



# THINKINGS 7

Collected Interventions, Evocations, and Readings  
2017-18

Jeff Noonan

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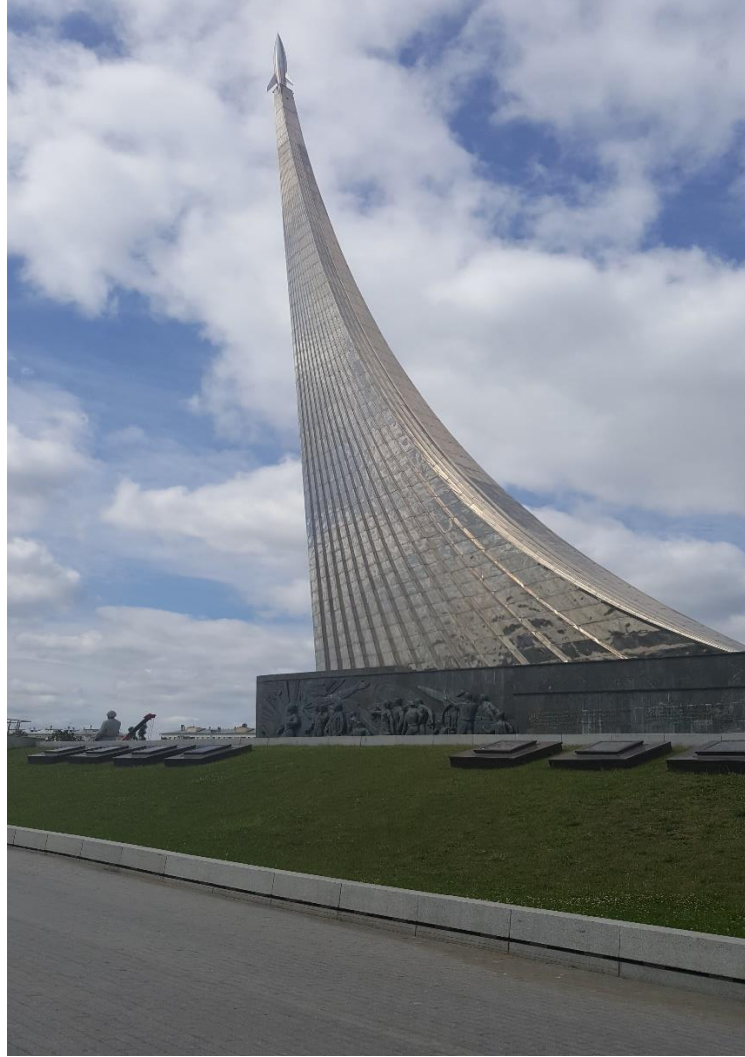
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# Interventions



# D'un tone moralistique adopté naguère en politique

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## Stop Me If You Have Heard This One Before

In the mid 1980's, when I began studying philosophy and became an active socialist, the major fault line on the left ran between Marxists (and other defenders of the "Enlightenment Project") and post-structuralist critics of "essentialism." The critic's basic argument was that the Enlightenment was a Eurocentric project which falsely universalized a conception of human beings as subjects, i.e., rational, internally unified, self-determining agents, for whom freedom meant subjugation of the not-self. The "not-self" included all non-European peoples and non-conforming identities (feminists, gays and lesbians, racial minorities, etc.) because they differed from norms assumed to be universal, but really (or so they claimed), relative to a particular discourse.

The fault line had two dimensions, theoretical and practical. My doctoral dissertation, (revised and published as *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*) argued that the post-structuralist critique of human subjecthood was both philosophically and politically incoherent. Philosophically, as a critique of Eurocentric thought articulated in the name of freedom for different ways of being, it presupposes, on the part of the people whose lives express the differences, precisely the capacity for self-determination that their arguments deny. Politically, they were also wrong to argue that struggles against colonialism or oppression asserted something radically different, or "transgressive," (Foucault) of the norms of freedom that had defined revolutionary struggles since the French Revolution. I showed, by studying what anti-colonialist revolutionaries actually said about their demands and goals, that they all asserted exactly what racists had denied of them: that they were self-determining human beings just like their oppressors (i.e, subjects of their own history).

Philosophically, I would still stand for the conclusions that I first defended more than 20 years ago. However, these philosophical arguments have done little to re-direct "identity politics" towards any sort of coherently unified political movement against capitalism. Claude Lefort argued in the 1980's that Marxists were completely misunderstanding the struggles of women, gays and lesbians, and other minorities within advanced capitalist cultures. (see *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, pp. 264-272). These were the struggles of minorities who wanted to remain minorities, i.e., they wanted to be included as different, as outside the mainstream; they conceived liberation as liberation from normalizing constraints, not for the sake of participation in the wider revolution, but for the sake of being the people they wanted to be, safe from assault and attack, and free from the need to justify themselves. The past thirty years have proven Lefort correct, at least at the level of practice, so far as political struggle in liberal-capitalist states is concerned. There have been large mobilizations (against globalization in the 1990's, Occupy, briefly, in the 2000's), but these movements brought together myriad particular interests and never achieved any sort of synthetic, pro-socialist unity).

The global crisis of capitalism that began in 2008 did nothing to catalyze a new global socialist movement. Marxist critiques of capitalism remain vital academic reference points, but do not inform the practice of any but a tiny subset of activists anywhere in the OECD countries. There are powerful communist movements outside the OECD (in Kerala, India, and in Nepal, for example), and the project for Twenty-First Century Socialism has not yet completely given up the ghost in Venezuela, although it does appear to be near death. During the Arab Spring, far-left groups played almost no role (as I learned first hand from talking with an older Palestinian communist at a conference organized in 2011 by the Law School at my university).

The point: an historical materialist analysis of political developments since 1968 (the last major wave of struggle in the West directly inspired by Marxist ideas that could in some sense be called socialist) has to conclude that old forms of socialist struggle and the interpretation of the connection between class position and political identity has been refuted. Instead, identity politics remains the most vital current of struggle: people have continued to organize around a defense of their felt identities. Universal goals like “social justice” and “equity” are not tied to deep structural transformation of social institutions and global economic forces, but understood as legal and attitudinal changes brought about education and struggle against specific problems that assure everyone “safe space” to be who they feel themselves to be.

### **Fuck You, I Won't Do What You Tell Me**

Struggles to be different, to appear in public as the person one feels oneself to be in private, to express one's desire and love, or one's culture or racial identity, as one wants to express it, involved, and continues to require, tremendous courage. Nothing is easier than to rouse violent anger against vulnerable minorities. Struggles to change social norms and laws such that people are not menaced, attacked, or killed simply for being whomever they desire to be are essential. If there is a real diversity of identities, then society has to allow for their free expression if it is to be in any sense socially just.

At the same time, I think the tenor of struggle has changed. In the 1960's, when the “new social movements:” radical feminism, black power, red power, chicano power, queer liberation, and the environmental movement were vital components of the New Left, they were all driven by the idea that “the system” itself had to be revolutionized. These groups emerged in a dual context: the stultifying conformity of 1950's culture on the one hand, and the global wave of anti-colonial revolutions on the other. Reaction against the first gave rise to the exuberant iconoclasm of the movements, their insouciance (“sex, drugs, and rock n roll”), their revolutionary sensuality, their creativity, their boldness. The cultural explosion, however, was contained within a sophisticated political critique of the connections between the fundamental dynamics of capitalism, the destruction of the environment, racism, colonial violence, the patriarchal family, repressive control of sexuality, the alienation of labour, and the meaninglessness of consumer society. There was no *one* fully coherent theory that seamlessly deduced every problem from the dynamics of capital accumulation on a global scale, of course, but the different expressions of revolutionary critique each exposed in their own way some aspect of the interconnected whole. Marcuse's political writings from the late 60's to the early 70's go some way towards a synthesis.

“Well, so what,” a critical interlocutor might respond. “That was then, this is now. You yourself said above that the only conclusion that it is possible to draw at this point in time is that the old means of struggle towards socialism are dead. So why are you lamenting the absence of a “revolutionary” sensibility in today’s struggles?”

It is a good question. However, what I lament is not the passing of an arch “revolutionary sensibility.” (I think historical contexts make sensibilities and theories revolutionary, and we are very far from a revolutionary historical context). What I worry about, rather, is a shift of focus from systemic dynamics as the cause of fundamental social problems to the identities and character of people as the cause of social problems, and ‘diversity’ and a change of character on the part of people as the solutions.

To understand what I mean, consider the ubiquitous charge of “white male privilege.” The term does have some descriptive value: in a very abstract way, “white men” do exercise preponderant power, but the idea of “privilege” makes it sound as if all white men have identical power that they somehow inherit upon being born as white men. By ignoring real internal differentiation within the imagined abstraction, politically relevant differences of power are ignored. We are left with the implied conclusion that all white men somehow rule over everyone else, and conspire to keep it that way, and that therefore their typical modes of behaviour are the real object of social struggle.

However, social reality is not composed of abstractions (‘all white men’) but real people, many of whom, even in the “privileged group” suffer poverty, ill-health, exploitation, alienation, and the sense that life is meaningless. Abstract categories that pay attention only to generic markers of identity completely ignore *class differences* that distinguish some white males from others. Only a very small subset exercise real power in society. Moreover, even they do not rule by fiat but according to social dynamics and structures that are more powerful and deeper than any group. These dynamics and forces shape all identities and are the causes of oppression, exploitation, and alienation. Abstractions like “white male privilege” personalise a structural-political problem and get in the way of building a unified movement in which all oppressed and exploited people recognise the common source of their problem and invent new ways to overcome it.

I am not denying that some white men really are privileged, but calling into question the political significance of endlessly beating that drum, or pretending that if we paid more attention to the voices of others, all problems would be solved. To be sure, we should expand the canon, put women and other oppressed groups in positions of power, and be open to different ways of life, relationship, and self-understanding. But this politics of diversity leaves completely unexamined the deep drivers of war, violence, structural poverty, and authoritarian politics. Merely “allying” with one or another oppressed group around their particular issues is not enough to build the type of movement the world needs to solve those major problems. Ally-ship might be good for the soul (it can be presented as proof that privileged individuals care about the concerns of oppressed groups), but what we require is the old socialist idea of solidarity. Ally-ship is a giving of oneself over to the struggles of a group to which one does not belong (and that is, of course, a good thing). But solidarity was not about giving one’s self over to another group’s cause, but members of all groups *recognizing a common source of their specific problems*, and building a

unified movement to solve them. Solidarity projects focused on changing the institutions, values, structures and dynamics of society, so as to make different relationships and people with different goals and values, possible. It was not about including a diversity of voices in the existing institutions, but fundamentally transforming them. Solidarity, in this precise sense, it what is politically lacking today.

There is of course a moral dimension to solidarity- the goodness of commitment- but it is not about character in the abstract. Abstract critique of character and values, or-worse- sorting rulers into good and bad capitalists (those who are inclusive and those who are suffocatingly old school in their defence of hierarchical management)- obscures the underlying structural problems. *It does not tell us how people come to be the people they are.* It ignores the social-structural factors involved in identity formation, the contextual pressures that act upon people, shaping their social position and values. One half of Marx's claim that people make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing, is missing. Unless we can explain the circumstances, we are left with voluntarism: social change comes down to individuals deciding to change their character and commitments..

If privileged individuals try to stop acting as privileged individuals, it might make better people, but it will not on its own overcome the structural problems of racism, sexism, and the exploitation and alienation of labour. We should remember that it was not because Marx thought that workers were necessarily "morally" good people that he thought they held the key to a free future, but because their role in the process of production- a process upon which social life depended- *positioned* them to be a politically universal class (i.e., capable of solving the structural problems that capitalism generates).

He may have been wrong in so far as he thought that social dynamics would create the conditions in which all working people, regardless of nationality or identity, would come to recognise, and act on, their universal interests. Nevertheless, subsequent history has also proven that capitalism is compatible with female bosses and turning Gay Pride Parades into big business. That is not a criticism of Gay Pride or liberal equality, but a reminder that capitalism can become more inclusive without become less exploitative and alienating. Work as a space safe from sexual harassment is different from a workplace governed by the deliberative decisions of the workers as a collective. Capitalist popular culture is endlessly plastic: it can adapt to changing values and create sitcoms with same sex or trans people as the lead actors and portray them in a positive light. But it captures those identities within a socio-economic normalcy in which their identity is simply one amongst a diversity all pulling in the same direction as workers, parents, investors, citizens. The underlying problem of work, parenting, family structure, economic priorities and citizenship is not touched at all.

In order to get at these underlying problems it is not enough to "call out" people for their privilege, chastise people for their sense of humour, float vacuous abstractions about what all white men supposedly think and believe, or plead for "diversity," "inclusivity," and "social justice." Chasing right-wing clowns around campuses trying to shut them up (only to, ironically, amplify their voices all the louder) is a waste of time. Of course, a society which includes different genders etc., should be inclusive of those genders, etc., but the goodness or badness of a society is not determined by whether its ruling class is monochrome or polychrome; it is determined by whether there is a ruling



class at all, and how resources are controlled and utilised. What we are lacking right now is not a clichéd call for “revolution,” but unified movements that point at the heart of the problem: ownership and control of universally needed life-resources by a very tiny fraction of the global population and the use of epic violence, military and police, to protect those holdings and the monetary wealth they derive from them.

# Moralism and Moral Criticism

Originally Posted February 19, 2018

I wish there were a God and It would appear as soon as any politician offered “thoughts and prayers” to the victims and survivors of a tragedy whose causes the politician had the power to address. It would say: “I do not actually “look” like anything. “Made in my image” means you have the power to solve your own problems. No one wants or needs your hypocritical prayers, so stop pontificating and address the causes. Oh, and by the way, you served the wrong master in life. You will be going to hell.”

I would gladly spend eternity burning with the likes of [Marco Rubio](#) if only I could see his face when he was confronted with his hypocrisy. Alas, we are all fated for death, oblivion, and the atomic recycling yard.

That there will be no final judgement does not mean that we should not render moral judgement while on earth, but this poses the problem of what “moral” judgement means, what its basis is, and what its goals are. The danger is that moral judgement collapses into moralism, because moralism leaves the social causes of preventable harm unaddressed.

Let us call “moralism” any position which, a) assumes, without argument, that there is right and wrong, b) that individuals have a responsibility to internalize the rules that define right and wrong, c) that all social problems result from a failure to internalize these rules, and, d) since, according to b), it is the individual’s responsibility to internalize the rules of right and wrong, there are no real social problems, but only individual failures.

People with something to hide always assume a moralistic posture. Moralism is a smokescreen behind which to hide one’s own complicity with the pattern of causes that lead to the atrocity. An “evil” character is invented to draw attention away from the real causes. Let me keep picking on Marco Rubio to illustrate my point. In order to hide the fact that he is major recipient of funding from the National Rifle Association, (NRA), Rubio argued (as everyone beholden to the gun industry and lobby in the US argues after every mass shooting) that gun laws would not have prevented the atrocity, because “the bad guys” don’t obey laws.

The argument studiously ignores the [statistical evidence](#) that the harder that it is to acquire guns, the less the bad guys have guns, and the less likely homicide by gun violence is. But that is not the real problem. The real problem is that the moralist fails to ask the crucial question: how does someone become a “bad guy” in the first place? And why do “bad guys” feel the need to deal with whatever problem plagues them by killing someone (either a specific person thought to be responsible for the problem, or random strangers).

Moralists, even self-professed “Christians” like Rubio, who would otherwise eschew scientific explanations, typically cherry pick psychological science to help them answer the question. In the hands of the moralist, the function of psychology is to take the focus away from social patterns and structures and locate the gaze firmly on the character of the individual. Hence responsibility

for all problems can be laid at the feet of bad individuals who failed to internalize the rules of right behaviour, and responsibility for all atrocities can be laid at the feet of bad individuals who failed to internalize the rules of right behaviour because they are mentally ill (“sick,” as The Donald might say). The mental illness is not invoked to exonerate the person, but only to explain the greater scope of violence and depth of depravity.

Magic shows have persisted even into the age of quantum mechanics because human beings are easily distractable. While your attention is diverted, the magician performs the trick. Even if you know what is happening, it hard not to be led to the conclusion the performer wants to lead you toward. Moralists are like magicians: they divert our attention from the real problems. They are successful not because they are talented performers (although some are), but because social and cultural patterns that have persisted over decades or centuries develop their own momentum, and are profoundly difficult to change. My revolutionary friends are no doubt lamenting right now: that is the very principle of conservatism! It is, and it is not. I do not (like the conservative) value long standing practices just because they are of long standing. I am simply noting a universal fact of history. True revolutions are very rare, they arise only where it is impossible to live in the old way any longer, and even then older mindsets and patterns of behaviour persist for long periods after the revolutionary event (or, like Orthodox religion in Russia, return after long periods of repression).

The point is not that nothing can ever really be changed. Clearly, long established patterns can change, and for the better, as I will argue below. But changing them requires long persistent effort. In a world with multiple demands on our time, where economic pressures force most people to have to worry about work and saving, and where the next crisis is just a mouse click away, mobilizing significant numbers of people for significant amounts of time against deeply ingrained beliefs and patterns of action is very difficult. As commentators in the US have been saying, if Sandy Hook did not change gun culture, nothing will.

They do not say that to support gun culture, but to acknowledge how profoundly it marks a large proportion of the US population. So, while Rubio and others are obviously nothing more than paid apologists for gun manufacturers and sellers, his moralistic distraction will probably work.

If it is going to fail, then the sort of political, mobilizations that the student survivors have launched will have to attract huge numbers. Moral criticism is an essential part of the mobilization.

There are two essential differences between moralism and moral critique. First, moral criticism explains individual character and motives by reference to a social value system and a structure of political, economic, and cultural power. Second, it de-legitimizes the ruling value system by exposing the ways in which it systematically harms people, typically, by subordinating the satisfaction of their needs to the goal of its own perpetuation. Whereas moralism distracts us from the causes, moral criticisms exposes the complicity of the moralist with the ruling value system. Moral criticism thus always leads to demands for fundamental change. Moralism, by contrast, is an attempt to prevent change.

In comparison with moralism, moral criticism sound positively amoral. It talks about dollars and cents, points out the economic interests that benefit from the ruling values, and unmasks hypocrisy

and cynicism. It leaves exalted talk of God and evil for Church. It gets its hands dirty, and does not worry about souls. It is true that guns do not kill people, people kill people, but when they kill people with guns, they are using a product whose combined sales reach into the billions of dollars. How long would manufacturers care about gun rights if there were no money to be made? And if there were no money to be made, there would be no money to spend to buy congress members, and thus no gun lobby, and no NRA.

Of course, that picture is far too simplistic. There is a gun culture, and a deeply ingrained ethos of “Kill Thy Enemy” in America. But: (and people outside of America forget this fact too often): a [majority of Americans do not own guns](#). They are as appalled by gun violence as everyone else, and feel hurt and embarrassed when they have to answer questions from their friends in other countries about “what is wrong with Americans?” Gun culture is real, but it does not drive the bus. Money drives the bus. If no one could buy a machine gun for personal use, machine guns for personal use would (eventually) disappear. Canada is very far from the peaceful society it portrays itself as being, but one would have a very hard time getting an automatic weapon to unload on concert goers from a hotel window.

