makeshift boats carrying desperate refugees and migrants across the Mediterranean today. What they all suffer from is, at root, a murderous inversion whereby the value of their lives is measured in money. McNally begins the central argument by quoting Cicero, who, looking upon the slaves in his possession after a battle, quips that he was

looking at 120 000 sesterces: Roman currency, not human beings.(p.9) Where life is valued in terms of money, and money is a means of exchange, *life itself is reduced to a fungible commodity.* Life or death becomes a function of supply and demand for labour: if life has no monetary value, it appears to have no value at all, and can (and indeed has been, throughout history), destroyed as a result.

If we are going to understand the social function of money, we thus have to understand the complex relationship between exchange, abstraction, and the social, economic, and political power relationships in which those two practices are always embedded. On the one hand, both are innocuous and necessary. No individual of society is autarkic but all require things that others produce and possess. All human thought requires abstraction from particulars: we cannot make our way in the world without classifying and categorizing. Here I differ from Sohn-Rethel's argument, which McNally cites, that claims that Greek philosophy and science were born from the practices of abstraction rooted in monetized exchanges. Monetized exchanges are an example of abstraction, but abstraction is a necessary epistemic practice in any society, and the refinements of Greek mathematics and logic were born of reflection on everyday cognitive operations, not conceptual reflexes of economic relationships) (p.54-5)

Nevertheless, I do agree with McNally that when it comes to the relationship between living human beings and money in a class society, abstraction becomes a form of violence. When a price is assigned to a human being, they are reduced to a mere thing, exchangeable for other things. But living things, and human beings most of all, are valuable as unrepeatable centres of social self-conscious experience, activity, and mutual relationship. To reduce that-life value to a mere price is to destroy the humanity of people so reduced. Once the humanity of people has been destroyed, any degree of brutalization is permissible. Hence throughout the ages the worst thing that can happen to people is to be enslaved, for enslavement is the most complete assault on the humanity of people imaginable.

Yet, from the ancient world through to the origins of capitalism (and in fact, still today, in zones where the social wreckage caused by capitalism is the most complete) slavery played a dominant social and economic role. Slaves performed necessary social labour, which produced value, for which money was the concrete social expression. The more powerful the state, the more money it required to fight the wars that spread and maintained its power. The majority of McNally's historical analysis is devoted to uncovering and illustrating the slavery-money-imperialist war nexus.

The origin of this nexus was classical Greece. Notwithstanding the greatness of its artistic, political, and philosophical achievements, this world was rooted in "violence, bondage, and enslaved bodies– bodies that were acquired through war, which had to be fought by common soldiers. The ruling class conceived of the latter by analogy with enslaved people. As much as the sacrifice of animals had been the roots of Greek culture, the sacrifice of soldiers in war was at the root of its wars and empire." (p.60) And so it goes throughout the ages: from ancient Greece and Persia to Rome, form Rome to the Islamic empire throughout the Middle East and North Africa, the militarily stronger conquered the lands of the weaker, enslaved the defeated population, and deployed their labour to produce goods for the ruling class. Money was the "life-blood" that enabled real blood to be spilled. Armies had to be paid, and to pay them money was

necessary. This circle was truly vicious: slave labour produced the goods that generated the money that paid the armies that conquered the lands that produced the slaves.

Capitalism *presents* itself as radically different: unlike the ancient slave societies, it purports to be a society based upon free labour and voluntary, contractual relationships; a society of maximum individual freedom where everything is permitted that is acquired by mutual advantage without "force and fraud." And of course, in one dimension, it is true that capitalist workers are legally free subjects, able, in principle, to bargain their conditions of work and to leave it if they find better conditions elsewhere. However, as one of McNally's most important influences, Ellen Meiksins Wood has decisively shown, (see *Democracy Against Capitalism*) this focus on the legal freedoms typical of capitalism ignores the deeper market coercion that rules over almost every aspect of human labour and life. In reality, wages and prices are not determined by negotiation but social forces that are not under the control of any individual or set of individuals. Workers are legally free, but also, as Marx noted, "free" of any other way of keeping themselves alive save finding work. The liberal injunction against coercion disappears in the face of any organized working class opposition: as soon as people act on their political freedoms to demand social changes, the open-minded libertarianism of capitalist society contracts into the iron fist of state-police power.

If McNally remains deeply influenced by the market dependence understanding of the *operations* of capitalism, he nevertheless departs in a significant way from Wood's understanding of the *origins* of capitalism (a position he shared in his earlier work). Wood, following the pioneering research of Robert Brenner, argued that capitalism emerged through endogenous changes to the rural social structure of England. These changes centred on the growing use of wage labour by yeoman farmers renting land from aristocratic landowners. (See *The Brenner Debate* and *The Origins of Capitalism: A Longer View*). McNally does not reject the importance of these social changes or the existence of "agrarian capitalism" in England. However, he does contest the view that capitalism can be explained by reference to endogenous domestic causes alone. Agrarian capitalism could not have become capitalism without the Atlantic slave trade and colonisation. Enclosure created a "surplus population" that was exported to the Americas as indentured labour. These impoverished and dispossessed English, Irish, and Scottish peasants were the first wave of colonisers. Soon, however, the supply of indentured labour ran out: the English then turned to Africa and the slave trade to satisfy the demand for labour. This enslaved labour generated revenues that returned to England as an important part of the capital that fueled the growth and consolidation of capitalism. (115-116, 160-2)