So moral criticism gets down to social causes. Instead of pontificating, it aids mobilization by exposing the problem. All social problems may be understood, morally, in terms of harm and damage: to either or both of life-conditions and living things. Mass shootings provide a vivid illustration: death is the end of all possible life-value for the person who dies. Death as the natural end of life is inevitable, and not a harm when it comes at the end of a fulfilling life of personally enriching experience and contribution to the community. Death prior to that point, as the consequence of preventable disease or random violence, is an irreparable harm, since the person cannot be brought back to life. Unlike the case of willing self-sacrifice, they did not chose their own death so as to save more life. Hence, an actually moral ruling value system would prioritize the protection of health and life over the social causes of disease and random violence.

That means, concretely, curtailing the “rights” of organizations that cause the harm. Inevitably, regulation will be denounced as a violation of freedom. But it is actually a gain for freedom. Freedom presupposes life: early death is an absolute negation of the freedom of the dead person. Having a right to consume a potentially deadly commodity is a limit on *one way of acting in freedom*, which—unlike death—does not preclude another way of acting. If you can’t swing your sword, you can beat it into a plowshare, and become an organic farmer.

“But I want to shoot guns, fuck organic farming,” my AR-15 toting friend rejoins. Relax, friend, it is just an example. The deeper point is that changing the social rules we live by can force people to change, but the changes are good if the outcomes better protect and enable life. When I was a kid in the 1970’s in Northern Ontario, drinking and driving was commonplace, not taken seriously, a real part of the culture. People joked about how pissed they were driving home the night before. Tougher enforcement and public campaigns have changed the culture, and drinking and driving is much rarer, and not something anyone would brag about. No one, including people who used to drink and drive, would argue that the old situation was better just because people used to laugh about it.

Because we are free, we can change ourselves. Democratically deciding to change the rules we live by is an act of freedom. Moral criticism participates in this act of freedom by taking its stand on the principle that *right* is that which protects and enables life, and that legal rights and cultures both have to answer to this higher court. It thus exposes the causes of socially pervasive harms, rather than masks them, as the hypocritical moralist does.

# The Use and Abuse of Ethics

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Ethics *should* be the most comprehensive field of philosophical inquiry. The term derives from the Greek *ethos*, which can be translated as “way of life.” Since the *human* way of life involves necessary interactions with nature and society, demands both physical and symbolic activity, physical and emotional relationships, and decisions about self and social governance, the ethical problematic involves everything, from ecological considerations, to the place of science in our relationship to nature, to economics, problems of gender and sexuality, race, political organization, religion and spirituality, art, interpretation and meaning, and individual existential crises about the meaning (or lack thereof) of their own existence. Moreover, since the only way to understand ways of life is to study them, and to study them we have to look to history, ethics makes clear the diversity of forms of life. But within that diversity, it also discloses (if we know how to look for them) certain commonalities, core natural and social needs which, though they may be satisfied differently, are shared, baseline human realities.

However, unity amidst diversity is a problem I will explore another day. I want to focus on two ways in which “ethics” is bastardized and its politically radical implications stifled today. In standard usage, ethics does not refer to a holistic form of life, but professional rules and standards. Hence, ethical behaviour is reduced to rule following within a strictly delimited professional domain. “Unethical” behaviour, by contrast, is reduced to transgressions of these standards, and is often synonymous with being “unprofessional.” When it refers to more than just unprofessional behaviour, unethical action is still typically confined to an individual violation of another individual’s legitimate expectations of treatment, given the rules that define the professional “code of ethics.”

Of course, professional standards are important and have their place, especially in a world where professions are defined by often complex bodies of knowledge. In cases of law or medicine, for example, those who need a lawyer or doctor but are not fully versed in the complexity of the legal system or scientific medicine rely upon their lawyer and doctor to be honest with them, to have their best interest at heart, and to provide them with the information they need to make informed decisions. So there is no question of simply doing away with professional standards and codes of conduct.

Nevertheless, this restricted use of ethics emphasizes its repressive aspect. Ethical codes are primarily invoked when they are violated: they are mostly lists of what not to do (even if they are phrased in affirmative rather than negative language). Ethics, in the sense of *ethos*, however, is not primarily about what not to do, but how people live. Ethical philosophy is thus life-affirmative: it studies the way people actually live, in the comprehensive sense of “live” given above.

At the same time, ethics is not anthropology. It is not a dispassionate study of different ways of life interested in the details for their own sake, or for the sake of discovering deeper patterns, but a critical inquiry into the normative problem of how we *ought* to live. Diversity may seem to rule

out an answer to that question. An unthinking cultural relativism might conclude: everyone ought to live in accordance with the standards of the culture into which they are born— bad news for women born into sexist cultures or racialized subaltern groups born into racist cultures.

I think that there are not terribly difficult ways to avoid the problem of cultural relativism without imperialistically ignoring difference. Societies claim not only to be, but to be *good*. All claims to goodness demand some attempt to legitimate available positions and opportunities, their openness or closure, as in the interests of the members of society. Ancient slave societies did not say that they were unjust because slaves had no choice about where they worked; they claimed to be just because those who were slaves were constructed as subhuman instruments who could do nothing more than work for a master. Had slaves never revolted, perhaps this argument (familiar from Aristotle's *Politics*) would have worked. But the so-called slaves themselves eventually did rebel (most famously in Rome, led by Spartacus) thus proving, by their self-activity, that the philosophical justification of *slavery* as good was really ideological justification for *slave holding*.

This example shows us the general way in which ethics can be critical without being perniciously ethnocentric. All societies justify themselves by intrinsic standards of legitimacy, but these justifications can also be found wanting by subaltern groups within them. Over time, we see a general pattern of struggle emerge across eras and cultures: people who are constructed as not having a certain need (say, women, for education) eventually re-interpret themselves and reject that construction. Once a group recognises deprivation of a core need as a harm, they realise that they have been oppressed, and begin to fight back against the oppressive structures and their justifying ideologies. Conservative elements will of course respond that the demands are unnatural abominations, but these are transparent attempts to hold on to their own power. The demand for change is a demand to open space for individual activity, not wholesale destruction of the culture (its language, art, etc).

These struggles are of course political and economic, but they are not about institutions in the abstract, but how people live, and how they might live differently, and *better*. Hence, they are ethical struggles *par excellence*. Normative inquiry into the problem of how we ought to live is thus essential to social change and ethics, properly conceived, is thus also critical.

Here again threats loom. Case in point: Israeli philosophy professor Asa Kasher who has authored a proposed [new code of academic conduct](#) for Israeli universities. This code of conduct is a pretty clear effort to squelch dissent on Israeli campuses and to prevent, in particular, the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement from gaining any traction there. Specifically, it is part of a wave of anti-BDS measures designed clearly to criminalize dissent and opposition to Israeli colonialism and apartheid. For good measure, Kasher has also recently argued that Palestinian teenager [Ahed Tamimi should stay in prison](#) for fear she might slap soldiers again. Tamimi had the temerity to slap a fully armed thug invading her home! But more generically, it is part of a wave of “civility codes” that institutions, from corporations to universities, are trying to impose on workers. These codes are always justified in apple pie terms: the need for respectful workplaces, etc. In reality, they are thinly veiled efforts to increase management power to control dissent and opposition.

Kasher is thus only an extreme example of the danger that seemingly benign or even progressive ethical codes, codes of conduct, anti-bullying protocols, etc., can have. Since these codes have to

be administered, they invariably give more power to the authorities: the very groups who preside over deeply unjust societies. Historically, however, most struggles against oppression: against slavery, against patriarchy, against exploitation, have been struggles *for* self-determination, against the bosses, the police, the authorities; struggles *not* for more repressive enforcement of the rules, but for *different* rules, whose willing internalization creates different people, who can govern themselves and establish mutually affirmative, respectful relationships with others always treated as moral equals.

But we live in a fearful age that lacks imagination and confidence, an age in which too many people want to be told what to do rather than decide collectively how to live together as free individuals, an age in which too many people are afraid of the unanticipated encounter, an age which too often confuses moralistic rigidity with social criticism. As the example of Kasher shows, people who think they are struggling for freedom and justice best be careful of what they wish for, if they wish liberation can be achieved by repressive behaviour codes imposed from above.

As ye suppress, so shall ye be suppressed in turn.



# What is Academic Freedom?

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Like all liberal rights, academic freedom cuts both ways politically. Much of the controversy that it engenders is a function of one side wanting to claim as its exclusive property a right that by its very nature is two-sided. The growth of the alt-right in the wake of Trump's election and the return of arguments over political correctness (first time tragedy, second time farce) to North American campuses has made a public issue of what in less fraught times would be studiously ignored by everyone outside of academia.

In Canada, the main fault line today is the University of Toronto, and in particular Psychology Professor Jordan Peterson's one man campaign against pronouns. Cloaking himself in the mantle of "science," he has argued that there are no biological or social grounds for using genderless pronouns when referring to trans people, and has accused his opponents of violating academic freedom in their critical responses to his position. Recently, he has upped the ante. Building on his popularity as an alt-right icon, he has promised to start a web site to expose left-wing "cult" classes on campus. As he told CBC radio:

"We're going to start with a website in the next month and a half that will be designed to help students and parents identify post-modern content in courses so that they can avoid them," [he told CTV's \*Your Morning in August\*](#).

"I'm hoping that over about a five-year period a concerted effort could be made to knock the enrolment down in postmodern neo-Marxist cult classes by 75 per cent across the West. So our plan initially is to cut off the supply to the people that are running the indoctrination cults."

[Colleagues at the University of Toronto are alarmed. Not only is this a gross failure of collegiality—we are supposed to criticize each other but not call each other names and try to destroy one another's classes— but they are also worried— legitimately— that in the ionized political atmosphere that prevails today, being singled out on this website could make them the targets of violence. I will leave these legitimate concerns to one side and use the example as a lens to examine the real meaning and value of academic freedom].

So, parents, before you start worrying that your child will go to U of T and come home next Thanksgiving in saffron robes singing hymns to Lord Krishna, let me decode Prof. Peterson's invective. "Post-modern" was a term that was *au courant* when I was graduate student, more than 20 years ago. Today, um, not so much. "Neo-marxist" is even older. Its referent— if it ever really had one— would be figures like Herbert Marcuse who, in the 1960s, tried to re-formulate Marx's critique of capitalism to account for the ways in which the working class had been absorbed into the system. So his terms of abuse are a bit out of date, but hey, he is a psychologist and not a practitioner of the dark arts of Anthropology or English literature (two disciplines which have, according to the good doctor, been taken over by cult leaders).

What actually troubles him is that some disciplines have the temerity to challenge the authority of empirical science, to expose its historical entanglements with very unscientific hierarchies of power, and to defend interpretive approaches to the problem of truth that take into account self-understanding, context, culture, and history. In other words, students in these classes have the opportunity to think critically—the very opposite of cultish indoctrination.

Supporters of Peterson will say that academic freedom gives him the right to expose what he regards as unscientific dogma; his critics can rejoin that academic freedom gives them the right to teach methods and content critical of the western canon and natural science. The truth is that academic freedom gives both sides the right (subject to key limitations that I will discuss below) to make whatever arguments they think need making. Like the right to free speech, academic freedom is a formal right that protects the expression, in an academic context, of politically opposed positions. Attempts to capture it by either the left or the right will always fail, because it protects *expression*, not content.

In order to understand academic freedom as well as its real value and importance, it is important that we not treat it as an abstract value but as a collective agreement right. Academic freedom does not appear in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. While it might usefully be thought of as a species of free speech, the only documents that formally assert it and are able to protect it are faculty collective agreements (and, sometimes, University Senate by-laws). Here are the relevant clauses from the Collective agreement between my Faculty Association and the administration of the University of Windsor:

10:01 The fundamental purpose of the University and its unique contribution is the search for new knowledge and the free dissemination of what is known. Academic freedom in universities is essential to both these purposes in the teaching function of the University as well as in its scholarship, research, and creative work.

10:02 Each member shall be free in the choice and pursuit of research consistent with the objectives and purposes of the University and in the publication of the results, subject only to the normally expected level of performance of her/his other duties and responsibilities.

10:03 Each member shall have freedom of discussion. However, in the exercise of this freedom in the classroom, reasonable restraint shall be used in introducing matters unrelated to her/his subject. The University shall not require conformity to any religious beliefs, doctrines or practices.

10:04 The University shall not impose supervision or other restraints upon, nor will it assume responsibility for, what is said or written by a member acting as a private citizen. However, as a person of learning she/he shall exercise good judgment and shall make it clear that she/he is not acting as a spokesperson for the University.

As should be clear, the main *purpose* of academic freedom is not to protect marginalized political positions of whatever ideological stripe, but rather to ensure that research and teaching are unconstrained by administrative, economic, or political power. The relevant contrast is not between left and right, but between truth and power: academic freedom is necessary because the discovery of truths depends upon the free exercise of intellect, including its critical exercise against

any and all authorities who would try to block the dissemination of certain truths that undermine their legitimacy.

The main threat to academic freedom is university administrations themselves, and the social, political, and economic forces that batter at the walls of the university demanding that research and teaching serve their interests. That said, academic freedom itself protects Marxist economists and business professors, radical feminists and defenders of traditional marriage, nationalist historians of the First World War and post-colonial critics of imperialism. So long as there are competing political positions in society they will be represented in academia. All attempts of one side or the other to use academic freedom to de-legitimize the other side contradict the very value to which they appeal.

That said, there are two very good reasons for social critics to defend academic freedom even though it also protects the right of their opponents to attack them. First of all, alt-right fantasies aside, the university is not ruled by neo-marxist cultists. Boards of Governors are stuffed with business people, and senior administrators increasingly identify their role with that of a CEO. While there are a few dogmatic leftists teaching, there are no neo-marxist cultists running universities. Ordinary market forces are a much bigger threat to the existence of Anthropology and English Literature than Peterson's website will ever be. The totalitarian drum beat of jobs, jobs, jobs, abetted by administrators who design budgets that de-fund the arts and humanities (as well as basic research in the sciences) in favour of commodifiable research, are rapidly shifting the university away from social criticism and toward conformity with money imperatives. Academic freedom can be an important value basis for the critique of institutional degeneration.

Second, the left has to learn how to win arguments again. We need to convince opponents that the world is wrong and stop being satisfied with patting each other on the back for our moral purity. That means a willingness to engage the intellectual enemy and prove that we have more coherent and comprehensive understandings of the world, that we can expose their contradictions and one-sided constructions, and that we have a convincing program that can build multi-faceted majority support.

The only real and legitimate constraint on academic freedom is the truth that our research and teaching ought to serve. Where there are contrary positions, both cannot be true, but to decide between them generally requires argument. Argument is not *ad hominem* insult; criticism is not dogmatic rejection of whole fields of social and cultural research. Moreover, truth is not the preserve of the natural sciences. To be sure, natural scientific understanding of the elements and laws of material reality are of essential importance, both as intrinsically valuable achievements of the human mind, and also as essential contributors to collective health and well-being. But science does not exist in a Platonic realm of ideas free from political and economic power. Nor are the laws of material nature sufficient to understand human history, society, and culture. There is no value free way to study values, and no way to fully understand human history, society, and culture without studying values. That ensures that there will be disagreement. Academic freedom is essential to ensuring that those disagreements are resolved by superior evidence, reasons, and argument, and not by campaigns to de-legitimize those disciplines with the historical competence to compile, evaluate, and articulate the evidence.

# Freedom and Imagination, Art and Politics

Originally Posted September 6, 2017

We think of revolutions as essentially political events, but we should also see them as art, in two sense. In the more familiar sense, every revolution throws old certainties into question and provides space for new forms of creative expression. But in a deeper sense, revolutions are themselves creative acts in which the old world is cancelled and a new one created out of the collective imaginations of their protagonists, including those whose ideas and dreams were never considered relevant under the old order. The oppressed and exploited have their moment to say and feel what they have not been allowed to say and feel, and their freedom to express these ideas informs the creation of new values and institutions: a new world comes into being through the combined creative power of ordinary people. That revolutionary fervour subsides is not refutation of my claim that revolutions are not just political transformations but also collective creations which would not exist without human imagination.

Of all the powers of the human being, imagination is the most important. Without the capacity to imagine we would not have the *Bhagavad Gita*, Carravagio's *The Passion of St. Matthew*, Nina Simone's *Mississippi Goddam*, or Philip Larkin's *Aubade*. We would also not have the French or Russian Revolutions, because without the capacity to think about a possible world in opposition to the actual radical, deliberate, conscious change would be impossible. Of course, not everything about a revolution can be planned (just as an art work does not proceed mechanically from mind to reality without unforeseen set backs and changes. Nevertheless, the point is that our ability to create worlds in thought that do not yet exist in reality is the precondition of our creative power over the given natural and social world.

Every revolution also comes with its moment of idol smashing, but perhaps because they are periods of maximum confidence amongst the oppressed, typically the greatest works of the old regime are preserved. The Bolsheviks did not burn down The Hermitage, because they understood that great art is not a function of its overt political content. You do not have to be a Christian to shudder in front of Valezquez's Crucifixion. It is not a documentary about the death of God, it is an allegory of human suffering, which everyone will have to face in her or his own way. Lenin did not decry Tolstoy as an anachronistic Christian utopian, but celebrated him as the master novelist that he was, lamenting only that millions of Russians were ignorant even of his existence, because they could not read. "If his great works are really to be made the possession of all, a struggle must be waged against the system of society which condemns millions and scores of millions to ignorance, benightedness, drudgery, and poverty." (*On Socialist Ideology and Culture*, p. 60). The goal of any genuine revolution is to emancipate the imagination of the oppressed, both by making available to them the great works of the past, and by creating space for them to become creative agents for the first time. When political confidence is high, enlightenment, not suppression of dissent, creation, not destruction, free expression, not censorship, are the ruling values.

We are not in a period of high confidence. The left, as broadly or narrowly as you want to draw it, has been on the defensive for four decades. This has consequences at the level of culture. Where historical ideas for a new world have been discredited, but the problems of this

one remain all too clear, and no new mass mobilizing emancipatory vision has emerged, people pick small, symbolic fights and spend more time apologizing than imagining, arguing, and building. If fear of giving offense impedes the growth of imagination, then there will never be a recovery of any left worth belonging to

The heritage of modern revolutions, from the English Revolution in the middle of the 17th century, through the French and Russian Revolutions, to the wave of anti-colonial revolutions following the Second World War, were not afraid of the symbols, the art, and the ideas of the past. Their leaders understood how to *interpret* art, how to *critically appropriate* it as exemplary of what human beings can be when they are furnished with the material and the time to fashion worlds for themselves. They understood that the point of overthrowing degrading social conditions was to enable more voices to sing, not to pre-regulate in the interests of an imaginary moral consensus what the lyrics must be. Once wealth has been freed to serve fundamental needs and political institutions created that really allow the majority to participate in their determination of their own lives, then revolutions have to be about widening the circle of creative subjects, valorizing experiments in living (Mill) and free associations between people, more pleasure, personal freedom, and fun.

Yet there has always lurked across the wide left a censorious, dour, moralistic, ascetic streak that becomes more pronounced in periods of weakness and defeat. It is, sadly, the dominant voice in North America today, making the serious arguments it has to make against racism and other forms of oppression easy prey to right wing critics of political correctness. A glaring case in point recently: the attempt to prevent the airing of the HBO series *Confederacy before a single episode has even been written*. Censoring unwritten scripts is analogous to imprisoning people for uncommitted crimes. It is absurd on the face of it, but worse, it lacks the capacity for critical appropriation that, when cultivated, opens up hidden fields of value beneath politically suspect content.

One might rejoin that this demand is no different than demanding that statues celebrating the confederacy be taken down. However, there is no analogy between the two demands. The political meaning of those statues is unambiguous: most were erected in the [1950's and 1960's](#) as an overt political response to the civil rights movement. They are pure racist propaganda and not public art. Taking them down is no different than taking down monuments to the Nazi's or Stalin. In other words, there is no political ambiguity about their meaning. The same cannot be said about a work of imaginary history: its political implications cannot be pre-determined. Works of imagination create spaces for exploration; no one can say what they mean in advance, and thus no topic can be ruled out as taboo. If art cannot explore the dark, what can?

Left guardians of the nation's virtue also make mistakes going the other way in time. Last year, the student council at the [University of Guelph](#) apologized for playing Lou Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side* because they determined it was "transphobic." Their ignorance of history and cultural politics is as dismaying as it is laughable. From the days of the Velvet Underground through to his solo career, [Reed's music](#) explored- affirmatively, it is apparently necessary to add — the sexual underground of New York, while he himself moved in social circles that were gay and transpositive, pioneered sexual ambivalence and fluidity, and was friends and acquaintances with repressive-norm destroying gay artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe— not to

mention transsexual rock musician Jane—formerly Wayne—County). Yet, because young activists have zero understanding of history, they embarrass themselves by castigating an artistic defender of sexual freedom as an enemy. In addition to their historical ignorance, they also display a shocking incapacity to appreciate humour, irony, and nuance, and a total inability to critically appropriate artistic meaning. One shudders to think what they would have done had the film society wanted to show Robert Frank’s *Cocksucker Blues*.

A much better example of how challenging and controversial content should be handled is given by the African American artist Glen Ligon. I saw his retrospective at the Whitney a few years ago. One of the pieces was a critical interrogation of Mapplethorpe’s *The Black Book*, (a work in which Mapplethorpe famously celebrated the nude black male form). From his perspective as a gay man, the black male body represented the height of erotic and aesthetic beauty. But one could legitimately ask: was not Mapplethorpe indulging in racial stereotypes? Did he not trade on cliché’s about black male sexual prowess by choosing only models with smooth muscled bodies and large penises? Ligon, as an artist and a black man, posed the problems, but he did not argue that we should burn *The Black Book*. Instead, he interrogated its contradictions by posting the images along with commentary that challenged us to think through the ambiguity of the original work.

This approach provides a model for how we should think about controversial creations. We cannot banish them but have to enter into them and think through their contradictions. If we demand that art (or philosophy, or science for that matter) be free of contradictions, we are really asking that there be no art, philosophy, or science, for nothing that pushes the limits is free of contradictions. Contradictions are the product of the given world being confronted with its limits, and that is what real art, philosophy, and science does. We cannot move beyond the limits if we do not understand them.

When it comes to art in particular, we have to keep in mind that its meaning and value does not lie on the surface of its content. You do not understand *War and Peace* if you know it is “about” the Napoleonic invasion of Russia. *Crime and Punishment* is not a crime novel. Any true work of art is a world into which the one experiencing it is inserted as an explorer in uncharted territory. Any work of art whose meaning is transparent on the surface and univocal is condemned to a short life. Art is not social work; its function is not to propose policy solutions to historical injustice. Its role *is* to provoke and challenge the acceptable, but *as* art, not superficial social commentary. The best art is ambiguous as to its full meaning, thus allowing endless exploration and interrogation.

I am tempted to say that really great art is not “about” anything, but that would be going too far. What I mean is that no art that has any value at all is just a straightforward representation of a given world. Art that merely and only represents is documentary, not art. Art transforms the given, it does not mechanically reflect it. Nineteenth century French realism was not about making paintings that looked exactly like the world, it was about elevating everyday subjects, contexts, and people to the dignity of what in the eighteenth century had been reserved to grand historical persons and events. Art transforms and transfigures; it makes us think precisely about the problem of “representing” a world, about what the limits of painting it, singing about it, composing poetry about it might be. Each era will discover its own limits and push towards new ones, hopefully

while preserving the best of the old. The derivative does not need to be burned as it will disappear once the context that made it relevant has disappeared.

The progress of art, if one wants to put it like that, including progress in overcoming the power of cultural elites to decide who has the right to artistic voice, can only be advanced if we reject censorship in all its forms and celebrate the value of free human imagination. If a work is bad, criticize it. Anything that strengthens the censor threatens critical voices and challenging work. It is also wrong in itself, because reactionary and fearful. Moreover, it is also conservative in implication, insisting as it does that all work must pass a pre-screening of self-appointed experts who assert, but in reality lack, the right to speak for everyone in matters of taste and enjoyment.

# Misunderstanding and Mystifying Democracy

Originally posted January 5, 2018

The New Year: a time to turn our backs on the mistakes of the past and look with hopeful spirit to the future. But of course, we kid ourselves. No celebration of an arbitrary point along our unending orbit will change us. The clock will strike 12:01, and we will have another drink, light another cigarette, eat more empty carbs, and lose our temper when we get home drunk. But it is all good: reason to endure the next 365 days so that we can promise ourselves to be better the next year.

And the political mirrors the personal. The holiday season is a time to note lessons learned, opportunities missed, and above all, to renew the faith in the sustaining illusions of the liberal-democratic world.

No political system mistakes fictive idea for social reality better than liberal-democracy. Consequently, no system's propagandists have a greater capacity for poetic pomposity. Liberal pundits are particularly susceptible to bathetic sentiments at this time of year.

The deeper the contradiction with reality, the sweeter the melody sung to the idea. One in particular caught my ear. As his country sinks ever more undeniably into a plutocratic police state, David Brooks composed "[The Glory of Democracy](#)" and shared it with a grateful world longing- as always- for America to show us the way.

He channels the spirit of Thomas Mann's *The Coming Victory of Democracy* (published in 1938, two years after the world's "democracies" sat out the fight against fascism in Spain and paved the way for Hitler's aggression and the Second World War). Mann was a great novelist but shows himself to be a bad historian. He argues that democracy is premised on "the infinite dignity of individual men and women," but ignores the fact that, to the extent it exists in any form, it was the product of the struggle, not of individuals, but groups (workers, women, the oppressed of the colonized world), i.e., those thought barely human by the aristocrats and bourgeoisie. Their fights were for more basic needs: control over the resources upon which their lives depended and their traditional lands, time away from merciless toil in Blake's "satanic mills," homes that were not overcrowded and disease riddled death traps. They fought with *collective* political power.

Mann makes an all too banal mistake for such an eminent artist, confusing the liberal principle of individuality with the democratic value of *collective self-determination*. The individuality that Mann champions, if it is to be more than the private conceit of the wealthy and educated, must be a social achievement. The fundamental condition of *democracy*, (rule of the people, which always meant, going back to Plato, rule of the most numerous, the poor), is control over the lands, waters, productive enterprises, and social wealth those enterprises produce. Yet this collective control over life-sustaining and enabling natural and social conditions is exactly what liberal individualists



from John Locke to Friedrich Hayek and on into the 21st century have railed against as *totalitarian*.

From the struggle in ancient Athens of small farmers and labourers against the traditional aristocracy, to the Diggers in the English revolution, to the *sans cullottes* in the French, from the African-American soldiers in the American Civil War to the militants of the Viet Cong and ZANU-PF, from Women's Liberation fighters, Queer revolutionaries, Black Power Militants, to indigenous Idle No More activists, the struggle for democracy has been led by people whom the educated and elite regarded as *beneath dignity*, a generic mass fit only to work and reproduce. Their dignity was an achievement, born of collective struggle, for social control over the institutions that decided whether they could access what they needed to live or not. Democracy does indeed involve the dignity of individuals, but as an achievement of collective power directed against the ruling elite's base: their control over what everyone needs to survive.

Without that collective control, "the individual's daily struggle to to be better and nobler" is nothing more than ideological fodder for capitalist self-help manuals. Democracy does not do away with those struggles, it makes their successful resolution possible by ensuring that everyone has access to the material means without which self-realization is impossible. But individual self-realization grows out of democratic self-determination, and democratic self-determination depends upon collective control of the resource bases our lives depend upon, the enterprises that transform those resources into life-serving goods, and the political institutions that determine the laws and policies under which we live together. Unpacked, that is what Marx meant when he argued that "the individual is the social being." And— since it undercuts their power at its base— it is exactly what the ruling elites and their platitudes about individuality do not want to hear (or, if they are forced to hear it, denounce it as "the road to serfdom").

Herbert Marcuse was much closer to truth of today in 1972 when, in response to the Nixon catastrophe, he wrote "The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy." Cutting straight through the platitudes about individual dignity and the triumph of the human spirit, Marcuse reveals the dark truth: at best, "democracy" is little more than mobilization of the masses against their own economic interests, and at worst, turning their primal instincts towards cheerleading the violent destruction of racially demonized others, at home and abroad. He is talking about Nixon, but he could be talking about Trump today: "In free elections with universal suffrage, the people have elected (not for the first time!) a warfare government, engaged for long years in a war which is but a series of crimes against humanity,— a government of the representatives of the big corporations .... propped up by a Congress that has reduced itself to a yes-machine, ... a government that' was elected with a considerable labor vote." (p.168, Collected Papers, Vol 2). If we substitute the War on Terror for the Viet Nam War, the vote for Trump was a vote for the exact same policies and values as the vote for Nixon.

America remains a deeply divided society, split into an conservative faction driven by nostalgia for a mythical time when Blacks and women knew their places and workers did what they were told for fear of opening the door to the communist threat, and a diverse, progressive, mildly socially democratic, tolerant but self-satisfied and smug, cosmopolitan-liberal, educated urban group. The later is more internally divided than the former, which explains why, at the level of policy, the conservative faction has advanced its interests much more successfully since Nixon's time. As in

1972, the radical left is not a meaningful part of the conversation. It tails social movements but cannot find the words and policies it needs to make itself relevant again. At just the moment where a credible radical alternative is needed, we have nothing to say that anyone wants to hear.

And thus the world slides towards the authoritarian nightmare Marcuse worried about 50 years ago. The coming victory of democracy is no more guaranteed now than it was in 1938.

# The Politics of Gestures

Originally Posted August 24, 2017

In the wake of the murder of an anti-fascist protestor in Charlottesville, Virginia, US President Trump doubled down on his support amongst white racists by casting a pox on both the houses in conflict that day. By establishing an equivalence between fascists and anti-fascists, he obscured the deep political and moral differences in their platforms, and thus attempted to mitigate the magnitude of the crime committed. While we are not used to seeing politicians so easily baited into losing their temper and undermining their scripted response, the content of Trump's remarks should not be all that surprising. He was elected by successfully following the historical script of US right-wing populist movements, which identify "the people" as productive white American men threatened by internal and external enemies: radicalized minorities, aloof elites, immigrants, terrorists, etc. The fascist marchers in Virginia are the outer political limits of this construction, a group that Trump cannot afford to marginalize completely. Given the fact that he lost the popular vote and carried the key mid-western states by tiny minorities, he cannot afford to lose a single voter, no matter what their politics. Hence he gambled that calling out leftist opponents would not cost him support, even if it did sound to his critics as if he was being soft on hard racism. We will see whether his gamble pays off.

If Trump is going to fold his hand and lose, the liberal and socialist left are going to have to start playing much more skillful political poker than we have up to this point. Once again, the liberal left sounds completely discombobulated by its distaste for Trump, while the socialist left runs the risk of chasing the news to find a short cut around the long term organizing and education that needs to happen if it is to become any kind of credible alternative. Both groups need to keep firmly in mind just what Trump's oft-maniacal behaviour so easily distracts from: that he and his racist supporters are the symptoms and not the disease. The disease itself is complex and has both general dimensions and features specific to the US context. Neither can be fully dealt with in a single election cycle. What is certain is that unless there is a re-focusing of political critique and mobilization away from Trump's buffoonery and the over-estimation of the systemic threat posed by white supremacists re-aligned with reality, the disease will not be cured.

White supremacist movements are as old as the United States, but they achieved a new prominence after the Civil War, when the Ku Klux Klan emerged in opposition to radical reconstruction ( the attempt of newly freed African Americans to determine their own social and economic horizons). It has flared whenever African Americans have asserted themselves politically. Trump is part of the cause of the re-emergence of overt white supremacist movements today, but the resentments and anxieties that drive it go deeper than Trump's immigrant baiting and will not go away if he fails to get re-elected. Overcoming them and the politics they generate will require a multiracial democratic movement so large it overwhelms and totally marginalizes the racists, and continued progress towards real integration and equality that undermines the separation and fear that feeds white racism. That 150 years on from the Civil War this task remains to be accomplished emphasizes the magnitude of the problem.

Contrary to Trump's liberal critics, singing hymns about American values and 'bringing the nation together' are not going to work. White supremacy *is* a core value of American history, undergirding slavery, Manifest Destiny (that led to the wars of extermination against American Indians) and Jim Crow segregation. Like every history, America's too is contradictory, and contains not only white supremacy but heroic and inspiring fight backs against it. But America has never been racially unified and Trump is hardly the first white politician to exploit it for his purposes. Of course, Trump himself should be called out and criticized, but obsessive parsing of his speeches and self-righteous tut-tutting about his boorishness has grown tiresome and accomplishes nothing. He should be criticized for his politics, not his personality; the contradiction between his actual policies and the interests of the white workers who voted for him has to be the touchstone of everything the left says about him.

By the same reasoning, Nazi's and Klansmen need to be confronted, preferably by massive numbers that emphasize to those racists who are capable of thought that they do not speak for white people; that they are not a courageous vanguard, but a fearful and misled minority. At the same time, they are a minority, even of Trump voters, and an expression of social, economic, and political weakness, not strength. Real social power is not dressed in Klan hoods but the blue suits and brown shoes of Wall Street. The ruling class is only too happy to sip Bordeaux and watch the spectacle of confrontation between white supremacists and antifa protestors. As important as challenge and confrontation is, it is not a politics that will build the type of mass mobilization a revitalized left needs. There is a certain amount of adolescent vanguardism at work in the antifa movement that needs to be channeled in a different direction. Again, fascists should not be given free reign to march through cities and intimidate African Americans and other demonized groups, but they are not about to launch a successful putsch. We are not in the 1930s' and an organized fascist take over of America is not in the cards (if for no other reason that that there is no mass Communist movement as there was in Germany that the ruling class wants to get rid of). Capitalism may be in crisis for the working class, but it is working just fine for the capitalists, who, as I said above, are happy to have what serious opponents there are focus on spectacular street confrontations rather than think up workable policy alternatives to austerity and longer term institutional alternatives to capitalism.

Hence the need to be wary of a degradation of left-wing tactics to a politics of gestures. By 'politics of gestures' I mean a practice which confuses the symbolically offensive with the structurally exploitative and oppressive, and considers the removal of the symbolically offensive with real gains. By no means does this claim mean that the symbolic is not important in social life or politics. It is: but as an expression of underlying systems of oppression which are not affected in any way by changes to language or public space. One could remove every statue to the Confederacy and absolutely nothing would change about American history or the current lines of racial conflict and inequality. That does not mean that the statues should not be removed; it means that the demand is important only as a mobilizing tool to draw wider numbers of people into a movement powerful enough to bring about social structural changes.

The politics of gestures is problematic just because symbols are powerful. This power means that it is easy to sidetrack debates which are really about racism and exploitation into debates about freedom of speech, expression, and "heritage." Passions run high, much heat is thrown off by the arguments, but, without most people noticing, the substantive collapses into the symbolic, a victory

is declared, many people pack up their political tents and go home, satisfied that a major victory has been won, but the lives of the oppressed which were supposed to have benefited from the victory remain as they ever were.

Those lives can be changed for the better in the way they have always been changed for the better: by cohesive, coherent, mass social movements that correctly understand where power lies, how it is organized and operates, and how it can be effectively challenged. We are at a moment of intensifying social division and conflict but the left has not recovered from its long period of defeat and decline. That Sanders was not red-baited into the sea, that Corbyn's Labour Party made a dramatic comeback in the most recent UK election, that even mainstream economists are arguing that inequality is structurally caused by the dynamics of capitalism, that the colonial histories of the US and Canada are being seriously exposed and challenged, are all signs of hope. But signs of hope and political power are different things. We need the poetry of emancipatory visions, but we also need the prose of policies that people think will work in their short term interests, and plans that provide credible road maps to a different set of social institutions, value systems, and standards of economic success. No movement which will be capable of those sorts of long term changes can afford to turn its back on the white workers amongst the 60 million voters who chose Trump. Democratic politics— of which Marxism is a species— must assume that people are capable of change in response to changed experience and sound argument. Both require time and patience.

# Democracy, Religion, and Cultural Difference

Posted on October 31, 2017

Anyone who has been to Montreal will have seen the giant crucifix, shining as a beacon unto the lost, on top of Mount Royal. It is not a public geometry lesson, not an art installation, it is a very large and very obvious religious symbol, testimony to the outsized role that the Catholic Church has played in Quebec's history. France's revolution of 1789 did not instill "secularism" at the heart of *la nouvelle France* but hived it off from history as a bastion of *ancien regime* Catholic power. Quebec's embrace of secularism took place during the Quiet Revolution, some two hundred years after the original.

Yet, even after the happy rejection of Church power over daily life, the giant cross still shines every night from the highest point of the city. Notre Dame Cathedral has not been turned into a Temple of Reason, nor L'Oratoire St. Joseph expropriated by the nearby Université de Montreal to house its science faculty.

If Quebec is now the national bastion of "religious neutrality" and "secularism," then I submit that the cross should be removed and the two great monuments to Catholic power and the credulity of true believers re-purposed. Believing that an old priest can cure the afflicted is surely at least as great a threat to democratic and scientific values as a relatively few women covering their faces in public in obedience to certain minority strains of Islam.

But it is only these women who will be obligated to conform to government dress code. Sorry- I forgot that worshipers at the Church of the Holy Sunglasses and members of the Sacred Order of Balaclava Wearers will also be forced to partially disrobe before they can take the bus. Not a word have I heard about priests in collars or nuns in habits. Do these overt signs of religious authority not violate the supposed principle of "religious neutrality?"