Despite this reality, money has always been understood as the very basis of civilization. English philosopher John Locke argued that consent to the use of money was the transition point between barbarism and human society. Money was powerful enough, according to Locke, to change our interpretation of natural law (laws written by God for the survival and flourishing of living things). In the state of Nature, Locke argued, personal appropriation of common wealth is limited by natural law to only such amounts as can be used for purposes of survival and development and which leave enough for others. Natural substances spoil, but money is a social convention (its physical form is irrelevant, that which makes money money is that it accepted as the universal equivalent of any material thing). Human beings that still lived on the land and did not produce for the sake of increasing the monetary value of the land had not yet reached the level of

civilization. The colonisation of their lands was thus justified by Locke on grounds that indigenous societies were wasting the resources that god gave them.

Here is the ultimate irony of money: Locke begins from the law of nature (survival and development) and criticizes hoarding. Once money is introduced he completely inverts his earlier argument: now use for survival is rejected as irrational and production for profit rational even if it deprives peasants or indigenous people of the lands their survival depends upon. So it has gone through the ages: from Cicero tallying up the monetary value of his slaves, to English colonisers justifying their expulsion of indigenous people from their traditional lands, to the sheriff changes the locks on an expropriated house, money-value has been opposed to the life-value of human beings. As Marx said in the *1844 Manuscripts*, money is a magic power: if you have money, you can become anything which your money can buy. The converse is equally true: if you do not have money then your life is a misfortune: regardless of how dire the need, if you cannot pay, you will go without.

For the ruling class, the truth of need-deprivation can be ignored so long as those who suffer do not organize. Their concern was not with human well-being, but economic growth. As social and economic relationships grew more complex, so the need for new forms of state finance emerged. While classical and neo-classical economists typically explain the origins of capitalism in terms of the superior rationality of market relationships working themselves out in history, the actual historical record reveals that market relationships would never have become socially dominant without consistent and pervasive state action. Nowhere is this fact more pronounced than in the sphere of public finance. And it was war– coordinated state action par excellence- which, in the early modern world as in the ancient world before it– that would be the necessity which birthed the invention of the Bank of England. The bank of England was the first national bank and the origin of the contemporary form of state expenditure financed by pubic borrowing.

One of the most illuminating sections of the book, McNally's history of the Bank of England is a compelling tale, but more importantly, it demystifies finance and in particular it most seemingly magical power: the creation of money. McNally explains, in as clear prose as such an opaque subject permits, that debt-financing works because the state guarantees loan repayments through future taxes. Future taxes, in turn, are guaranteed only on the basis of materially productive social activity: the production of valuable things through labour. So, while it is true that national banks can "print money" the ultimate value of that money depends upon the state being able to repay the loans that it contracts with the national bank to finance its expenditures. And it can only make payments on those loans if there is a real economy producing real value. (pp.130-133)

The revolution expressed by the Bank of England– a revolution whose effects are still being felt– lay in its break from the ancient practice of rooting expenditure in past labour. As McNally explains: "The Athenian owl had been based upon past labour, that of enslaved people in the Laurion silver mines. Bank of England notes, however, carried an index of future labour, not past work. They denoted a slice of social wealth (derived from that labour), that would find its way to the state in the form of taxes."(133) This shift from past to future labour implicitly broke the link between the value of paper money and precious metals, but it also massively increased the amount of money that could circulate at any given time. If money could now in a sense be "produced" in response to state and private borrowers demands, with only future returns form

labour to back it up, then as long as an economy is growing, an unlimited amount of money could be produced.

These monetary innovations allowed English capitalism to dominate the world from the eighteenth through to the beginning of the twentieth century. By the end of World War One, however, it was becoming clear that the United States had supplanted the United Kingdom as the world's pre-eminent power. It had unmatched industrial capacity and its shores had not been churned to bits by the artillery battles of the First World War. By the end of World War Two, with Europe in ruins and only America with the financial and productive wherewithal to rebuild it, the United States had achieved unprecedented global power. And it consciously used this power to eventually leave the gold standard and constitute the American dollar as the world's currency. As McNally explains, the status of the American dollar as the world's currency generates tremendous advantages for American capital: "Over 500 billion in US currency circulates outside the United States, for which foreigners have had to provide an equivalent n goods and services … by early 2018, foreign governments had accumulated 6.25 trillion in US Treasury securities. Dollar-receiving countries, in other words, unable to convert their US dollar holdings into higher forms of money –like gold– have often used them to purchase American government debt."(223) The United States can continue to finance its debt by issuing more debt, because everyone is dependent upon the US dollar. They cannot call in the IOU's without risking the destruction of the whole global economy, and theirs along with it.

This pre-eminence also confers profound political power. Although McNally does not go into this aspect, the ever-expanding sanctions regime through which America bullies the rest of the world is made possible by the fact that the world economy runs on US dollars. If you want to participate in that economy, then you must deal with the US banking system, to which access can be cut off by the US government.