The face! There is something about the face. What is it? According to Phillippe Couillard, Premier of Quebec, democracy requires [face to face encounters](#). "Public services should be given with an open face," he said. "Why? Not because of religion but because of issues related to communication, safety, and identification. It's the characteristic of any society that when we talk to each other I see your face, you see mine. This is something that is very distinct from religion." If this claim is true, that the bill is about safety and identification, why does the bill include the phrase "religious neutrality" at all? "[Bill 62's](#) ... English title is "An Act to foster adherence to State religious neutrality and, in particular, to provide a framework for religious accommodation requests in certain bodies." Yet, the *only* supposedly religious garment the act would ban are the variety of face coverings worn by some Muslim women.

Hence it is clear and indisputable that whatever the framers' intentions, its only effect will be to further stigmatize and demonize Islam and in particular Muslim women. Ostensibly, the law derives from the [Bouchard-Taylor Commission](#) on cultural accommodation in Quebec, although

the co-chairs, sociologist Gérard Bouchard and Philosopher Charles Taylor have [criticized it](#). As have the Parti Quebecois and the Coalition Avenir Québec, but in their case for not going far enough.

Although there can be little doubt about the real implications of the law, can one not argue that the value of liberal-democratic equality demands it? On the surface, religious-cultural traditions that demand *any* mandatory form of dress for women seem themselves stigmatizing and oppressive. If a tradition is rooted in patriarchal power over women, then it is hardly compatible with the idea of democratic equality, in which every member of the polity is assumed free to choose their political and religious beliefs, as well as the way they will present themselves in public. If the tradition to which the woman belongs *requires* her to cover her face, and imposes sanctions if she does not, then her power to choose is compromised, and she is oppressed. A law that opposes that tradition therefore opposes oppression, and should thus be defensible on grounds of liberal-democratic equality.

This argument has some merit. It rests on the Enlightenment view of religion as irrational superstition. It rejects pure tolerance in favour of critical evaluation of traditions on the basis of universal human interests in freedom of self-presentation. Values which claim the authority of history but are manifestly rooted in rationally indefensible hierarchies of power are judged illegitimate. The public realm is treated as a space for the harmonious interplay of differences, but only *legitimate* differences, ones that do not depend upon the marginalization and domination of others. In its liberal-feminist form, it rejects all paternalistic arguments that women must conceal themselves from the male gaze for their own good.

As I have argued in more detail in past posts, ([How do You Like the End of the Enlightenment Now?](#) February 22nd, 2017)) the so-called age of “post-truth” politics that we find ourselves has had the one salutary effect of reminding us of the political importance of these Enlightenment values. Frightening displays of far right violence have been encouraged by false historical narratives and empirically untrue social theory (e.g., that the Confederacy was the legitimate product of honourable Southern culture, or that immigrants “steal” “our” jobs). In the face of false and invidious ideologies, a dose of truth is most necessary (as are reminders about the value of liberal-democratic equality in the face of far right, exclusionary violence).

However, choice and liberal-democratic equality produce sometimes paradoxical results. When they do, contextual political intelligence is required to decide the paradox in favour of one or the other *doxa* in tension. Contrary to the expectations of radical Enlightenment critics of religion like the Baron d’Holbach, one of the first openly atheist philosophers and a determined anti-clericalist, whose *System de nature* mocks the hypocrisy of priests and demolishes all “proofs” of the existence of God, history has proven that religious belief is not rooted in rationality, and is therefore impervious to rational-empirical criticism. As Feuerbach and Marx understood, religious belief stems from deeper felt needs: to belong, to feel loved, to feel protected in a world that exposes us on every side to uncaring deprivation and violence.

While I would argue that it is the community that believers form that satisfies the needs (if they are in fact satisfied) and not the always absent, other-world God, this need is a powerful social bonding force. While the belief in a caring and protective other-world being is irrational,

superstitious, and sure to be disappointed by the void which death no doubt is, the demand that the need be satisfied is rational, in the sense of essentially important for a good human life. I have tried to provide a secular-materialist explanation of this need and how it might be satisfied outside of religious systems elsewhere. (See [Can Only Religion Save Us?](#) *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms*, 15:1, 2010). So long as billions of people reject my argument and maintain their religious cultures, democratic societies are going to have to contend with the existence of communities some of whose members *choose* to belong even though the choice entails commitments which, on the surface, seem to limit their own rights in oppressive ways.

Here we have a paradox of self-determination and choice: rational people choosing to follow irrational belief systems to live in ways that appear oppressive from an abstract liberal-democratic perspective. Laws like Quebec's Bill 62 claim to want to resolve the paradox in favour of abstract liberal-democratic equality. Given the reality and the power of peoples' religious commitments, and the *value* of satisfying the needs for belonging and love that these commitments serve, this and similar laws end up being *more* oppressive and paternalistic than the practices they try to eliminate.

When it comes to oppression we must always listen to the voices of those who appear to be oppressed. If Muslim women who cover their faces say that they choose to do so because they do not want to be ostracized from their communities, then those of us who do not share those beliefs, indeed, even those who regard them as both irrational and oppressive, need to listen. Self-determination, the most essential democratic value, means that people can choose paths that might not be fully consistent with liberal-democratic conceptions of equality, but which cannot be uprooted without destroying the all-important democratic commitment to coherently inclusive social institutions. If there are groups who will not abandon certain practices which are in tension with some aspect of liberal-democratic equality, but which otherwise leave members free to change their mind and reject the practices at some future point, then the policy most consistent with democratic equality and freedom is to leave the people free to choose, trusting that they are capable, as mature, rational adults, of understanding what they are doing and accepting of the consequences.

That said, there is always room for argument: No group, religious or otherwise, has the right not to be criticized, and has a duty to respond the criticisms. If some members find their group's answer lacking, eventually they will choose to leave, as many millions of people in Quebec chose to leave the Catholic Church to build a new secular Quebec. No one compelled them to do so, they decided collectively that they wanted a different *avenir* for Quebec. Unless we think Muslim women are a species apart, incapable of changing their individual and collective future for themselves, then we have to conclude, with Trudeau the elder, that the state has no more right to rifle through the closets of the nation than to police what goes on in its bedrooms.



# Canadian History X

Originally Posted October 6, 2017

Fortunately for potential citizens, I lack ego on the scale that would make me want to name an imaginary city or country after myself. Noonanville? Noonania? The “oo” sound encourages comedic exaggeration. Others would not take the city or country seriously, undermining the self-esteem of the citizens. I couldn’t bear their shame.

Sadly, others lack my humility. The history of colonialism is a history of expropriation and violence, but also of renaming. Europeans relied upon the doctrine of *terra nullis* (empty land) to justify their colonies, in bold contradiction of the obvious fact that there were people and civilizations already here, in the “new” world. The new world soon began to spawn “new” European names: New France, New England, and within them, settlements that took their names from European cities (Halifax, London) or the names of colonial military and civic leaders (Brockville, Amherstburgh).

Names confer identity. When a place is identified by its European name, the implication (if not always the explicit intention of the user) is that there was nothing of value there before colonization. When it happens in that manner, naming is a form of cultural erasure. That fact explains why anti-colonial struggles always involve de-naming and re-naming. Zimbabwe was re-named Rhodesia after Cecil “I would colonize the stars if I could” Rhodes; the victorious ZANU-PF forces de-named it and returned to Zimbabwe. We used to call the islands off the coast of British Columbia the Queen Charlottes. Today they are more properly referred to as Haida Gwaii. Half of the Northwest Territories became Nunavut in 1999.

Re-naming happens for other reasons too. Port Arthur and Fort William merged to become Thunder Bay. Ruling powers and dominant languages change, leading to changes of name: “Istanbul was Constantinople,” They Might Be Giants sang, “and even old New York was once New Amstersdam.” The point: naming is political and historical, names change as history and politics change. Re-naming is not a particularly rare event.

Intensifying debates over the legacy of Canadian colonialism are exposing uncomfortable truths about the racist beliefs of key figures from our history. These debates have led some to argue that places and institutions named after these figure be re-named. The mere suggestion has provoked outrage from the guardians of the nation’s morals and Britishness. When an Ontario teacher’s union voted to demand that [Sir John A. MacDonald’s](#) name be removed from Ontario public schools because he supported residential schools, a thousand sermons about the [greatness of the country](#) he founded were launched. “Yes yes, he was a racist, yes yes, he supported the planned destruction of indigenous cultures and languages in the residential schools, but look at the country he helped found: Beauty, eh!. And besides, *everyone* had those racist beliefs at the time. Water under the bridge people, lets move on.”

It takes awhile for the national debate to make its way down the 401 to our little Windsor-Essex peninsula, but it arrived with a crash last weekend, when, in a double-barrelled editorial attack,

stalwart local reactionaries [Lloyd Brown-John](#) and [Gord Henderson](#) vilified as “historical revisionists” those who demanded that the town of Amherstburgh (named after British General Jeffrey Amherst) be re-named, in light of revelations that he wanted to exterminate the indigenous population by spreading small pox amongst them. I want to carefully examine the three central arguments that they advance: a) that the demand to change names amounts to “historical revisionism,” b) that indigenous warriors were also violent and committed atrocities, (turn about is fair play, in essence), and c) that people are “products of their times,” those times were racist, therefore everyone was a racist.

### Historical Revisionism?

Let us deal with the charge of historical revisionism first. Henderson writes that politicians should “tell these historical revisionists to take a hike.” The substance of his editorial is a discussion with Parks Canada historian Ronald J. Dale, who argues that Amherst never advocated genocide against indigenous people as a whole, but only directed targeted vengeance against specific tribes who had risen against the British in 1763. For the sake of argument, I will take Dale’s position as veridical. Even if critics are wrong about the details, they are not, as Henderson implies, historical revisionists. Historical revisionists re-write history to suit an ideological agenda. Most often the re-writing involves denying that known state crimes ever happened. What is at issue here is not re-writing history but an argument over the extent and meaning of Amherst’s and other British and Canadian politicians’ policies towards indigenous people. The issue is not whether the crimes happened, but whether they amount to genocide or genocidal intent.

If there is a problem of revisionism it does not lie on the side of the critics, but with those who constructed the ten cent tour version of Canadian history that is typically taught in secondary school. It consists of little more than Confederation, Vimy Ridge, and the repatriation of the Constitution. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission called for the inclusion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives on Canadian history, and that is what we are getting with criticism of figures like MacDonal and Amherst. That is not revisionism but just better history that is more inclusive of the perspectives of those who were also actively involved (First Nation’s people, the Métis, and Inuit), but from whom we have rarely heard.

### 2) Savages, not Saints?

The second problem concerns Brown-John’s claim that indigenous people were also violent, also committed atrocities, and that their contemporary supporters are trying to paper over this truth by putting all the blame on colonists and colonial authorities like Amherst. He writes: “What I find fascinating about some of the contemporary opposition to names of historic figures is that often those promoting the change are remarkably selective about their own interpretations of historical records.” He then adds some lurid detail to support the main claim: “To some extent, Indigenous people were mercenaries and were allies as long as there were rewards. After one British defeat, for example, a dozen or so British captives were turned over to French Indigenous tribes at Quebec City. One of the British captives was boiled alive and the other captives were forced to eat his remains.” One can agree with Brown-John’s historical claim (indigenous people employed violence) without having to accept the political implication he wants us to draw (that therefore criticism of colonial authorities is one-sided and ideological). Had there been no colonial project,

there would have been no mercenary alliances, because there would have been no need for any of the First Nations to ally with one or the other major colonial powers as a means to maintain what land and autonomy they could. Nor would there have been massacres of settlers had there been no settlers. The violence that arises in resistance to invasion is morally distinct from the violence that arises from invasion. If someone storms your house, the law recognizes your right to protect yourself. It would be better if we lived on a planet where one could peacefully persuade the invader to leave, but that is not this planet, as Brown-John well-knows. We might moralistically lament all violence, but the job of historians is to understand it. Clearly, indigenous violence towards colonialists was caused by colonialism: had their lands not been stolen, there would have been no armed struggle against it.

### 3) But Mom, Everyone is Doing It!

The final argument against the critics is the claim that what they call racist crimes are not really racist crimes, because everyone at the time shared the belief that indigenous people were dangerous savages. People are products of the time, the argument runs, and it is anachronistic to judge them on the basis of more morally enlightened contemporary sensibilities. Henderson quotes Dale again in support of this position: “Dale, in an interview, said the 18th century was an incredibly brutal period, by our standards. To modern eyes these were all terrible people. But that was the temper of the times.” The first thing that must be said in response is that although it is true in general that those were brutal times, every historical period contains opposition and contradiction. Thus, while the prevailing ideology equated indigenous people with savages, it is not true that this view was universally shared. From the beginning there were European critics of the colonial doctrine that the colonized were subhuman and thus without rights or moral standing.

The first such critic that I know of was Francesco de Vitoria, a Spanish Jesuit who argued against the dominant justification of the conquest of the New World. Drawing on Aquinas’ view of natural law, (a law ‘written’ by God which directed each species towards the means of its own survival and flourishing) Vitoria argued against the dominant defense of colonialism. Instead, he maintained that since the indigenous people were human, they were created by God as self-governing agents. He thus rejected the view that indigenous people were incapable of self-government— natural slaves with which the Europeans could do as they please. It is true that he then found other ways to justify colonialism. (See the discussion in Annabel S. Brett, *Changes of State*, p. 14) Nevertheless, his defense of the humanity of indigenous people puts paid to the myth that all Europeans took positions that were mechanically determined by “the temper of the times.”

More decisive challenges would arise in France. In the 18th century, Condorcet, Diderot, and the Abbe Raynal would all condemn French and English colonialism and call for its revolutionary overthrow, and French sailors arriving in the 1790’s what is today Haiti helped inspire Toussaint L’Ouverture to lead just such a revolution, the first successful anti-colonial uprising in history. (See C.L.R. James’ unmatched history of that revolution, *Black Jacobins*, for the detailed account of the complex relationship between the French Revolution and anti-colonial struggle). So it is completely untrue to say “everyone thought like that.” Everyone did not think like that, and the ideas needed to construct solidarity, rather than domination, existed.

The deeper problem concerns the principle that this one-sided and inadequate view of history is supposed to support. If we say “people are functions of the social and historical context, they just believe whatever was believed at the time” it becomes impossible to explain how those beliefs *arose*. Societies are not just given artifacts, they are the products of the combined activity—including thought—of the people who live within them. There is no “society” on one hand and “individuals” on the other, the latter programmed by the former somehow to believe according to the “temper of the times.”

Marx understood this point very well. Confronting this mechanical materialist philosophy in the 1840’s he responded that “the materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing ... forgets that it is men who make circumstances.” (Third Thesis on Feuerbach). His point is that the historical times (their “temper”) are not fixed and given realities external to the activity and beliefs of people but are the product of social interaction. These interactions give rise to institutions and forces that must be justified. The justifications do influence people’s consciousness, but we are still agents even as we are shaped by historical context: we are capable of changing our ideas and our circumstances. Thus, to dismiss racist attitudes as “a product of the times” fails to explain why the times were racist.

The most important issue here is not the moral blameworthiness of individuals like Amherst in the abstract, but understanding the forces that structure society and belief systems. Why would Amherst and others believe that the First Nations were savages who needed to be suppressed? The answer “that was the way things were” is not an answer, because the question asks *why* things were the way they were. People like Amherst thought the Natives were savages because they stood in the way of a colonial project that they were trying to administer. This fact is crucial to understanding the attitudes that guided their action. I agree that there is little to be gained from abstract criticisms of long dead people, but the political criticism of colonialism is of a different order. It exposes to view the real forces that drove European expansion across the world from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Amherst and others had to justify the drive for territory and resources, and they accomplished this task by reducing the people who originally lived in those territories to the status of mere things to be removed. As the brilliant critic of colonialism Aimé Césaire wrote in his short classic *Discours sur la colonialisme*: “Colonisation = chosification.” (colonisation equals thingification, p. 23). Since this process continues today in other forms, it is crucial that we understand its history. If, in the process of understanding this history some are moved to demand that colonial names be changed, we should understand the demand as an attempt to respect the living and change the future, not to moralistically condemn the dead and re-write history.

### Summing Up

Still, I do not think that changing names on its own accomplishes much of real political or social value. Opinion within indigenous communities is mixed ([Murry Sinclair](#) argued against removing MacDonald’s name, urging instead that it be used to spur a more complex understanding of Canadian historical realities). I think the best way forward lies in listening to the complex array of indigenous voices and using the ideas that emerge as the centre around which political argument develops and as the leading edge of practice. As I was reminded recently when reading a collection of essays by the American historian David Roediger, solidarity is risky. Allies can unwittingly

substitute their own voices for the voices that most need hearing: those of the historically oppressed group. We stand in the shadow of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at a critical moment where the complex and contradictory history of Canada is being re-thought. This re-thinking opens the possibility for radical change to address the on-going harms caused by the history of colonization. The worst outcome would be that this deeper and longer-term project gets sidelined or silenced by moralizing criticism on the one hand and apologies for colonial violence that they provoke in response on the other.

# Isolation Drills

Originally Posted May 24, 2018

Two on going strikes, by two (on the surface) very different sets of workers, prove that the bosses are confident, and show just how far unions have to go to become a labour movement again. In Windsor, 2300 [UNIFOR Local 444](#) workers at the Caesar's Casino have been on strike for over 40 days. In Toronto, Graduate Teaching Assistants and Contract Academic Staff have been on strike since March 5th. The Casino workers have twice voted down tentative agreements recommended by their bargaining team and national UNIFOR representatives, while in Toronto, the [CUPE 3903](#) members have resisted a forced vote on a final offer and rejected a report by seasoned arbitrator William Kaplan which concluded that a negotiated settlement is impossible.

A negotiated settlement is of course impossible if one side (the bosses) refuses to engage in serious bargaining. That has been true for the entirety of the York strike and most of the Casino strike. Caesars has multiple revenue streams. The Windsor operation is small in comparison to its other properties and it can afford to leave the workers on the street indefinitely. That the workers have not yet caved in to these tactics is a testament to their fortitude, but reveals larger political problems that I will discuss below. At York, the administration has flat out refused to bargain and is clearly trying to destroy the union and starve the workers back. The York Board of Governors has kept as many classes running as it could, and has violated Senate by-laws and bi-cameral governance by inventing arbitrary criteria for credit to be given for courses only partially completed, and cancelling the summer term. There have been over a dozen non-confidence motions passed against the President, who, Trump-like, ignores the collapse of her legitimacy and carries on.

Here is a list supplied to my union by a colleague at York:

## **Motions of Non-Confidence (Student Associations)**

- Motion of non-confidence by York Federation of Students, May 11, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Development Students Graduate Association, May 9, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Humanities Graduate Student Association, May 8, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Social Anthropology Graduate Association, May 1, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Sociology Undergrad Association, April 30, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Communication & Culture Graduate Association, April 27, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by English Graduate Students Association, April 26, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Sociology Graduate Students Association, April 26, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Graduate Political Science Students Association, April 23, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Social Work Association for Graduate Students, April 22, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by York U Graduate Students Association, (YUGSA) April 21, 2018
- Motion of non-confidence by Science and Technology Studies Graduate Student Association, April 21, 2018.
- Motion of non-confidence by Social and Political Thought GSA
- Motion of non-confidence by PhD Environmental Studies Association

Motion of non-confidence by Master's Environmental Studies Association  
 Motion of non-confidence by History GSA  
 Motion of non-confidence by Gender, Feminist, and Women's Studies GSA  
 Motion of non-confidence by Geography GSA  
 Motion of non-confidence by Music GSA  
 Motion of non-confidence by Theatre and Performance Studies GSA  
 Motion of non-confidence by Civil Engineering GSA

### **Motions of Non-Confidence (Professoriate) Faculty Councils**

Motion of non-confidence by Faculty of Graduate Studies, May 10, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by Faculty of Environmental Studies, May 2, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by the Liberal Arts & Professional Studies Faculty Council, April 30, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by the Glendon Faculty Council, April 20, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by the Faculty of Education Faculty Council, April 25, 2018

(this represents more than half the faculty at York – missing are Science, Business, Health, and Engineering... most of those faculty you see represented over on the “profs4change” petitions)

### **Departments**

Motion of non-confidence by Department of Politics, LA&PS, May 2, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by Department of Sociology, LA&PS, April 26, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by School of Gender, and Women's Studies, May 7, 3018H  
 Motion of non-confidence by the Department of English at LA&PS, April 18, 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by Department of Social Science, April 2018 1  
 Motion of non-confidence by Department of Cinema and Media Arts, April 2018  
 Motion of non-confidence by Graduate Program in Social and Political Thought, April 2018

That the President can carry on despite this opposition shows just how weak faculty and campus workers have become. This weakness is not objective: had they decided to walk out en masse in support of CUPE, the York University Faculty Association could have ended the strike very quickly. Likewise, had every one of the thousands of UNIFOR auto workers in the city of Windsor walked out on indefinite strike in support of the Casino workers, the local government would have become far more vocal about the need to resolve the problem than it has been. Yet, the solidarity actions that have been launched in both cases fall far short of that fantasy.

YUFA is facing a serious internal revolt of conservative members who want all bargaining units at York to agree to an across the board no strike ever agreement. The 200 or so professors who have signed an open letter to this effect claim to be supporting “the students,” but seem to forget that a majority of people on strike *are students*. In Windsor, repeated calls for solidarity to the tens of thousands of trade union members in the city have produced mobilisations of a few dozen labour council stalwarts and nothing else. The gambling public can easily cross the river to lose their money at one of three Detroit casinos; everyone else carries on as if nothing important is happening. Calls to my own members in the Windsor University Faculty Association (I am

President until June 30th) have drawn less than 10 people to visit the picket lines (out of a total of about 900 members, almost half precarious, to support a strike which is largely about respect, new restrictions on contracting out, and improved job security for contract staff).

Hope for mass support is a political fantasy because the subjective conditions for the exercise of latent power are completely absent. The bosses know they are absent, and they are thus emboldened to take a wait 'em out approach. Even unionized workers do not feel themselves to be part of a broad based political movement. At best (with a very few exceptions), even active union members think of themselves as part of a bargaining unit that should focus on a narrow set of issues pertaining to conditions of work and rates of pay. It is almost impossible to effectively make an argument that when bosses are allowed to put different groups of workers in competition, it results in relatively worse conditions and relatively lower pay for everyone (in comparison with an alternative in which everyone cooperated and fought together). The reason why this argument is difficult to successfully make is not difficult to understand: it depends upon contrasting an actual scenario (a given set of negotiations with defined demands) with a hypothetical scenario (of universal cooperation and struggle). Perhaps in theory it makes sense to support worse off workers in their struggles because it would help to build the global solidarity that, if it were realised, would vastly increase workers' bargaining power. Since that global solidarity is not going to be built tomorrow, it makes more practical sense, in the short term, to mind one's own business and let other groups struggle on their own.

The results are all around us: groups of workers left to fester on picket lines, or being legislated back to work, and, one way or the other, having to settle for contracts that do not meet key demands. That means that there is no labour movement, and there will not be a labour movement until we find our way out of a political vicious circle. If everyone only thinks in the short term, such that the project of building real solidarity between different workplaces and sectors is rejected as impossible because it is not possible *tomorrow*, there will be no movement. Yet, without a movement with solid long term prospects for success, people are forced by material conditions to think in the short term, (the bills have to be paid tomorrow). All that we are left with are heroic groups of workers who hold out against the odds for an impressive period of time. However, these are militant tactics without a strategy that is necessary for success.



# The Triumph of Death

Originally Posted April 16, 2018



Hundreds of paintings have drawn me in so deeply that I lose track of time looking at them, thinking and feeling along with them. Only one has terrified me: Bruegel the Elder's *The Triumph of Death*, in the Prado, Madrid. It is not the dead bodies or the skeleton army impeding the lines of escape that I find terrifying. It is the absolute devastation of the landscape. Guilty humanity is not only being killed for its sins, its capacity to ever recover and return is being permanently destroyed. The triumph of death is forever.

John Berger saw in the sublimity of this painting a foreshadowing of the Holocaust. (*Portraits*, p.43). In 2018, I see Syria. I see Syria not in the didactic message Bruegel the Elder wanted to send (the wages of sin are death), but in the total, all consuming violence without remainder or promise of redemption. There is no heaven, only hell on earth. There is no salvation, only fire and murder. Its great courage as a work of art is that it refuses to promise hope.

On Friday, Trump, May, and Macron launched their long promised assault on Syria, in response to an alleged chemical attack on the rebel city of Douma. As of this writing, the attack has not been verified by any objective authority. I am not interested in whether it happened or not. Perhaps I am morally unevolved, but I have never understood why Syrians being suffocated by chlorine gas is a different magnitude of moral crime than Afghan wedding parties being eviscerated by Hellfire missiles, or why Israel using phosphorous munitions in the densely populated Gaza Strip is not counted as use of a chemical weapon but the attempted murder of an ex-Russian spy with a nerve agent is. Perhaps it is good that I have no geo-political power. I seem to lack the keen eyesight required to detect these nuanced moral distinctions.

What I can see is an absolute contempt for human life on all sides: major powers, jihadis, regional power brokers. The Syrian civil war is the most brutal beating down of the democratic revolutionary aims of the Arab Spring, but they have been vanquished everywhere, the victims of

Western complicity with the *ancien regime* and the inhuman consequences of geo-political posturing.

It is so obvious that the Western response is nothing more than posturing that criticism of it is hardly worthwhile. What does it matter to the hundreds of thousands of victims that the missile launches were a temporary distraction from Trump Scandal-land, mass student and workers' strikes in France, and the Brexit debacle in the United Kingdom? Critics point out the hypocrisy, the double-standards, the piles of bodies on our leaders' doorsteps, but it does nothing to end the system that causes the crimes.

People seem bored by all of it. The light show is not as cool as it was during the First and Second Gulf Wars. There was no mass patriotic upsurge. Spectators had a chance to get a fresh beer from the fridge in time for the next bit of salacious gossip about Trump.

As for *raisons d'etat*, they are easy to find. Russia wants to maintain its tenuous foothold as a major power in the Middle East, the US wants to check it; Iran wants to support Assad and pressure Israel, Israel wants to weaken Iran. We could go on and on, but who cares? When we get right down to it, there is nothing *real* at stake for any of them. Russia will not collapse if it loses its base in Tartus, America is not going to be undermined if Assad survives, Iran has no hope of seriously threatening Israel, and Israel, therefore, has nothing to fear. The only reality is the absolute pummeling of life and life-conditions.

I have no solutions and nothing novel to say. I just want to remark upon the sheer, unrelenting, mad, life-destruction. Mad, because no one can win by the strategies adopted. Everyone cloaks themselves in the mantle of righteousness: Assad in the cloak of formal legitimacy, the various rebel factions in whatever version, secular or sectarian, of revolutionary righteousness they prefer. Everyone tries to try to line up whatever allies they can. Somewhere in the wreckage are legitimate revolutionary aspirations. But what sort of future can anyone reasonably imagine if all continue with the same strategies they have been pursuing for seven years?

Breughel saw the future. A land laid waste, bodies piled on bodies, an army of death ready to finish off the survivors. The advantage of art over politics and philosophy is that it communicates its truths directly: it does not make arguments, it asserts conclusions. You can take them or leave them, but you have to confront them. There is no dodge, no hair splitting. *Ecce Syria*: Hundreds of thousands of people killed, millions internally and externally displaced, ancient cities destroyed, *without any redeeming goal having been accomplished*.

The living can always project themselves into the future and say: if the right side wins, peace will be restored, and a better future established. What else can anyone say? But death is permanent. There is no redemption for the dead. They cannot rise up from the grave and reassure everyone: "Hey, it was worth it, don't worry, get on with your lives." Look at the painting again: there is no getting on with it.

# An Essay on Frustration

Originally Posted March 12, 2018

A juxtaposition pregnant with political meaning: one week after the [Windsor Downtown Mission](#) bought the building that currently houses the central library, (yes, you read that correctly), anarchists in Hamilton smashed shop windows as a performative protest against gentrification. Two sets of dispossessed people (or people representing, or claiming to represent, the dispossessed), two opposed solutions, equally ineffective.

Only in Windsor could a massive expansion of the homeless shelter be interpreted as a good thing. So desperate is the city for any type of “development” downtown that any transaction is heralded as “good news” story. I guess this move is “transformative,” to use the lingo. Addresses are being exchanged, (although, laughably, lamentably, no one knows where the library will end up). But is there any other city in North America where the homeless shelter has more money than the central branch of the public library, enough, in fact, to buy the building out from under them?

This absurdity is the outcome of the privatization of poverty relief on the one hand and the fiscal starvation of public institutions on the other. The two processes are completely intertwined: as public investment dwindles, private charities have to assume a greater role in poverty relief and the provision of formerly public social services. Since they are private operations, they adopt the same growth model as businesses in the productive economy, seeking to grow and expand their operations. Corporate sponsored foodbanks advertise on television, boasting about how much more money they raise year over year. Private charities like the Downtown Mission raise enough money that they can become players in the real estate market. But what is never said is that the growth of foodbanks or missions means that the problems they are supposed to solve: homelessness and hunger, *are getting worse*. However, once the growth model of the capitalist economy has colonized social service provision, bigger operations appear to be better operations. The poor continue to suffer.

So, is there a “revolutionary” solution? Presumably the belief that there is underlies the protest of the self-styled “Ungovernables” who smashed up chic shop windows in Hamilton last week. Their protest against gentrification was reminiscent of attacks last year in [St. Henri](#), a storied working class district of Montreal.

“Locke St was downtown’s first gentrified street, its ‘success story’ as Mayor Fred [Eisenberger] might say, the surrounding neighbourhoods the first to see the rent hikes that have since come to dominate so many of our lives,” the post read. “Turning the tables and finally counterattacking Saturday night helped me to shake off some of the fear and frustration that build up when you’re trapped in a hopeless situation.”

While they might work as therapy, I want to say that, politically, such attacks are useless, so I will say it: rampaging down the street smashing windows is politically useless.

In fact, I want to say they are worse than useless, so I will say it: they are worse than useless. First, while the [justification](#) for the event came with the usual adolescent male braggadocio about confronting the cops, the political reality is that spectacle-politics of this sort only strengthens the police. Once a group has been labelled “violent” the gloves can come off the next round. Worse, it generates far more community opposition than it does support, and therefore for political pressure on the police to “crack down,” (by cracking heads if there is a repeat performance).

By increasing support for repression, groups like the Ungovernables ensure their own destruction and political irrelevance. Either they can never appear again, or, if they do, they risk arrest. But they will not become martyrs that inspire the masses to greater acts of revolutionary heroism, they will be forgotten in provincial jail while workers in Hamilton worry about how NAFTA negotiations will affect the steel industry.

Thus the real problems with revolutionary anger: it is inchoate and destructive, has no constructive economic or political agenda, and is moralistic (believing that truth lies only with good-souled militants willing to risk their own asses). Groups motivated by anger alone have nothing to say that the vast majority of people have shown any inclination to listen to for more than half a century. Yet, if the structural problems that the Ungovernables expose are at all tractable, the solution will require mass political efforts to build a different economy, one based-upon a value system that prioritises the satisfaction of fundamental needs.

It is true, on the other hand, that spontaneous attacks on gentrified streets remind us of the suffering that is a hidden but pervasive reality in the cool capitalist city. It is true, as the expanding Windsor Mission proves, that there are vast unmet needs. But these needs are only going to be met when collectively produced wealth is appropriated by the community and used to satisfy those needs. In the short term, the fight has to be for expanded and democratized public services, fully funded through a progressive income tax system. The idea that homelessness is some impossible problem to solve, when the materials and the know-how to build homes exists, is just an obvious political excuse to not do what is easily done. There is a lack of affordable housing because governments do not build it. If they were to return to building it they would not have to repeat the mistakes of the past: soulless housing projects that warehouse the poor in self-contained ghettos. “Public housing” is not logically exclusive of imaginative architecture and sound urban planning.

In the longer term, beyond a re-vivified public sector, we need a left that affirms the value of creative labour and works to open up access to the beautiful as well as the necessary. Marx warned long ago about the politics of envy and levelling. His was a socialism of good things, art and music as well as a roof over one’s head, roses as well as bread. One can understand a militant frustration with a world where libraries are displaced by a homeless shelter which is incapable of solving the structural causes whose effects it tries to manage. But there is no short cut to solution, and only political argument and movement building can hope to one day solve them.

# Reality Check

Originally Posted December 8, 2017

On December 6th, U.S. President Trump did what the U.S. Congress voted to do in 1995: recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and begin the process of moving the Embassy there from Tel Aviv. The move was in keeping with the dominant trends of his presidency thus far: it kept a campaign promise, but was an old idea he embraced as his creation; it was odiously reactionary, but more style than substance, and it left all the details about implementation open.

The reaction to Trump's announcement is also in keeping with the pattern that has developed: loud *verbal* condemnations matched by no practical actions. Hypocritical leaders from Europe and the Arab Middle East condemned the move as the death of the "peace process," when any sentient being knows that the peace process been dead for two decades. Israel will not seriously bargain unless threatened by forces it cannot resist or defeat. The vaunted "Arab Street" is not such a force, nor are heroic Palestinian youth (both forces seem exhausted after decades of struggle with little concrete achievement to show for it). The Palestinians have affirmed their dignity by their willingness to fight for what is right, but their valour has meant nothing to the leaders of the world. European leaders sometimes say the right things about illegal Israeli settlements, but they have never taken any real measures to end them. If they were serious about their platitudes, they could support meaningful sanctions, but no major politician in Europe or North America has ever even mentioned the word. Arab leaders are perhaps worst of all: the loudest in voice to condemn Israel, the most silent when it comes to concrete action to build a global movement against Israeli colonialism. Palestinians have been, since 1967, mostly on their own in a fight where they need real allies.

Trump is an obnoxious, narcissistic, right-wing pandering slave of money and media exposure, but he also does what he says. Widely vilified for constructing his own reality, he also lays bare the reality of this world. Most other politicians pretend that things like human rights, social justice, equality, and diplomatic *politesse* matter. They do not. The world is governed by money and political-military power, and Trump makes this clear, all too clear. Perhaps that is the deep reason why he is so loathed by liberals (in the American sense). His tweets are lasers cutting through decades of moralizing sediments to expose the bedrock of violence that really drives global capitalism.

They hate this exposure because it brings to light the emptiness of their words: they ruled over the same system and supported the same substantive policies as Trump, but they couched that support in puffery about human rights and social inclusion. Trump knows that the hymns sung to human rights are all bullshit and refuses to sing along. Mariam Barghouti, writing for [Al Jazeera](#) makes this point clearly.

Today, we see both the international community and Arab leaders ignoring Palestinian cries for justice once again. This is evident in the dominating discourse of global and as well as Arab leaders – It revolves around the fear of another uprising, instability, and protest. There is no genuine

address, in most the speeches and proclamations, to the roots of the travesty bestowed upon the Palestinian people in the form of a violent occupation.

Trump's crime is that he lets the cat out of the bag: European and Arab leaders really do not care about Palestinians. More deeply and generally, they all abide by the principle that the world is ruled by those who have won the wars. Social justice for them, as for Trump, is for each side to behave as it is in truth: the winners rule by virtue of winning, the losers are ruled by virtue of losing. The world has always thus been governed, but usually the rulers put clothes on this naked truth. But the clothes do not make the man in this case: the man underneath is a violent brute and he always ruled with an iron fist.

No immediate good will come out of Trump's announcement. Even though he did little more than recognize a *de facto* political truth, the recognition is yet another humiliation for the Palestinians. They have endured worse and continued to fight. There is no doubt that they will endure this slap in the face and fight anew. But over the longer term, there is perhaps some value to Trump's political realism. Writing one year ago, just after the Trump election, Palestinian journalist [Ramzy Baroud](#) mused that Trump might prove better in the long run for Palestinians than liberals just because he is so overt in his support for Israel:

The US has served as an enabler to Israel's political and military belligerence, while pacifying the Palestinians and the Arabs with empty promises, with threats at times, with handouts and with mere words. The so-called "moderate Palestinians", the likes of Mahmoud Abbas and his Palestinian Authority, were duly pacified, indeed, for they won the trappings of "power", coupled with US political validation, while allowing Israel to conquer whatever remained of Palestine. But that era is, indeed, over. While the US will continue to enable Israel's intransigence, a Trump Presidency is likely to witness a [complete departure](#) from the Washingtonian doublespeak. Bad will no longer be good, wrong is not right, and warmongering is not peacemaking. In fact, Trump is set to expose American foreign policy for what it truly is, and has been for decades. His presidency is likely to give all parties a [stark choice](#) regarding where they stand on peace, justice and human rights.

Thus far, events have proven Baroud absolutely correct. In order to win, one must not only know who the enemy is, but what they really think. Attempts to build meaningful support for Palestinian liberation through cultivating ties with Western governments have failed. Just as in the case of apartheid in South Africa, mainstream politicians can smell the money over the pile of stinking bodies, and they always follow their nose. Unless something unexpected and unforeseeable at present happens in the West, the liberation of Palestine will have to be the work of Palestinians and solidarity movements built outside of and against existing governments.

Writing one hundred and fifty years ago, [Marx and Engels](#) argued that capitalism undermines all the religious and superstitious beliefs that former ruling classes employed to justify their rule. No one can any longer believe that the king is king by the grace of god or that the ruling class is possessed of superior blood. Money and violence rule, and the observable everyday dynamics of the world prove it to anyone who can stand to look:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

Trump forces us all to look with sober senses at the real situation and our relations with one another. He is, unabashedly, the ideal expression of the real relationship between economic and political power in capitalism. Puffed up by the trappings of his position, he is, manifestly, a servant of money-power. This deep truth needs to be the basis of opposition to him and the forces that created him.