Nevertheless, although it thus appears that money as such confers social power, the truth, McNally continues to remind us, is the opposite. Social power constitutes the power of money. The 2008 crash reminded everyone that at the end of the day, the financial systems still depends upon the real economy of goods and services– of human labour and its products.

The whole impossible labyrinth of modern financial instruments that provoked the 2008 crash were rooted in that very simple and elegant relationship between borrowing and future labour first developed by the Bank of England. No institution has to have "on hand" a sum of money necessary to cover any loan. So long as payments can be made, more money can be put into circulation. However, since the value of the money ultimately depends upon the real economy, which does not grow forever but periodically collapses, wealth based on debt is ultimately a house of cards. "All of this private credit-money creation typically proceeds smoothly," McNally demonstrates, "until a downturn in the economy or a financial shock induces a credit crisis. At that moment, it becomes clear that much of the bank-credit money that had been created … is as worthless as the IOU's passed by a penniless person."(p. 231) In these moments of crisis the material reality that underlies the fetishism of money asserts itself in all too obvious ways: unemployment, loss of homes, collapse of businesses and banks, and intensification of social conflict.

Need-deprived people must ultimately fight back against the social forces and groups that would destroy them or leave them to die. McNally– like Marx before him– is a thinker of broad scope and deep understanding, but he is ultimately a revolutionary. He is a revolutionary not in an cliched or anachronistic sense, but in the sense of someone who wants to get to the bottom of social problems and contribute to their solution. As his new book ably demonstrates, the root problems of inequality, poverty, racism, and pervasive social violence is money. But underlying money are exploitative social relationships. Underlying exploitative social relationships is class structure. Class structure grows up out of the soil of exclusionary ownership and control of basic life-resources. Until that depth problem is resolved, none of the particular problems of capitalism or any other class society can be fully addressed.

McNally ends on a note of hope– the same note of hope which has been sung throughout the ages of revolutionary struggle, all the way back to Spartcus's slave revolt against the Roman ruling class. These voices, McNally believes, are inspirations to new generations of activists with the courage and imagination to confront the depredations and violence of the the blood for money system. His book was published just before the explosion of anti-racist and anti-police violence struggle currently gripping the US and having effects around the world. This latest upsurge is testimony to the permanence of struggle so long as their is oppression and domination in thew world.

McNally is right to end on a note of hope. At the same time, politics cannot live on hope alone. If, after two millennia, we are still struggling with only hope to feed us, one might reasonably object that this hope is irrational and groundless. But there is more than hope, and the world is more than a violent exchange of blood for money. That there is this more: elements of democracy, life-security, civil, political, and social rights, beauty and friendship and care and concern– is the result of the history of struggle which motivates McNally's inquiries. When we refer to this history of struggle we should not neglect the corresponding history of (imperfect and partial) achievements. The left needs hope, but it also need to remember that the material possibility of change is proven by the material reality of past victories.

As I have argued before, people need to understand not only that another world is possible, but that this actual world would be a lot worse than it is– and it is in bad shape– without the struggles of working and oppressed and exploited people. We should not fear that mention of the good that has been achieved will detract attention from the bad that still needs to be overcome.

Readings: Virtue Hoarders: The Case Against the Professional Managerial Class, by Catherine Liu

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Catherine Liu's *Virtue Hoarders* is an admittedly polemical attack on what she regards as the anti-working class politics of the "Professional Managerial Class" (PMC). Like all good polemics, it is a romp: lively, fun to read, but flawed when made the subject of theoretical reflection. She exposes a serious problem in an influential wing of the American liberal left, but questions abound about whether the PMC is bets understood as a class and the overall political salience of some of Liu's targets.

Liu draws on Barbara and John Ehrenreich's definition of the PMC. According to the Ehrenreichs, the PMC consists of "salaried workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations."(p.6) I will discuss the problems with this definition below. To begin I want to retrace the main steps of her argument.

For Liu, the PMC poses a political problem for the socialist left because while its objective function is to reproduce capitalism, it has convinced broad sections of the public to think of it as the bearer of progressive values. Their version of progress lacks a commitment to wealth re-distribution. For the PMC, according to Liu, progress is nothing more than the institutionalization of its own virtue signalling: "The PMC reworks political struggles for policy changes and re-distribution into individual passion plays … It finds in its particular tastes and cultural proclivities the justification for its unshakeable sense of superiority to ordinary working class people."(p.2) She cites Hilary Clinton's dismissive rebuke of Trump supporters as "deplorables" to illustrate the point. Clinton's supercilious disdain for the unmet concerns of working class voters is an excellent example of the political damage the PMC's moralism can cause, but the majority of the book is given over to extended analyses of examples that I found comparatively trivial and dated.

The body of the book focus on the politics of transgression in the American academy, the child-rearing obsessions of the PMC, the politics of reading, and sex-based moral panics. The first chapter rehashes the Sokal affair from the 1990s (when the editors of the journal *Social Text* were tricked into publishing nonsense produced by the scientist Alan Sokal) and tells a few other lurid tales of cancel culture on campus. The Sokal affair was a minor *scandale* at the time, (and there is a more [recent example](#)that it might have been better to discuss). I agree that values like peer review and academic freedom are socially important and that they are threatened by the sort of incompetence exposed by these hoaxes. I wonder, though, whether starting the book with events that are mostly unknown and irrelevant to the lives of the working class people she wants to defend does not repeat rather than address the problem she hopes to help solve: the substitution of academic navel gazing for meaningful political struggle.

Likewise the next three chapters. Her second chapter focuses on the PMC's obsessive over-parenting. She attempts to portray its development in an historical light, looking back to the influence of Dr. Spock and Winnicott on post-war parenting methods. The chapter also contains an important reminder about the disastrous impact of Clinton's so-called "welfare reforms." However, instead of laying bare the political-economic reasons behind competitive child care, the chapter soon sounds too much like the author venting her own annoyances. While I concur that America is in the throes of a "class war from above," that war is not being waged by the PMC, but the actual ruling class.

Yes, helicopter parents and their anxiety-ridden children are insufferable, but *class* analysis has to try to get beyond personal pet peeves to the social causes of the problem. There are very good reasons for all but the most wealthy to be anxious: decades of stagnant economic growth (and the absence of a credible socialist alternative) mean that the prospects for today's young, working class or members of the PMC, are grim. Most young people, even graduates of the highest ranked universities, face the prospect of precarious employment in the gig economy, chasing dreams of writing the billion dollar app but living the reality of penurious piece work. Liu should by all means have a go at the shuddering middle class masses afraid of their own shadows, but she has to shine her critical lights on the real culprits.

The following chapter is odder still. Thematically, I suppose one could say that it focuses on the politics of reading. I agree that reading raises political stakes, but does it raise the political stakes that engage the material interests of the poor and working class? Methinks not so much, But the oddness is not a function of its lack of connection to the material interests of the working class, but its narrow focus on the meaning of *To Kill a Mockingbird.* She argues that Harper Lee's famous novel as a synechdoche for all that ails the politics of the PMC (here represented by Obama). I think her critique of the novel is excellent: it displaces Black agency from the centre of the struggle against racism and replaces it with white saviour-lawyers. The chapter also exposes "educational reform" for the teacher union busting it actually is. Still, in the age of Black Lives Matter, is the example of Obama's reading references really the most important political problem to examine?

At both theoretical and practical levels Liu wants to re-inscribe anti-racism as anti-capitalism. She is correct to try. However, she makes no mention of the long and shameful history of the American working class and union movement when it comes to the representation of the interests of Black workers. Yes, identity politics is a problem, but as with social anxiety about downward mobility, it has to be explained as a response to real social and political problems. Wherever groups of people are demonized and oppressed because of who their oppressors say that they are, there will always be a need for members of the demonized identity to organize *themselves* to expose the lies of the oppressors. To be sure, the Left needs unity around shared material problems, but it must be a complex unity of real people coming together on the basis of their own experiences, experiences which are always inflected by race, sex, and so forth.

The final substantive chapter again focuses mostly on a university-centric issue: the media representation of moral panics over campus rape. She reminds readers of the case of the *Rolling Stone* reporter Sabrina Erdely's story about a purported gang rape at the University of Virginia. Erdely failed to fact check the story and it was later exposed as a fabrication. The chapter then

moves on to critical appreciation for the work of Laura Kipnis (Northwestern University professor and author of *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus)* and concludes with an excoriating critique of Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz and her performance art piece in which she carried a mattress around campus to protest the university's refusal to expel her alleged rapist. Liu is once again correct to lament the collapse of critical politics into personal therapeutics and the too-quick rush to judgement that often takes hold in allegations of sexual harassment. (Neither problem is new. John Fekete diagnosed essentially the same problems in the 1980's in his book *Moral Panics: Biopolitics Rising).* However, as with her position on race and class, the political problems cannot be solved without serious engagement with the issues. The *Rolling Stone* case might have been bunk, but one comes away from the chapter feeling that Liu feels that the problem of sexual harassment is largely a function of over-sensitivity and character weakness on the part of today's young women. She says as of today's college age women "that they seemed less capable of sexual agency and more in need of protection than previous generations of women." (p.66) Even if this claim is true, one still wants to hear the social explanation: what is it about the landscape of sexual relations that has generated this sort of response amongst young women?

That question leads me to the two systematic issues that I have with the book. First: is the PMC really a *class* in the Marxist sense of the term? Second: do the scattered examples that she explores add up to an identifiable *class* project?

Marx defined classes in terms of their material interests and explained their material interests as a function of their relationship to the means of production. This definition works very well for the ruling and working class. The former owns and controls the means of production (means of life support and development). The later is "free" of the means of production and thus must sell their labour power in order to survive. That leaves a large segment of the population undefined. Marx referred to them as the "petite bourgeoisie," today the term "middle class" is more common. They play a wide variety of ideological, managerial, and regularity roles. But what are the defining material interests of the middle class? We know that capitalists have a material interest to maintain conditions for the profitable exploitation of labour and workers' have a material interest to attenuate and overcome those conditions. But what unites layers, pharmacists, professors, accountants, and middle managers?