# I Can't Stand Up For Kneeling Down

Originally Posted September 26, 2017

The highly cultured amongst us sometimes sneer at sport. I have never understood why. Athletic excellence is better regarded on analogy with artistic beauty. Like dance, athletic expression involves supreme physical discipline, economy of gesture, singular concentration, and breathtaking control over the body, all realized with electric speed or terrifying power. Sports are competitive, it is true, and there is an instrumental purpose— winning— that art transcends, but the art world is hardly free of competitive dynamics and is every bit as much integrated into market relations as sports.

It is true, on the other hand, that art tends to value and cultivate the idiosyncratic and iconoclastic, while sports— especially team sports— are schools of hyper-masculinity and conformity (women's sports increasingly mirror men's in these regards). So it was more than surprising last Sunday to see over 200 players in that most militaristic and jingoistic of sports— American football— rise up by refusing to stand for the national anthem. The players were responding to President Trump's racist attack on the trend toward kneeling instead of standing during the national anthem. In a speech in the always racially progressive state of Alabama, he demanded that owners fire any "[son of a bitch](#)" who refused to stand for the anthem.

The movement began last year with then San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Responding to police shootings of unarmed black men in Ferguson Missouri, as well as the longer history of racism in America, Kaepernick argued that he would no longer stand for the anthem of a country that "[oppresses black people.](#)" His was a mostly lonely protest until last Sunday.

Even though the NFL is dominated by African American athletes and has suffered for most of its history from a clear division of racial labour (the "thinking" position of quarterback was reserved until very recently for white players), there has been little in the way of politicized protest. [Jim Brown](#) in the 1960's was a notable exception. The intensification of official racist pronouncements streaming from the White House since the election of Trump is rapidly changing this quietude. It is spreading, too. Arguably the biggest sports star in North America today, LeBron James, has been the most vocal critic of Trump, dismissing him as a "[bum](#)". He was responding to Trump's attacks on The Golden State Warriors, last year's NBA champions, and their star forward, Steph Curry, who have refused to visit the White House, as the champions of all four major sports leagues typically do.

(Shamefully, the Pittsburgh Penguins, last year's Stanley Cup Champions, led by Cole Harbour Nova Scotia's Sidney Crosby, are still planning to attend their scheduled visit, wasting an opportunity to stand with their brothers in the NFL, not to mention a chance to give voice to the long history of oppression of Canada's oldest African Canadian community in Crosby's home province).



Why does this protest matter? For three reasons. First, Trump's margin of victory in 2016 was razor thin in the key battle ground states of Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. He won the working class white vote in those states, but by tiny fractions. For better or for worse, sports fans look at sports stars differently. Recall one of the most politically telling moments of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, where the white protagonist was confronted by his black customer who asks him how he can spout racial epithets and love Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson. White people who cheer for black athletes can still be racists, but their love for their sports stars is an entry point for political argument against that racism, a basis in their own experience to challenge them to think about the coherence of their views. If even a relative handful change their minds, Trump will not be back in 2020.

Second, the militancy of the movement is building. Until now, Kaepernick has been isolated. Indeed, he has, literally and figuratively, been blacklisted and is without an NFL job. On Sunday, The Seattle Seahawks and Pittsburgh Steelers both refused to take the field during the anthems. The Steelers are an iconic team who embody the working class ethos that Trump pretends to honour. Their fan base is exactly the demographic base that voted so narrowly for Trump. Of even greater symbolic and political value, many players gave the Black Power salute, fists raised, instead of merely kneeling. Symbols matter in politics.

Finally, the politicization of Black athletes, fed initially by movements like Black Lives Matter, has the potential to strengthen those movements by further radicalizing young people, giving them the inspiration from which the courage to confront the day to day racism of life in America and its deeper structural bases derives. If even the wealthiest and most respected Black Americans feel racism's sting, it is clear that its source is not just bad attitudes, but is rooted in the heart of American (and, more broadly, Western) history. Its solution will require widespread social change and not just education.

Of course, this movement, like all social movements, comes with its contradictions. Once again it has provided a platform for the "good capitalist" to pontificate. Owners- some of whom, like Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, are friends with Trump- have, predictably, defended their players' right to protest. Moreover, there are no saviours in politics, and a movement led by stars always runs the risk of overshadowing older movements with organic connections to oppressed communities. Overcoming structural problems is a collective effort. The media, by contrast, needs heroes, and they will ignore the more important street and community level activism in favour of air time for the famous, who they will portray as responsible yet committed, measured, yet determined, role models to temper the anger of more militant activists. Anger alone cannot win, but it is crucial fuel. This week's protests are an encouraging sign of widening opposition, but they are not a substitute for community level organization.

# The (Politically) Repugnant Conclusion

Originally Posted February 5, 2018

In *Reasons and Persons*, Derek Parfit famously explored problems of identity, the temporality of obligation, and, in that light, the happiness of future generations. The “repugnant conclusion” concerns possible human futures. If we adopt a crude utilitarian summing of average happiness, then the “best” future for humanity could be one in which there is a huge number of mostly miserable people. So long as those people prefer their rubbish lives to death, the addition of an enormous number of small tokens of happiness could lead to a greater sum of happiness than a future of a much smaller number of ordinarily happy people. Arithmetically considered, the sum of the value of the happiness of a huge number of mostly but not totally miserable people could exceed the more complete happiness of a smaller number of people, and so, without countervailing argument, it would seem to follow that the best future for humanity is a world overflowing with wretched but not yet suicidal people. “In each of these lives there is very little happiness. But, if the numbers are large enough, this is the outcome with the greatest total sum of happiness.”(p. 388). The conclusion is repugnant for obvious reasons.

Parfit’s thought experiment came to mind recently while I was reading a report from the [Brookings Institute](#). The report showed that while there has been job growth under Trump, almost none of it has occurred in those districts that voted Trump. Of most significance: the (de) industrial districts of the mid-West, those districts to which Trump promised renewed investment and a revitalization of manufacturing have seen no or [negative job growth](#). Technologically and culturally dynamic major urban areas, especially on the coasts, i.e., those parts of the country that were overwhelmingly Democrat, have been home to all the jobs.

The spin will be: that’s creative capitalism for you. Venture capital follows young, hip, tech-savvy entrepreneurs to the big city cauldrons of innovation. While that picture is not completely untrue, it also masks the other side of the high-tech economy: precarious or low paid labour in bars, cafes, call centres; low-paid back-breaking labour cleaning, maintaining, and repairing the built environment on which high tech industries depend. Dynamic population growth sends housing costs soaring at the same time as older problems of inadequate or expensive public transit, lack of access to health care, and class and race divides in access to education persist.

Nevertheless, the economic and cultural dynamics are clear: the old industrial cities of the American mid-West are not going to regain their power as the workshops of the world. Even if it is a complete myth that cities are full of nothing but upwardly mobile, well-educated, tolerant, multi-cultural youth, there is an element of that story which is true. And it is the element of truth that gave rise to my “politically repugnant conclusion.”

The Politically Repugnant Conclusion: a significant fraction of the American working class will become permanently alienated from the emerging culture of diverse and dynamic urban life and turn backward and inward, shielding themselves emotionally from economic forces they cannot control with xenophobic and racist ideologies, and blindly supporting right-wing movements even

when it is objectively clear that those movements have neither the power nor interest to restore the economic basis of the former heartlands of American industry.

There is a corollary: Left-wing politics will be increasingly dominated by the interests of young urban professionals. It will embrace a politics of diversity, and cultural, economic, and technological dynamism, and be forced to see the nostalgic fraction of the working class as the enemy, and permanently turn its back on them.

The first part of the corollary is not repugnant: if left wing politics is rooted in the historical materialist premise that human beings make their own history, it has to change as that history changes. Thus, any left politics with a future is going to have to find a language and a program that speaks to contemporary cultural and technological realities. Those of us who grew up without smartphones might not need them to manage our social lives, but young people who have never seen a curly, tangled phone cord do. A workerist politics of nostalgia (a grossly caricatured and dishonestly expressed version of which was central to Trump's appeal to a large fraction of white mid-Western workers) is not going to work.

But think through the repugnant political conclusion to see what might conceivably happen. Well-educated young people flock to the major cities. Urban culture valorizes multicultural spaces over ethnic uniformity, sexual and gender fluidity over fixed sex and gender roles, the self-organizing communities of cyber-space over rigid family structures, "the melting into air" over "all that is solid." The left, to the extent that it wants to articulate a progressive agenda, will have to re-invent itself around the demands that elevate the social and legal conditions for fluidity, self-organization, mobility, and diversity over the demands for social protection for obsolete ways of life. And that will mean saying "farewell" to a large fraction of the working class in a way quite different than that intended by Andre Gorz.

We can already see this process at work in documents like the [LEAP Manifesto](#) and Srnicek and Williams' *Inventing the Future*. The LEAP manifesto asks us to imagine a post-carbon economy in which environmental integrity takes priority over profits, while Srnicek and William's warn the left that lingering traces of technophobic nostalgia will condemn it to irrelevance. They argue instead that the left must see the computing and robotics revolutions as material conditions for a new emancipatory vision centred on: free time, play, diversity, and democratic self-governance.

I have been critical of aspects of Srnicek and William's argument [elsewhere](#), but I agree with them that the left can only look forward, not back. Hence the repugnant conclusion: Unless a language to counter the appeal of Trumpite populism can be found, the chasm between the values of younger workers (and even those in precarious employment share the values of fluidity, diversity, and playfulness) and that fraction of older workers who believe the snake oil being sold to them by Trump, will only widen. The danger is that everyone will fall into it— except the capitalists who can only benefit from intra-working class conflict.

# A Note on Indiscretion

Originally Posted January 27, 2018

In the ever-widening circle of judgement about sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, and sexual assault, it seems to me that a useful moral distinction has dropped out of our social vocabulary: the indiscretion. Unlike the violence of sexual assault, the indiscretion is not criminal. Unlike sexual harassment and misconduct, it violates informal, not formal codes of conduct. Unlike both, therefore, it is not a fit subject for public declamation, censure, and punishment. Its solution has been effective in restoring social connections for millennia: the sincere apology. The sincere apology must be distinguished from the public apology to whole world, which is always an exercise in public relations. An apology is not meant to restore a public reputation, but to acknowledge a wrong to the person(s) who was/were wronged.

Sexual violence remains an all too prevalent danger for women. Sexual harassment likewise. These are public, political problems that have to be dealt with through the criminal justice system in the worst cases, and through formal censure, education, and demonstrated personal transformation in the less serious. The criminal justice system has numerous problems, of that there is no doubt, but there is no better existing alternative. (For an example of what can go wrong when ‘revolutionary’ alternatives are tried, review the abominable way in which the [Socialist Workers’ Party](#) in the United Kingdom tried to handle rape allegations against a leading male member. It shatteringly failed the young female comrade who made the allegations and effectively destroyed the party).

However, not every unasked for and unanticipated sexual advance is assault or harassment. Some are unproblematically accepted; others are awkwardly received, or ambivalently accepted, or rejected. I would argue that these define the field of indiscretions. They should rightly be classed as private and interpersonal. Yes, the personal is political, but it does not follow that *everything* personal is political. Unless we are willing to descend (as it appears we may be) into a moral totalitarianism in which every tiny little bone from every skeleton in everyone’s closet can be exhumed by anyone at any time– which will prove a social catastrophe for everyone– we should all insist upon, and respect in others, a space in which indiscretions can be privately dealt with.

Isn’t this just an excuse for men to get away with bad sexual behaviour? No, because there is no hard and fast scientific definition of the different categories of sexual misconduct. It is always up to the object of the advance to decide how problematic it is. The philosophical issue seems to me to make sure that the moral vocabulary is available that allows a distinction to be made, by women who have been victims, between cases that require formal response and those that can be handled by private discussion and apology. Where there is any question of criminal behaviour, the solution is not an internet trial, but a real investigation and appropriately rendered judgement. Legal rights are not the whole solution to social problems, but do we really want to return to a world in which moral condemnation based on hearsay takes the place of formally constituted investigations and procedures? We should know all too well what happens when groups of people appoint themselves judge, jury, and executioner. The results have never been pretty or progressive.

I suppose a person who has never thought, said, or done anything untoward is a logical possibility. I do not think I have ever met one, and I know I do not want to live in a world that thinks that it is possible to eradicate indiscretions. The only way to do that would be to eliminate all spontaneity from sexual interactions: anything unplanned can be unwanted, so unless everything has to be planned in advance, it is impossible to avoid behaviors that might turn out to be indiscretions.

Let whomever is without indiscretion cast the first meme.

# World Philosophy Day 2017

Originally Posted November 17, 2017

STEM The Tide: The Revolution Will not Be Digitized  
Remarks on the Occasion of World Philosophy Day 2017  
Villain's Beastro,  
Windsor, ON

1. There can be no question of skepticism about the results of three hundred years of scientific research. The issue is not whether material nature can be understood by the scientific method. Rather, the question is whether human beings and our societies and cultures are reducible to material nature, its elements, forces, and laws.
2. There can also be no question of retreating to idealist dreams of a spiritual other-world and divine origins. Not only do they presuppose what would need to be explained: how god created the world and what reason there would be for souls to become embodied, they also abstract from the limitations and challenges that make life as finite, mortal being difficult.
3. Hence the philosophical object is the specific historical materiality of human beings, the way our individual and collective lives are at once biological and social, physical and symbolic, framed by objective forces that are nevertheless subject to interpretation and change. Grasping this specificity adequately is not only a philosophical problem: it organizes the whole field of the humanities. What is uniquely philosophical is the task of making the case, against reductionism on the one hand and idealism on the other, of the synthetic, bio-social nature of human beings.
4. Our biology both links us together in mutual need and allows us to think as separate individuals. We are drawn together and pulled apart; the meaning and value of our lives are at once collective political problems and individual existential problems. We build together and dread our deaths alone.
5. Our finitude can be lived religiously or philosophically, or it can be ignored scientifically. If religious belief cannot solve the problems of existential anxiety, the dread of uncertainty, the eventual reality of failure and loss, when it is honest it at least acknowledges them as the source of the need to question the silent heavens. "Let man, coming back to himself, consider what he is in comparison with what is; let him consider himself as lost in this out of the way corner of nature; and from this little cell he finds himself lodged ... let him learn to appreciate at their true worth the world, the kingdoms, the cities, and himself. What is man within the infinite?" (Pascal, Thought 13).
6. Science makes the same mistake as the dogmas it claims to overturn. In reality a historical and dialectical accumulation of partial understandings, science oversteps its competency as soon as it weighs in on ultimate issues. The absurdity of thinking that there is an algorithmic solution to ultimate questions is as overt as the belief in a literal creation of the universe in 6 days.

7. Choice is not algorithmic but normative: what can cruel or kind, tender or ruthless mean to a machine? They are felt and cognized realities, machine intelligence is artificial because it is not a feeling intelligence aware of itself and its responsibilities.

8. Ultimate questions are those which human beings have perennially posed, in all reflective cultures: Life, death, purpose, love, hate, sex, creation, destruction, knowledge, ignorance, future, the part and the whole, the self and its community, justice, freedom.

9. Philosophy as the public exercise of foundational questioning lives now as it has always lived, nourished by these ultimate questions. Human beings apart from these ultimate questions are protein awaiting recycling. Feeling the essential importance and value of our existence depends upon being confronted with these questions. We do not reason our way to these questions as a computer grinds out solutions. They are just there one day: alone on a bus, walking in a field, looking into your lover's eyes, alone and suicidal, deliriously happy but knowing it cannot last. "It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. ... But one day the "why" arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement." (Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p.10).

10. Cut off from these ultimate questions philosophy is reduced to a loose connection of technocratic specialities that must live and die by their contribution to instrumental knowledge. In the competition between empirical disciplines and philosophy over the instrumental value of knowledge, philosophy cannot win over the long term. It will eventually be absorbed by the empirical disciplines. If it wants a future, it must confront those disciplines with the limits of their competence.

11. Those limits are: the values by which we live and ought to live, the interior life of imagination and thought, the purpose and meaning of existence, in all of their historical complexity and contradiction.

12. Once we open up this field of questions there is always the possibility that the best conclusion is nihilism: that there are no universal values, that inner life and the affections and attachments it helps us form are chimeras, that life has no purpose. Living only really begins where confrontation with the non-necessity of continuing to live has been thought through and felt.

13. Everyone must think down to this level below which there is no going deeper on their own and for themselves. The value of the history of philosophy is not to unburden each individual of the need to work down to that absolute floor. "The task of becoming subjective, then, may be presumed to be the highest task, and one that is proposed to every human being." (Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 146). If any philosopher could answer fundamental questions once and for all, they would have been the last philosopher. Like Virgil leading Dante through Hades, the history of philosophy is a guide that lets us see what we need to see, but not an answer book.

14. Hence, the public value of philosophy today is that it keeps these questions alive for the whole community, in circumstances in which our politics, our culture, and our science wants to ignore them or pretend they can be answered by pointing to a chemical sequence or a string of numbers.

It forces us to think the specificity of the human as an existential, historical, social, symbolic, and political reality.

15. While this task is not the preserve of an expert culture of academic philosophers, academic philosophers find their public justification as teachers of disciplined and rigorous ways of posing these questions, as interpreters of the history of answers, as creators of answers demanded by our own time, and as exemplars of the dignity of argument and reasoned defence of positions, against violence on the one hand and the dogmatism of quantifiable results on the other.



# NAFTA 2.0

Originally Posted July 27, 2017

On Monday, 17 July, the Office of the United States Trade Representative released a document detailing their 5 priorities for the re-negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The re-negotiation of NAFTA follows President Trump's denunciation of it as "the worst trade deal in history" during the 2016 election campaign. NAFTA has been very good to the American capitalists overall, but not, it is true, to American manufacturing workers, or some sections of domestic American capital. Capitalism is a doubly contradictory system. Overall, Gross National Product can increase while standards of living for workers can remain stagnant and decline. Between sectors, policy changes that allow some to benefit and grow can undermine others. Free trade deals can thus benefit exporters while harming domestic manufacturers that rely on home markets and cannot compete with cheaper imported goods. Sectoral contradictions explain the splits that sometimes open up with the ruling class between proponents and opponents of free trade. Since workers tend to lose out either way, (having to attenuate wage demands in exchange for job security or just losing their jobs as domestic manufacturing proves uncompetitive), nationalist arguments like Trump's always resonate.

During the election, Trump, like a host of right-wing populists before him, from George Wallace in the 1960s to Ross Perot in the 1980s and Pat Buchanan in the 1990s effectively exploited real working anxiety about job loss and stagnant wages by tying it to demonized foreigners. While Trumpmanagaed to win strong working class support in some areas, it was still a shock to read that one of the administration's [5 key objectives](#) would be reading labour rights directly into the agreement. The text in full:

- Bring the labor provisions into the core of the Agreement rather than in a side agreement.
- Require NAFTA countries to adopt and maintain in their laws and practices the internationally recognized core labor standards as recognized in the ILO Declaration, including:
  - Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
  - Elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor;
  - Effective abolition of child labor and a prohibition on the worst forms of child labor; and
  - Elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.
- Require NAFTA countries to have laws governing acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wages, hours of work, and occupational safety and health.
- Establish rules that will ensure that NAFTA countries do not waive or derogate from their labor laws implementing internationally recognized core labor standards in a manner affecting trade or investment between the parties.
- Establish rules that will ensure that NAFTA countries do not fail to effectively enforce their labor laws implementing internationally recognized core labor standards and acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wages, hours of work, and occupational safety and health laws through a sustained or recurring course of action in a matter affecting trade or investment between the parties.
- Require that NAFTA countries take initiatives to prohibit trade in goods produced by forced

labor, regardless of whether the source country is a NAFTA country.