In Marx's day the petite bourgeoisie was unified by a fear of falling into the working class (which Marx predicted would happen, but it did not). Is that still the case? For some, I think it is, but for the whole class? Note that the Ehrenreich's definition does not refer to material interests but to an ideological disposition. The problem with this approach is that ideological dispositions are subjective: class position does not determine what one thinks about one's interests, even when the interests are objective. If class consciousness were a mechanical function of class position workers, being the immense majority of society, would long ago have overthrown capitalism. So, is the PMC a class in Marx's sense? Perhaps it would be better to stick with "middle class" and define the PMC as that fraction of the middle class whose livelihood depends upon positions which a) translate ruling class decisions into effective policy, b) enforce them, and c) legitimate them.

This conclusion, unsatisfactory as it may be, leads me to the second: do Liu's examples add up to a class project? Here I think the answer can be more definitive: no. I think that Liu's real target is left liberal ideology. However, there is nothing unique to the PMC as she deifnes it that makes it the mouthpiece for a moralistic version of left liberalism. Moreover, there are good reasons to argue that some professionals (teachers, nurses, to give just two examples, are better thought of as workers. Teachers have very different class interests than the principal, but they are both professionals. If one wants to insist on the term PMC, it must follow that since both are professional, both are members of the same class, *and espouse the moralistic version* of left liberalism that purportedly defines the class consciousness of the PMC. That view implies all sorts of political confusion, I think.

If one approaches moralistic left liberalism as an ideology not associated with any class in particular, those confusions are better avoided. The problem with moralistic left liberalism is not that the PMC espouses it, but that its proposed solutions are personalistic and leave the distribution of resources, wealth, and income in place. But there are better traditions of left-liberalism. Liu notes approvingly the early twentieth century version that descends from John Dewey. She does not discuss the more politically important mid-late twentieth century version that descends from the work of John Rawls. That version is much closer to the Bernie Sanders' sort of social democracy that she supports. Neither version is more or less the expression of the class consciousness of the PMC. Neither gets to the root of the problem, but Rawlsian left liberalism gets much closer to it than the bromides that Liu critiques.

[Readings: Insurgent Empire: Priyamvada Gopal](#)

Posted on

[1](#)

The eruption of new struggles against racism in the spring and summer of 2020 posed again an old philosophical question: what is the role of universal human values in the struggle against particular forms of oppression? Priyamvada Gopal's *Insurgent Empire* provides what I have formerly called a "critical humanist" answer to the question. The detailed history of the interaction between anti-colonial activists and their British supporters is unified by the reality and value of self-determination that underlay the struggles of oppressed people against the Empire. Gopal's book is therefore a major new contribution to understanding of the logic of concrete universality, self-determination, and the collective agency of colonized peoples. The book is a rich historical analysis of the ways in which colonized subjects in India, the West Indies, and East and West Africa not only brought the British Empire to a close through their struggles, but transformed the political and philosophical consciousness of anti-colonial allies in Britain. The book argues convincingly that the impetus for radicalized metropolitan criticism was not inherent in the benevolent humanitarianism of liberal and social democratic critics, but was a change forced upon British critics by the agency of the oppressed themselves.

Philosophically, therefore, Gopal exposes an often unremarked difference between what I would argue are the revolutionary implications of a properly understood humanism and paternalistic humanitarianism. Since we still live in an age of "humanitarian wars" championed by ideologues who Max Blumenthal calls "military humanists," Gopal's book is of much more than historical and abstract philosophical interest. The incoming Biden administration has revived the careers of Obama-era champions of regime change like Victoria Nuland and Samantha Power. Effective opposition to what will surely be renewed calls to maintain troops in the Middle East and East Africa will depend upon understanding the lessons of self-determination that the subjects of Gopal's book taught.

Gopal's book learns from, but ultimately rejects, the view of post-colonial and deconstructive critics of empire that universal human values are always cultural particulars falsely inflated by power to the status of universals. Gopal recognizes the obvious: that the are widely divergent symbolic systems and that all non-European cultures have been subjected, at one time or another, to demonizing attacks as "subhuman" and "uncivilized." But what the collective resistance to those racists attacks proves is that beneath differences of culture and language is a universal human power to determine the social conditions of life. She quotes the leader of Jamaican resistance to British rule during the Morant Bay rebellion (1865), G.W Gordon to make this crucial point. Gordon demanded British support for an end to British rule by invoking "the stern obligations of a sense of justice and common humanity." (p.95) Solidarity thus demands recognition of common humanity; imperialism, by contrast, presupposes a racist rejection of a shared humanity underlying the differences of oppressed and oppressor. But 'the human' is not, as Marx would say, an abstraction inherent in each individual. It is, rather, as the struggles across

the colonized world proved, the capacity of all human beings to determine their own social and political conditions of life.

Philosophically and politically, Gopal's text can fruitfully be read within a tradition of revolutionary opposition to imperialism and colonialism whose most articulate exponent was Frantz Fanon. Gopal does not enter into any extensive dialogue with Fanon's arguments (the book is more history than political philosophy and its focus is resistance to British imperialism). But the foundational philosophical principle that anti-colonial resistance proves the shared humanity between oppressed and oppressor is Fanon's greatest contribution to political philosophy. Unlike his post-colonial interpreters, Fanon never rejected the truths of European philosophy, but he revealed the way in which imperialist practice contradicted philosophical theory and proved the bad faith of the later. But the solution to this bad faith was not an embrace of the pure particularity of the colonized, but the construction of a "new humanism" in which the voices of the formerly colonized would be heard (*Wretched of the Earth*, p. 246).

Gopal hammers home that crucial truth of anti-colonial struggle on every page. The best proof of the humanity of the oppressed is their victory over the colonialists whose rule rested on the belief that their subjects were incapable of governing themselves. Instead of teaching the purportedly uncivilized people of the colonies the master truths of European civilization, the most perceptive English liberals and socialists were forced to learn from the struggles of the oppressed. The willingness to distinguishes the paternalist humanitarian from the comrade standing in solidarity with the oppressed as they organize and lead their own struggles. Anti-colonial radicals thus proved to their white comrades that "universalism and humanism" are neither singularly European in provenance nor (therefore) radically 'other.' The task they set themselves is radical in its very simplicity: to demonstrate that the impulses towards freedom and equality can be seen to arise across multiple contexts and cultures, not least those of Africa and as such would be impulses towards reclamation from rather than bestowal by Western benevolence."(348) Humanism is thus not opposed to cultural differences, but rather to the invidious use of cultural differences to justify colonial domination. If the 'human' is expressed through a variety of cultural traditions, then none is by nature superior to the others, but all human groups have the right and capacity to organize their own lives as they decide.

The truth of humanism is thus expressed through the cultural differences that proponents of colonialism fetishized to justify British rule and demonise insurgencies. " A case in point is J.S. Mill's faux-caring for the future well-being of Indians whom he regarded (4 000 years of poetry and philosophy and self-organization notwithstanding) as in their "non-age." (*On Liberty*) Critical humanism, by contrast, is a construction born of seeing the power of self-determination at work in all people struggling against different forms of oppression. Post-colonial critics are right to expose the racism inherent in platitudinous humanitarianism and its Eurocentric conceits, but they are wrong to thereby conclude that anti-colonial struggles are irruptions of incommensurable particulars against imperious universals.

While Gopal does not reference his work, *Insurgent Empire* reinforces the argument of Ato Sekyi-Otu, in *Left Universalism, Africacentric Essays,* that the post-colonial critique of universalism ultimately rests on a mistaken understanding of universals as abstractions. There are of course abstract universals ('green,' book' 'computer') and these concepts are necessary to

classify the content of experience and allow us to make sense of and work with it. But they are dangerous when the concept has a value independent of what one might want to do with it. When we are trying to distinguish the human from the non-human, the way in which the distinction is drawn determines how those inside and outside the classification will be treated. False universalization of a particular definition of the 'human' carries with it the utmost danger for those who find themselves excluded.

The racial hierarchies of European imperialism are a paradigm example of the false universalization of a particular conception of what is fully human. European ideologues constantly constructed their colonial subjects as analogous to children in need of tutelage. Imperialism was portrayed as a civilizing mission justified by the long-term interests of the oppressed, who would learn how to govern themselves by listening meekly to their enlightened rulers. Anti-colonial revolution exposes the untruth at the heart of this racist construction: the power of self-determination is *not* a property of European civilization but a universally human power. As she says, commenting on C.L.R. James' interpretation of the Haitian Revolution, "It is less the case … that insurgent slaves 'embraced' a revolutionary doctrine from Europe, than that the French Revolution provided a ready-made language as well as the material support for aspirations that were already there but held in check by the degradations and violence of the slave system."(p.349) One cannot understand anti-colonial rebellions unless one sees them as the uprising of human beings sick of inhuman treatment, and proving, by force of arms, their equal capacity for self-determination.

Looked at philosophically (Gopal is a historian but their book displays considerable philosophical sophistication) the human power of self-determination is a concrete and not abstract universal. The philosophical roots of concrete universality are found in Hegel's dialectical understanding of the truth of things as the process of their historical development and realization. The radical implications of concrete universality are not properties of the Hegelian text but of the full range of real historical struggles against the illegitimate denial of the full humanity of oppressed and colonized people. The brilliance and beauty of Gopal's text is the lively way in which it brings the dialectic of human self-emancipation to life across a range of struggles, beginning with the Sepoy rebellion in India in 1857 and ending with the independence of Ghana and Kenya.

Gopal's text contains important discussions of well-known anti-colonial activists and intellectuals like C.L.R James (*Black Jacobins*) and Eric Williams (*Capitalism and Slavery* and the first Prime Minister of Trinidad) as well as lesser known leaders, like the Indian-British Communist MP Shapurji Saklatvali, whose tireless efforts pushed British liberals and socialists to recognize the imperative need for independence and an end to colonialism. It traces the history of now forgotten movements like the League Against Imperialism as it exposed the racism inherent in colonialism and campaigned tirelessly against the British Empire. It shows how the courageous and persistent mobilization of Indian, Jamaican, Kenyan, Ghanaian, and other intellectuals and ordinary people across the colonized world organized and led a century-long set of struggles that is the most inspiring political movements for human freedom in history.