- Provide access to fair, equitable, and transparent administrative and judicial proceedings.
- Ensure that these labor obligations are subject to the same dispute settlement mechanism that applies to other enforceable obligations of the Agreement.
- Establish a means for stakeholder participation, including through public advisory committees, as well as a process for the public to raise concerns directly with NAFTA governments if they believe a NAFTA country is not meeting its labor commitments.

These principles are clearly in the interests of workers everywhere, but we have to remind ourselves that they both originate from workers struggles from below and are only enforced by those same struggles. The Office of the United States Trade Representative is not interested in the well-being of workers anywhere, but they are interested in ways of reducing the competitive advantage of unorganized, low wage Mexican labour. Hence the inclusion of these principles in their statement of objectives. Like other fine sounding constitutional principles, they can and will be sidestepped, weakened, or simply ignored when they are not actively defended by workers themselves.

We can be quite sure that no party renegotiating NAFTA will be serving the interests of workers, because the whole point of treaties like NAFTA was to free capital as a whole from the constraints that national trades union movements had successfully imposed upon it from the late nineteenth century to the early 1970s. Of course, these trade deals can work against the sectional interests of some domestic capitalists, but, overall, they have greatly facilitated the mobility and growth of capital as a whole and funded the spectacular rise of inequality that even mainstream economists can no longer ignore.

So, can workers look to existing trade unions to protect their interests? A few days before the document from Office of the United States Trade Representative was made public there was a joint statement from the Canadian union representing auto workers, Unifor, and the United Auto Workers (UAW) in the US. It more or less adopted the same position on labour rights as the US government document, but gave them a different political interpretation. The [Unifor/UAW](#) document states that

It's essential for auto workers in the United States and Canada to not be persuaded by those who wish to portray Mexican auto workers as the problem. Workers in every country have the right to develop their economy, advance social conditions, and to seek a higher standard of living. But for far too long successive Mexican governments have failed to protect and advance workers' fundamental rights and auto companies have been all too willing to reap the windfall of repressed wages and weak standards. The future of North American auto workers is already intertwined, and the best prospect for making gains is to raise conditions for all.

The document gestures rhetorically towards solidarity with Mexican workers, but does not lay out an action plan for building it. It does say that Unifor and the UAW would have welcomed the participation of Mexican unions in preparation of the document, but that independent unions do not exist. While this claim is true as regards Mexican autoworkers in the Maquiladora zones, it is not completely true, as we will see below. Given the fact that there was no effort made to reach out to independent trade unionists in Mexico, it is difficult to draw any other conclusion than that

Unifor and the UAW share the same hopes as American domestic capitalists: that an improvement in working conditions in Mexico would reduce its competitive advantage and reverse the flow of capital. Within a capitalist system, economic development proceeds through competitive advantage, and lower labour costs are a prime source of competitive advantage. This reason explains why any attempt to advance the interests of all workers in a global capitalist economy is bound to fail: the system must put capitalists and workers into competition, and in any competition, the loser will do worse than the winner.

So if the UAW and Unifor are serious when they say that “the best prospect for making gains is to raise conditions for all,” then they need to start mobilizing their members for a long term struggle for a different socio-economic system. However, as soon as one makes that claim one is immediately confronted with the not unreasonable rejoinder: the bills must be paid in the short term, workers cannot afford to indulge utopian dreams.

The objection is not unreasonable because it rests on the truth that life is lived in the present. At the same time, the future is not some void opposed to the now, but is constantly engendered present action. The contradiction between short term and long term, present and future, is overcome by forms of struggle that achieve short term gains by encroaching on the structural power of capital to shape the whole field of human social and political life. Instead of (implicitly or explicitly) allying with domestic capitalists, workers must build links with each other and make demands that cannot be achieved without forcing capital and the state to cede some degree of control over the wealth and resources that capital’s power depends upon.

This claim again sounds very abstract but it is not. It is just a programmatic statement of processes that are always at work, albeit in very fragmented and attenuated ways. In the present case, the coherent advance of the interests of American, Canadian, and Mexican workers starts with the construction of real solidarity between the three. As I noted above, there is an independent Mexican trade union movement, and it has recognized the need to build these links from below. At a meeting in Mexico City three years before the renegotiation of NAFTA was announced, the independent trade unions met to discuss a common response to the failure of NAFTA. A report from the [UCLA Labour Center](#) notes their key demands:

1. Better understand the lessons of trilateral networks to guide future actions.
2. Analyze new trilateral initiatives and campaigns that build on a culture of transnational labor solidarity between Canada, Mexico, and the United States.
3. Develop a collective understanding of labor at the transnational level and the opportunities and obstacles for workers’ struggles.
4. Promote the exchange of ideas and strategies between participants to strengthen the culture of solidarity among trade unionists from the three countries.

In contrast to the UAW/Unifor document, the independent Mexican unions start from the need to examine what is actually happening at the level of real interaction and political work between workers and movements from all three countries with an eye to identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas of development. They do not commit themselves from the outset with working within the established framework of capital and state formations for an undefined “fair share.” Instead, the idea is to build real networked movements that can express and articulate a set of shared

demands: a workers counter-project against the ruling class project of free trade, revised or otherwise.

It goes without saying that such a politics cannot solve immediate problems of de-industrialization of Southern Ontario and the US Mid-West, or any of the other myriad problems that beset American, Canadian, and Mexican workers. What it could do, if it were to ever gain traction and numbers, is create a real counter-weight to free trade that could exert political and social pressure on the state to take workers' interests into account. Capital cannot soar around the world if it has no place to land, and landing rights are controlled by the state. Movements can generate new political forces that can re-shape short term policy, and short term policies that stem from and enhance workers' power can create the space needed for the imagination and progressive realization of deeper structural changes. As a recent essay from the Canadian [Socialist Project](#) put the point:

Third, we must move toward *democratic planning*. This must be a two-tracked strategy. It means building workers' struggles in workplaces and in communities for control over investments in infrastructures and plants and the flows of surplus capital and profits. And it means, if these struggles are at all to be successful, directly struggling over – and entering – the state with an orientation to transforming its institutions and building the capacities to allow for the democratic transformation of the economy, with all this necessarily means in terms of transforming social relations.

For democratic planning to solve the problems that free trade deals cannot, it will have to be based in an explicit understanding of what all workers shared life-interests are, framed by the recognition that limitless quantitative growth of output is impossible, and build in some formal mechanism allowing for international coordination of production and trade. Those are not easy problems, but they are ultimately the one's that working people in America, Canada, and Mexico are going to have to solve.

# Critical Distance

Originally Posted on July 12, 2017

The other night I was sitting on my second floor deck when I noticed a spider spinning a web. It started by dropping a vertical thread. It made a ball of silk in what would become the hub of the web, crawled back up the vertical shaft, shifted a few degrees, and dropped another vertical thread to connect to the centre. It continued weaving spokes around the full 360 degrees and then began the process of connecting them. Starting from near the centre it connected the spokes, moving outward at what was doubtless a determined ratio. The speed and precision of the work were astounding, as was the beauty of the finished construction.

Yet, what is most astounding of the all is that the spider had no idea what it was doing. Unlike a human craftsperson or artist there is no idea to which the spider seeks to conform its actions, just the instinctually programmed actions. What separates the worst of architects from the best of bees, Marx said, was that the architect first erects their structure in mind, and then realizes it in nature, whereas the busy bee builds its magnificent celled honeycomb unconsciously. No matter how beautiful and complex the honeycomb, it is inferior to even the poorest examples of human architecture, he believed, just because the human architect acts intentionally.

Why should that make such a difference?

This question arose for me as I thought about the spider. It occurred to me that what I was watching was essentially a programmed function, and in that sense the spider was just like a robot that has been programmed to carry out certain complex tasks. In both cases there is absolutely no intentionality, no conscious comparison between idea or plan and outcome, but there is an outcome. If we do not need intentions or consciousness for the creation of things, was Marx wrong to exalt human intentionality as the mark of the qualitative superiority of human craftspeople and artists?

Many contemporary technotopians and transhumanists would be prepared to say yes, if not vis-a-vis spiders, then certainly vis-a-vis computers. The long quest for artificial intelligence is essentially for machines that can, like the spider, create without knowing that they are creating: autonomous function without self-conscious internal steering. If the spider can weave a web so beautiful I want to preserve it just to admire it, and we all agree it does not do so consciously, why should critics of AI put such a stress on self-consciousness as a key condition of intelligence?

After all, it is “artificial” intelligence that the programmers are building, which allows for differences from the human original. Still, if intelligence involves the capacity to carry out complex instructions, adjust to unforeseen obstacles to the carrying out of the task, and revision of the program in response to those obstacles, then we are certainly on the cusp of the age of intelligent machines.

But is intelligence nothing but rule following and recursive self-correction? I do not think so. In fact, I think these aspects are the least interesting aspects of intelligence. I am not saying that rule following and self-correction are unimportant. What I am saying is that *human* intelligence also involves the capacity for *criticism* and that criticism involves an element of self-consciousness that creative species like spiders lack and which computers cannot begin to simulate.

Criticism is not simply the ability to determine when a rule has not been followed properly. If I was supposed to cut a plank to 3 feet, and I instead cut it to 4, then I have made a mistake. There is no reason why a computer cannot be programmed to infallibly cut boards to 3 feet, and there is no reason why it cannot come with a diagnostic program that senses whether it is carrying out its program correctly. Thus, while the computer can detect errors and mistakes, it is not capable of genuine self-criticism, because genuine self-criticism involves a normative dimension that depends upon social self-consciousness.

Let us stick with the trivial board-cutting example. The carpenter asks me to cut a three foot length, and I cut a four foot length instead. Let us assume he is a patient person, but I am hard on myself. I say “I am such an incompetent assistant, I am really not cut out for board cutting.” Here I am not just saying that I made a mistake. I am saying, first, that I have fallen short of an ideal, and second, that this falling short tells me something about myself. In both cases I have to think of the task assigned me not simply as a set of instructions to be followed, but as a challenge to myself. The rules are not external to me or indifferent to my sense of self; I regard my ability to do or not do the job as reflective of my identity, my talents, my abilities, and these all matter to me in a way to which I cannot be indifferent.

When we criticize ourselves, or someone else, or a work of art, or an institution, or society as a whole, we are not just saying that there are rules and that I, or the artist, or the authorities, did not follow them. We are saying there are rules, and there are values that rule above the rules, higher order principles that provide reasons for caring about the way things are or are not and offer goals towards which we *ought* to strive. Moreover, there are values and there are higher level values, which claim to tell us what our “oughts” ought to be. Criticism is always *evaluation*: reflective judgment regarding whether some human practice was carried out as it ought to have been, or, at a higher level, whether this “ought to have been” is as *it* ought to be (whether the values according to which we govern our lives are the best we can imagine and create).

Whatever the content of those values, it should be clear that nothing can govern itself according to values unless it has a sense of itself, its interests, and its goals. Without self-consciousness, therefore, it is impossible to criticize in the sense of evaluation. I cannot judge myself by a higher standard if I have no sense of my ‘self.’ However magnificent its creation or precise its operations, neither the computer nor the spider has that sense of self, and neither, as a consequence, can criticize. The spider can sense if the web needs repair, but it cannot say “Man, that is a beautiful web.” The broken computerized board cutter cannot feel bad that it has failed in its vocation, because it cannot feel any intrinsic connection between its performance and its worthiness.

Why is this distinction important? It is important because the space for criticism as evaluation is shrinking as the demand for *assessment* according to quantitative metrics is expanding. I am not opposed to assessment. Societies have to be concerned with what programs cost and whether they

accomplish the goals that they set out to accomplish. *They also need to criticize the ruling goals and values.* If there are food banks, then it makes sense for those who run the food banks to ask if they are connecting with the target population. But anyone who cares about human beings also has to ask: what is wrong with a society that allows some people to be so poor they have to depend on food banks? The first question is a matter of assessment which takes the given as give, the second is a matter of opening a space for genuine social criticism

What does this issue have to do with spiders and computers? In its initial expression, AI was an attempt to model human intelligence. We are in danger at this point of inverting the relationship, and seeing our own intelligence in the mirror of the computer. Intelligence becomes what computers can do, rather than what computers can do being judged as a replication of *one* aspect of human intelligence (rule following). But human intelligence is not just rule following and rule assessment. It is also rule criticism, rule breaking in the name of higher rules (moral and political principles) and new rule creation through processes of social change governed by commitment to higher values that define ideals we would like to embody, as individuals and collectives.

If criticism is reduced to assessment, then all change will be within established value parameters. If those values allow core human needs to go unmet and vital possibilities to remain unrealized, and we cannot grasp the reasons why because we have allowed the higher dimension of value criticism to be closed off, we will trap ourselves within the given world as ultimate, even as it remains deeply problematic. Problems we do not know about cannot be changed. Hence the need to preserve the space for social criticism. Part of preserving that space requires that we defend a multidimensional understanding of human intelligence. The truly distinctive dimension that makes intelligence human is the linked capacities for evaluative criticism and creative transformation of the given in light of the results of critique. If we give up the difference between criticism and assessment, creation and rule following, we give up the possibility of transformation towards better worlds.

# Planned Obsolescence

Originally Posted July 2, 2017

“Man—this is the mystery of religion— projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject.”

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*

With that insight Feuerbach hoped to bring us back to ourselves from the religious projections to which we subordinated ourselves. God, for Feuerbach, was nothing but the perfection of the human species— intellect, love, creativity— abstracted from earthly limitations and embodied in the idea of a transcendent being. The perfections attributed to God were nothing but idealizations of our own powers. Critical insight into the human origins of the idea of God would, Feuerbach hoped, transform human life and relationships. If we recognized that the perfections that we worshiped in God were just our own highest potentialities, the narrow egoism and selfishness of earthly life could be overcome by the loving mutuality reserved for our spiritual relationships.

The power of projective abstraction has proven much more difficult to overcome than Feuerbach thought. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have proven that the need to project our own powers onto a being which we imagine to be independent of ourselves runs very deep. It dominates the scientific mindset as much as the religious. Alongside the traditional religions we thus find today a religion of technology. Like the monotheistic God, worshipers of technology see it as a force independent of individual and collective will, to which individual and collective choice must always bend, because the good is identical to whatever happens as a consequence of untrammelled technological development.

If you think I am drawing specious and superficial analogies, ponder the words of Ray Kurzweil.

In every monotheistic religion God is ... described as all of these qualities, only without any limitation: infinite knowledge, infinite intelligence, infinite beauty, infinite creativity, infinite love ... of course, even the accelerating growth of evolution never attains an infinite level, but as it explodes exponentially it certainly moves rapidly in that direction. So evolution moves inexorably towards the conception of God, although never quite reaching the ideal. We can regard, therefore, the freeing of our thinking from the severe limitations of its biological form to be an essentially spiritual undertaking. Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Near*, p. 389.

Kurzweil is no backwoods preacher fleecing an uneducated flock of their hard earned money. He is a leading computer scientist, inventor, and head of Google's Artificial Intelligence project. And yet he explicitly, and in all seriousness, identifies the monotheistic god with a future supreme computing intelligence which will redeem us and raise us from the dead. But what he does not realize is that he actually sells himself short in his genuflection before his own creations.



Technology, like God, is not a force independent of human intelligence and activity, but their product. Yet, like the idea of the divine, the actual relationship of dependence is reversed, and the creators subordinate themselves to their own creation, at immense cost.

Kierkegaard argued in his essay *Fear and Trembling* (a meditation on the story of God's commandment to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac) that divine command produces a "teleological suspension of the ethical." That fearsome phrase just means that God can command us to set aside ordinary human conceptions of right and wrong for the sake of the higher good of obeying His will. The problem is (and Kierkegaard understood this, although it did not change his mind) that only God knows what the higher good served by obeying his will is. Hence, from the human perspective, we are left in an absurd situation: having to renounce our own ethical duties for a higher good we cannot possibly know. What we do know is that violating the ethical norms will cause harm, but we do it— if we have faith— just because it is what God commands.

Do not our ruling technotopians council the same? Never reflect about the values that we want our society to embody but always do that which it becomes technically possible to do. By fiat, the benefits will always outweigh the costs. Whatever harms technological development causes will be cured by more technological development. The responsibility of politicians and people generally is simply to adapt and obey the priest-class that produces the marvels.

Behind these injunctions to adapt is the real driver of capitalist society: economic competition. Individual firms must strive to increase productivity, to produce more product in less average time. Technological innovation decreases socially necessary labour time, decreases per unit costs, and thus (other things being equal) increases profit. That is not to say that every technological development is a mechanical reflex of economic forces, or that science is nothing but ideology. It does help explain the reason why no labour saving innovation is ever rejected by capitalists, and why rulers cheerlead every technological innovation no matter what the social costs for the workers who lose out, or, more irrationally from a system perspective, society's long term stability.

Everyone can see that a society in which: a) people must buy the goods they need to survive and b) are by and large dependent upon paid labour to earn that money will enter into a fatal crisis, if c) it allows technology to replace labour without any system-wide planning to find new ways of ensuring that people can live and that social services can be funded. The history of capitalism is largely a history of ignoring the social costs of technological development and letting those workers made redundant fend for themselves and gradually die out. That would seem to be the approach that is on offer at this point, but there is a difference, or a potential difference, that means it will most likely not work. Past rounds of technological development did create new and increased demand for labour. The emergence of Artificial Intelligence threatens to break with this pattern, reducing the overall demand for labour, or at least full time workers with secure jobs.

(Some economists dispute this view and argue that technology is just an ideological excuse to draw attention away from anti-labour political choices. No doubt there is some truth to this argument, but at the same time it seems safe to at least conclude that if technology will not anytime soon eliminate all jobs, it is contributing to their continued degradation. For a clear articulation of this

argument see the report from the Economic Policy Institute *The Zombie Robot Argument Lurches On.*)

Let us assume for the sake of argument that there will at some point in the future arise a structural crisis due to severe declines in demand for labour. This possibility helps explain recent discussion of Guaranteed Basic Income projects in some parts of the capitalist world. In the form on offer in Ontario, for example, it will be little more than the existing welfare system by another name. It will provide poverty levels of income support and keep people tied to commodity markets (rather than free public services) to satisfy their needs.

If business consultants like Martin Ford (author of two studies of the future of work that are worth reading: *Light in the Tunnel* and *Rise of the Robots*) the structural crisis of capitalism noted above is inevitable, as the technical achievements in AI become self-ramifying and abolish the need for human labour in ever more domains formerly judged exclusively human. If Ford and others are correct, (and again, they may not be, but one must plan for worse case scenarios) the looming crisis creates an opening on the left for political mobilization around creative policy responses (massively reduced hours of work without loss of real income, GBI at levels sufficient to free individuals from the need for paid labour) that will be difficult to resist, because mass unemployment always spells massive trouble for the legitimacy of capitalism. But it poses another challenge often not remarked upon on the Left, which is has its own indigenous technotopian wing.