Gopal has the gift of the great historian to bring the characters to life without degenerating into mere biographical story telling and to convey the excitement of the struggles of the time without

collapsing analysis into melodrama. The book is sensitive to the complexity of the problems it studies. However, it does not surrender in hopeless relativism to those complexities but sticks– non-dogmatically– to the concrete universality of human freedom that the lives of her subjects expressed and imposed on those who tried to deny it.

Lessons From History XI : Reg Whitaker, "The Tower of Infobabel: Cyberspace as Alternative Universe" Socialist Register, 1996

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Reading Whitaker's essay 25 years on, I was reminded of the anxiety that a certain class of left-wing intellectual felt as emerging communication technology began to re-organize social, intellectual, and economic life. In response to the often breathless and uncritical celebration of the "revolutionary" implications of networked computers, many critical intellectuals were reactive and defensive, arguing (correctly) that the technology would serve rather than undermine capitalism and (fussily) that cyberspace was just another consumer society distraction from the hard business of social change.

Whitaker covers all this ground and more in his short contribution to the 1996 *Socialist Register*. I was struck by the contemporaneity of his main political and economic arguments. But I was also reminded how relatively undeveloped the technology was in 1996. The technologies that would really re-wire the self and transform social relationships had yet to emerge. In 1996 I checked my email (remember Pine, oldsters!) on a monochrome monitor. The possibilities for using the web to revolutionize marketing and distribution had not yet been fully understood. The prosumer (producer-consumer) ethos of the Web 2.0 had not yet emerged, and social media was in its infancy. Instead of Facebook most social contact was funelled through Bulletin Board sites that brought like-minded people together (I was a member of the Hegel Society of America's) using a mostly text-based interface.

Anyone who has come on-line since 2010 would hardly recognize the platforms that were cutting edge in 1996. It was easy to be dismissive of more future-oriented social theorists like Mark Poster who argued (presciently, I now think, but disagreed with at the time) that the cyberspace was a new opportunity for playful experiments with selfhood. I would still argue that the politically emancipatory power of the web is overblown, but I think I was wrong to dismiss its liberatory potential for marginalized individuals who were able to reach out beyond the parochial confines of small conservative towns and societies to find comfort, support, and pleasure with others in the same situation with whom they would have never have been able to connect prior to the web.

Whitaker's general disposition towards the emerging on-line world is expressed in the analogy, around which he constructs his argument, between cyberspace and Borges' "Library of Babel." (p.174). On the one hand, Borges' universal library stands for the unlimited quantity of information available on the web (but in 1996 Whitaker could not have known the half of it, just as Borges could not have anticipated the materialization of his story when he wrote it in the 1950s). On the other hand– and this point is more important– it also stands for what Whitaker regards as the destruction of quality by quantity. On line and in Borges' story, sense and nonsense co-mingle as equals.(p.185) Once the secret is exposed: a library of everything cannot

be coherently navigated, naive hope gives way to a sober return to the material world from which cyberspace promised to free us.

Whitaker's criticisms were justified in 1996 and nothing that has transpired since refutes his thoughtful skepticism about the political potential of networked communication. What is remarkable– or perhaps not– is that evidence and argument have had no effect on the exuberance with which liberals and some radicals continue to celebrate the emancipatory potential of the internet. Every time there is an uprising anywhere liberals are quick to point out the role of social media. But as Whitaker reminds, *communication* long predates *networked communication technology,* and before Facebook there were *faces* meeting in real space to debate and organize.(p.186).

The problem with the technotopian belief that ease of communication mechanically entails democracy is three-fold, but only two could clearly be seen in 1996. First, it fetishizes "horizontal" relationships between people, while revolutionary politics also requires vertical organization. To illustrate, consider the outcome of the Egyptian Revolution of 2010. It is no accident that the Muslim Brotherhood won the election that followed the Tahrir Square uprising. Their cadre were more disciplined and better vertically organized and prepared for a struggle to win power. This fact in no way diminishes the courage and energy of the younger liberal and socialist revolutionaries, but it does remind us that the struggle for power requires centralized decision making and a shared focus. Clear organizational lines of command are essential when power is at stake.

Second, state security systems know how to use computers! If you can communicate, you can be tracked communicating. Twenty years before the British and US governments conspired to torture Julian Assange for the crime of disclosing the truth about racist US war crimes in Iraq, Whitaker rightly warned that communication technology would prove more useful to the security state than revolutionaries. New communication technologies enable the state to more effectively track the activities of potential adversaries wherever they might be. "The lineaments of the surveillance state have been apparent for a long time, but the explosive advances in computer and communication technology provide a powerful and ever-expanding toolbox of surveillance."(p.181). It is possible to work around attempts to filter content and black access to the web; it is more difficult to avoid being traced, at least for ordinary activists. Skilled hackers can avoid detection,. but are political threats to the state only in their own minds and on line bluster.

The third limitation could not yet be seen because the dominant social media apps had not yet been created. Today we can see that 'social" is a misnomer. It is true that Facebook and Twitter allow real time interaction between people, but societies are complex institutionalized relationships that interlink people who do not know or necessarily care about each other. Social communication is always communication between and across differences. Members of complex societies have to accept that their consociates think differently than they do about problems that affect society as a whole. In order to communicate, people have to listen to one another. So-called social media have had the perverse effect of isolating people from each other's differences and siloing them into closed circles of true believers. Instead of facilitating complex and multi-faceted discussions, people on social media crowd together with others who already share their

views. The right has given itself over to conspiracy and far-right organizing (which Whitaker anticipated, p.177) while the liberal left wallows in sanctimony, bathetic 'outrage,' and on-line shaming circles. What they do not do is develop the capacity for political argument that progressive social change requires.

Left illusions in the power of the web to transform capitalism economically are perhaps even deeper than their political illusions. Whitaker exposes in 1996 the problem with the wishful thinking that underlies critics like Hardt and Negri's argument (drawing on the earlier work of Paolo Virno) that the web effectively puts the means of production into the hands of prosumer workers. What these critics forget is that in order to use the web to do anything, you have to get on line. (p.179) The networks that purportedly allow workers to "exit" capitalism are owned by capitalists. Computers are also machines which must be built out of minerals and plastics dug out of mines and manufactured in factories owned by capitalists. Unless those material means of production are made public property, no one is "exiting" capitalism.

An analogous argument holds with regard to the hopes of some non-Marxist economists like Yochai Benkler (*The Wealth of Networks*) who maintains that networks will undermine capitalism by reducing the cost of producing and disseminating information to near zero. If information can be created and disseminated for free, it cannot be commodified, and if it cannot be commodified, it will undermine the capitalist profit motive. Since Benkler's pioneering study Jeremy Rifkin has extended it to explain "the internet of things." If information can be sent without costs to prosumers with 3D printers at home, they can produce what they need autonomously, circumventing and ultimately destroying the capitalist form of commodity markets.

Whitaker was writing too early in the development of networks to be able to comment directly on these sorts of positions, but he could already see their Achillies' heels. First, information, like other commodities, is more or less valuable. Less valuable information is allowed to circulate freely; more valuable information is jealously guarded and those who would distribute it freely are hounded and sued. Second, information is useful to workers looking to create outside of capitalist relations, but it is also useful to corporations looking to market to workers in their role as consumers. Whitaker did not live to see his web activity turned into ads that make suggestions for new purchases based on an algorithmic construction of a personality profile, but he could see the dangers of targeted marketing emerging in outline.(p.182).

These criticisms should not be read as rejections of the *possibility* of networks being used to organize non-commodified dissemination of information and de-centralized production. On the contrary, I (like Whitaker) am emphasizing the point that deeper social changes would be required to enable their realization. Technology on its own, as Whitaker already understood, will not bring about a change in class structure because it does not change the structure of ownership and control of the means of production.

Whitaker's arguments about the effects of technological change on the Global South have proven less accurate than his worries about surveillance capitalism. In the 90's the big worry (and it was legitimate) was the so-called "digital divide" between rich and poor in the Global North and between the Global North and South) (Third World, at the time)(p.177). If information was

going to be the new oil fueling the 21st century economy, then unequal access to information technology would deepen inequality between classes and nations. On the one hand, this argument has proven true. Take the example the education of students from poorer households during the pandemic. Those children living in homes without high speed internet or their own devices have suffered from the shift to on-line course delivery. The digital divide is real and inequality within and between nations has grown. Whitaker was right to argue that technological change would not solve the problem automatically.

On the other hand, what he did not see clearly is the way in which new computing and communication technology would create new opportunities in the Global South for uneven development. "Combined and uneven" development was Trotsky's term to describe the phenomenon of less developed societies using technologies developed in more advanced economies to accelerate the process of economic development. While inequalities between the Global North and South have continued to grow in general, it is also true that countries like Brazil, India, and China have raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty by developing high tech manufacturing sectors. China is now a leader in the development of Artificial Intelligence, India is home to a robust software industry, and Brazil's Embraer is a leading commercial aircraft manufacturer. Moreover, Silicon Valley draws programming and engineering talent from around the world. It was a leading sourse of opposition to Trump's racist immigration restrictions, (but also proof positive of the nonsense behind the argument that mathematical logic is a function of Eurocentric thinking: there is no more universal language than mathematical logic).

But the biggest limitation of Whitaker's argument is the fact that it was written prior to the invention of the most revolutionary communication technology since the printing press: the networked smart phone. For good and ill the smart phone has become an indispensable device, helping Syrian refugees plot their journey to Europe and allowing Wall Street billionaires to organize mergers. If anything proves the neutrality of technology it is the smart phone: it can be used for good or used for ill, but it is not he technology that determines the use, but the users and the social forces that act upon them.

At the same time, technology is itself a social force. Technological development is not the sole determinant of history, but, as Hartmut Rosa has argued, it does generate path dependencies which can be channeled in different directions but not resisted. (*Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity).* Technological change generates powerful acceleration tendencies which have effects across economic and political systems and cultural worlds. They change the nature of work, play, and appearances and are extremely difficult to resist or roll back, not only because people depend upon work for their livelihood, but also because innovations which are unsettling for older generations define the normal frame of life for the next generations. Since their identity has been forged within a new technical-cultural matrix, they see no reason to resist what for older generations might be seen as a threat. Helpfully, resistance naturally dies out.