To this point in human history, labour has been a natural necessity, a socially imposed necessity, and a source of meaning and value in human life. People had to work directly on the land to live (as in agricultural societies); they have to work in order to earn the money they need to exchange for the goods their lives require (as in capitalism), and people's labour has made them feel like valuable contributors to the lives of other people with whom they share the world. If we are moving to a technological stage of history in which the natural necessity for human labour is abolished or seriously attenuated, then its social necessity will be abolished as well (although whether that takes a form that is in the interests of displaced workers or not depends upon the success of future left struggles). But even the resolution of that problem in the interests of workers would not solve the third, and the left needs to think philosophically about its response to the potential catastrophic loss of meaning in a world without work.

Marx foresaw the possibility that capitalist technological development would eventually do away with the need for human labour. In *The Grundrisse* he welcomed it as a necessary step in the final liberation of human beings from naturally and socially coercive material circumstances. In *Capital* he attributed the falling rate of profit to the increase in the "organic"—i.e., technological—composition of capital. Capitalism was doomed over the long term to collapse, he thought, because it requires an increasing rate of profit that its own competitive trajectory makes impossible.

But in his early works, where he thought of labour not only as the means of producing life, but—in so far as it was non-alienated—also a means of producing meaning in life, his emancipatory vision turned not on freeing human beings from labour, but freeing labour from the meaningless forms it takes under capitalism. Thus, people would free themselves to labour in ways that were valuable

for others and meaningful forms of self-creative activity for themselves. Later thinkers like William Morris continued this tradition of looking to creative, highly skilled labour as the deepest normative foundation of the struggle for socialism.

There are few William Morrises left on the left. The dominant voices tend to look to a post-work future rather than a non-alienated work future. A recent example of this vision is Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future*. While it would be self-contradictory for a position like mine to deny the value of technological development (what better example is there of human intelligence and creativity than the history of science), we also must resist the intellectual pathology of projective abstraction discussed above. That is, we must remember that science and technology are not really independent historical forces and can always in principle be subjected to critical and evaluative criteria that derive from considerations of: a) what our real needs are at a given moment in history, b) whether, in light of those needs, we need to replace a given form of labour with automated systems, and c) what the costs will be if a given form of labour is replaced with an automated system, because d) that form of labour is life-valuable in its non-alienated form.

Do we really want to be treated by robot doctors and nurses? Do we really want to “learn” from on-line modules and not actual human teachers? Shall we listen to nothing but music “composed” by computer programs and read “news” compiled by algorithms? Is it sensible to replace pilots with ground based systems, given the awe that controlled flight inspires in people who want to become pilots? Do we want all of our food grown by automated greenhouses without any connection between human hand, soil, and produce? Will a world without booksellers and record shops and the conversations between devotees they enable really be richer?

The questions can be answered either way, I think, in the case of any particular form of labour. What cannot be answered either way, I also think, is the question of whether life can remain meaningful when there is nothing essentially required of us. By “essentially required of us” I mean a demand on our time, exerted by the recognized needs of others, that causes us to work, not in the first instance for money, but because we acknowledge a good in the satisfaction of the others’ need that our labour fulfills. Meaning derives from recognizing ourselves as people who can respond to the demands that others’ needs exert upon us. This form of recognition draws us out of the self-satisfaction of an ego-centric cocoon and allows us to devote some of our lifetime and life-actviity to something outside of ourselves. If that sort of devotion to the not-self is not the ethical foundation of *socialism* then I do not know what is.

Through non-alienated work we make ourselves real for others and contribute to the present and future of the human project. That is not the whole of what makes life valuable. We need to play as well as work; we need time for ourselves as well as others, we need to be idle as well as active, as both Sir Bertrand Russel (*In Praise of Idleness*) and Paul LaFargue (*The Right to be Lazy*), remind us. But life has to be more than game playing and amusement. Both get boring for a reason: they make no existentially compelling demands upon us. No one commits suicide because their team loses the Stanley Cup; people do commit suicide when they feel they have failed others whom they regard as rightfully depending upon them in a given instance.

What does that tell us? It tells us that people distinguish between things they have to do in life which make it unbearable if they fail, and things that are optional. We might think that life would

be better without the first, but it would not, because it would be a life, not just without work, but without necessary connection or devotion or obligation to anything. It does not follow that we should not exploit technological power to free our time from forms of work that are so degrading, servile, and mundane that they choke rather than give voice to our creative abilities. It does follow that we must govern our own technological powers rather than allow them to blindly lead us into the oblivion of a society in which we have no more real need for each other.

# Evocations



# Poem at 50

Originally Posted March 22, 2018

Now your apprenticeship is over.

Plato counsels: You have done your time,

leave the world to the young:

Repose, think.

Think? Of what?

Myself?

What am I? A thing that thinks.

In between the thinging and the thinking,

breath, (*psyche*, soul).

Breath that links world and me:

Lungs expand,

change in pressure

draws the atmosphere in.

O<sub>2</sub>, (thank you photoplankton and trees),

binds to Fe,

makes ATP,

makes me.

Is that it?

Too thin to bear the weight

of your expectations?

What did you expect?

A god to hold it all together?

[The heart beats because cardiac cells contract.

They have never heard of god, or you, even though

the sages of all ages say:

“The heart is the centre.”

But the heart’s home is where the cells are.

Even in a petry dish they contract:

an electrical switch: +, -, +,-;

boom-boom, boom-boom;

shorter-fatter, longer-thinner, shorter-fatter, longer-thinner.

A membrane’s spontaneous depolarization

explains how the heart beat originates

in the heart itself].

The light of nature,

it turns out,

is just light,

waves of measurable frequency

propagating through space,  
making room  
for my time.

And if this is truth:  
Matter that does not matter,  
then our meanings are illusions,  
but they can still be shared.

Knowing this now,  
perhaps you can understand  
why love for me is difficult:  
I have to build it up, ion by ion,  
and they are so small,  
it takes time.

It's beautiful cold tonight,  
and clear.

I know you are tired,  
But let's take a walk  
on these streets of my childhood.  
I'll show you the Northern Lights,  
(They are rare at this latitude)



and we can pretend the stars look down at us,  
and care.

If there were anything to pray to,

I would plead:

Lord, let me not think of these impossibilities,

for surely if I do,

I will stop the this vital beat

that is me.

Windsoria, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018

(The physiology of the heartbeat in the parentheses is adapted from Andrew Melnyk, *A Physicalist Manifesto*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 276-277).

# Pub Poem

Posted on September 20, 2017

Can live without:

padded banquettes/gilded signs/

union jacks/football/

prints of mutton-chopped lords/fox hunters.

I come for worn hardwood

grooves

between bar and gents

and pints of bitter,

hard to get now,

being crowded out

by beards,

and over-hopped

craft beer.

Old guy at bar's

eyes say: "Aye,

Its maker's culture now, mate,

gettin' too late for what you want."

So far I have seen:

“authentic”

indonesian street food/jerusalem street food/

saigon street food/thai street food/

viet nameese street food/mexican street food/

Have been to mexico/jerusalmen

ate food

but no signs assured authenticity,

maybe because in jerusalem/mexico

street food sold on streets,

cheap,

not in

polished glass boites

at creative capitalism prices.

Worry my fun license at risk

for pointing this out.

He’s young

only has eye for

end game, so misses

the tiny tear

in her stocking

dot of white thigh

shows through

the run.

Sexiness in the subtleties,

Imagine

pressing finger into rip,

delighting in contrast

between flesh and fabric.

On train to Brighton,

Battersea power station

guttled,

being condo-ized,

emptied of history,

filled with money,

and authentic people

who need to be seen

and think

they are getting in on

the ground floor of something.

Must everything old

be wrong

and love of it nostalgia?

In Brighton, better pints,  
warm oak panelling,  
plaster ceiling  
invites late afternoon drink,  
and thinking.

Old people, pissed,  
make naughty jokes,  
laugh: death one day closer,  
one less thing to worry about.

Wandering through  
hushed halls,  
leading from Ain Ghazal's  
lime plaster eyes,  
and pursed lips,  
7200BCE,  
to Giacometti portraits,  
brother and lovers,  
seated,  
awaiting the inevitable,  
faces lost in grey,  
save the eyes,

staring,  
an aesthetic history  
of dread and resoluteness.

40 years on,  
last punk standing  
sits in Camden Town pub,  
sips Guinness,  
but all-consuming time  
has last laugh.

Looks like  
what it would sound like  
to say: “hep cat,”  
or “daddy-o.”

Freedom:  
no longer needing to be seen.

Getting old,  
so I’ll drink old

Slainte!”

# Essay on Time\*

Originally Posted June 2, 2018

Here comes the Eternal,



pitiless

in anger and in blazing wrath,

to lay the earth desolate.



Sweet is the light of life,



and pleasant it is for the eyes to see the sun.



Yet, man born of a woman





lives but a few days and is full  
of trouble;



he flowers and fades,  
he is a fleeting shadow.



Why died I not when I was born?

why perished I not at birth?



Then the Eternal answered ... out of a storm, saying:

I am almighty time, the world destroying

and to destroy these worlds I have arisen!



I am the way, the Lord, the witness,  
abode, refuge, and companion;



origin, death, and all between;  
sepulchre and horde



I radiate heat, ...

I hold back rain and let it go,  
I am immortal life and death,  
I am being and non-being.



Who darkens my design  
with a cloud of thoughtless words?  
Confront me like a man;  
come, answer my questions.



When I founded the earth,  
where were you then?  
Who measured out the earth—  
do you know that?



Who stretched the builders line?

What were its pedestals placed on?

Who laid the corner stone,  
when the morning-stars were  
singing

and all the angels chanted in their joy?



Will critics still dispute with the Almighty?

To argue with God, answer all these questions.

Remember that the dark days will be many.

All that comes after death is emptiness.





Will you seek to discredit my just ruling?

To justify yourself, will you condemn me?

- The text consists of a mash-up (is that what the kids call it?) of verses from The Bhagavad Gita, the Book of Job, the Book of Isaiah, and Ecclesiastes. (I will leave it to the intrepid amongst you to work out which verse is from which book). Nothing has been added save the word “yet.” I took the photos on my last visit to my home town. They are of an empty Anglican Church in Garson, an empty motel in Britt, (on Highway 69 just south of Sudbury), the now vacant Sudbury General Hospital (where I was born), the decommissioned Superstack at the Copper Cliff Smelter, the old Copper Cliff Nickle Refinery, and the once creme de la creme of Sudbury strip clubs.

# Sunday Morning

Originally Posted June 19, 2017

Cigarettes. He must need cigarettes. Skinny, straggly hair, screaming at the impassive window of the corner store: “Man, are you not open? Are you closed? When you gonna open, man?” Cut off sleeves and dirty baseball hat. He flexes his thin, muscular arms. His ire is building; he is not thinking about what I think of him screaming at a locked door. Rage makes one totally un-self-conscious. Seneca said: when you get angry, think how ugly you look, and calm yourself. I am guessing that he has not read Seneca; that he is not in the mood for a lecture.

My bike’s momentum carries me past before I have a chance to feel sorry for him; to wish I still smoked so I could help him out.

The sky pends grey over the dirty street.

Everything is closed for several blocks either way, the street empty save for the poor. A grimy, bearded man, also in a cut off t shirt, holds a tray of coffee. Something to wash down the hangover. An anxious woman with a hard face, staring at the dive across the street, muttering to herself, “c’mon, c’mon, c’mon.” The clients of the Mission all put out at the same time, milling about on Victoria Street facing another day with nothing to do; the residents of the low-rent nursing home wheeling themselves out for a morning smoke.

Is the sky low and heavy enough for rain? It hangs, still, grey.

Two blocks and a world away from the Mission and nursing home three little girls play on their handsome stone porch, shouting happily about something only children can imagine. Can the father who smiles over them imagine his little girl one day standing on the street corner (the bad corner, just a few blocks north) rocking on her heels, a shivering meth-head, praying, “c’mon, c’mon, c’mon?” So close, so far. Here, social space is not measured in meters. Mapping it requires a geography of dollars and cents.

Will it rain? That wind feels pretty strong.

You could say it is a city of contrasts, but that describes every city. Here the contrasts are house to house, half block to half block, corner to corner. There is no “wrong” side of the tracks here, every side is right and wrong at once: sturdy nineteenth century brick homes sit next to boxy post-war houses that sit across from monstrous factories neighbored by empty fields abutting half-razed industrial ruins; 1960’s housing projects arrayed in random intervals, low-slung and stuffy, mid-sized parts plants here and there, parking lots and more empty fields.

Bike trails give respite from terrifying six lane streets. They become alleyways that lead into magical little micro-neighborhoods where the houses and streets seem too small, fairy villages a

universe away from the oppressive humidity and haze of two countries worth of car exhaust. People sit on their front porches, looking at me.

That sky looks heavy, their eyes say, he might get rained on.

When you bike you can hear a world you only see when you drive. Behind the van plant, its transformer station hums with the menace of deadly high voltage. Across the street, a freight train clangs and creeks and groans its way to life. Low cinder block warehouses line the broad road; grey walls to frame the black cracked asphalt. Not a person about.

If the sun could escape the clouds, it would be oppressively hot.

The city gets everything wrong except the non-city parts. Across Lauzon, a hidden little Pelee opens up. Sycamores and honey locusts line the smooth curves of the trail leading to the lake. "The River and the land sustain us," but the lake feeds them. The forgotten preserve of the yacht-club set, healthy seniors in their hiking and biking gear, money as far as the eye can see, from here across the bay to Grosse Pointe and St. Clair Shores.

It is cooler here, shaded and breezy. Back in the city, the wind only blows to move the trash around.

The sky darkens. It comes down, finally, hard. Then the clouds open; plate tectonics on fast forward. I see imaginary cities in the breaking clouds, the blue sky as inlets allowing ghost ships passage into the cloud continents, and then finally just blue as if none of this had happened.



# Readings



# Reading Victor Serge in Russia, (or, The Return of the Gulag Archipelago)

Originally Posted June 22, 2018

## St. Petersburg

“Tsar Peter’s city, he thought, a window opened on Europe. What grandeur is yours, and what misery, what misery.” (p.77)

The first thing I noticed were the trees: birch, poplar, pine. Later: smelts and pike on the menus. It felt familiar, the landscape and the fish reminded me of home. But my home was never besieged for 900 days; 1.5 million people never died in consequence. On the ride in from the airport the first landmark you encounter is a monument to the defenders of Leningrad. It sits in the centre of a traffic circle, immense, a soaring obelisk flanked by two columns of armed citizens, heroically strong, arms raised, signalling to unseen comrades behind that the siege has been lifted, the war won. Grotesque like all over-sized monuments, but if ever there were an event to demand this scale of memoriation, victory over the siege would be it.

“One was jovial, with a high bare forehead, high cheekbones, a prominent nose, a wisp of russet beard, and a great air of health, simplicity, and sly intelligence. he laughed often, which made him squint, and then his half closed eyes were full of green sparks.” (p.155)

Ploschad Lenina, St. Petersburg, across from the Finland Station. Heavy, low slung sky, plaster grey scalloped clouds scudder past, carried by the relentless Baltic wind. Grey like we were taught Communism was grey during the Cold War. Finland Station was re-made in the Soviet era. It is a low slung neo-classical building with socialist realist friezes. A statue of Lenin dominates the nearly empty square: “Long live the socialist revolution across the whole world.” It is dated April, 17th, 1917, the day Lenin disembarked from the train from Zurich and won the argument for insurrection against the provisional government. But Lenin and Trotsky did not make the Revolution. Millions of people demanded Bread, Land, Peace.

But what a price they would pay for their impudence. The Russian Army was starving by 1917. Then Civil War. Then the Nazi siege. This was a city of struggle and suffering, of magnificent death, right from the beginning. Peasants by the thousands died filling the marshes on which it was built. Was it for them that Dostoyevsky was moved to write his novels of redemption? The city testifies to the conflict at the heart of each of those masterworks: the desire for material freedom running up against the need to kill for it, killing for it ruining the value of the principle the desire for freedom served. In his simple flat, a small memorial to his own death. On his last pack of tobacco his daughter wrote: “Papa died today, Jan 28th, 1881.” Life demands action. When we act we sin. Political sins produce guilt beyond the human capacity to forgive.

“Rain washes over newspapers freshly glued to the walls. COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES, SPIES, AND CRIMINALS SHOT. This column, single-spaced in 8-point type, with the names

set off in bold, is the one people read the most attentively under the dreary, piercing rain.” ‘List of counterrevolutionaries, spies, criminals, blackmailers, bandits, and deserters executed by order of the special commission. Thirty four numbered names.’ (p.177)

The contradictions of Petrograd/Leningrad/St Petersburg (so many names!) are summed up in the art and architecture. The riverfront is dominated by the garish green facade of The Hermitage, once the Winter Palace of the Tsars, stuffed overfull with paintings purchased by Catherine the Great. She seemingly bought anything that she could get her hands on: some good, none outstanding. The one that I notice is a small Portrait of John Locke as an Old Man by Godfrey Kneller. No one has heard of Kneller, so no one bothers to look. Bony face but soft eyes, grey flowing hair, a kindness to his face, a loose white cotton shirt hangs from his thin shoulders. How appropriate, I think, that the father of the Enlightenment (according to Condorcet) should have his portrait hung here. The former palace of the Tsars now a museum displaying the collection of Catherine the Great who sought to emulate the “enlightened monarchs” of Europe. Locke himself embodies the same contradictions: defender of the right of revolution and rational foundations for political legitimacy, he nevertheless ignored the just claim of African slaves to be treated as free human beings and the sovereignty of indigenous people in the Americas over their land. (It would have been more fitting to have hung it in Room 188. The Provisional Government was meeting there on November 7th, 1917 when they were arrested by the Bolsheviks).

“The days got longer, heralding white nights ... swollen rivers reflected pure skies of still frigid blue. Scattered bursts of laughter hung in the woods among the slim white trunks of the birches. Specks of dull silver seemed to hang in the air. The first warm days were tender, caressing. The pedestrian in the damp streets offered them his face and his soul.” (p. 96).

Dead Poets are expensive cocktails and beards and tattoos; a young woman at the bar stretching her perfect, long, fish net stockinged leg seductively towards her date. He is shy, demurs from touching her, continues talking softly, she smiles. Later, around 1, we walk back to the hotel down Nevsky Prospekt, still exuberant with happy people. The sky is not white, more like backlit indigo blue, dark, but not dark, only a single star bright enough to be seen. The people at the bar and the early morning *flaneurs* are mostly young. What do Peter the Great, The Revolution, The Siege mean to them? A history lesson, as boring as history lessons are for kids in Canada? Or something worse, something that cannot be remembered save on pain of ruining the present? Something, therefore, that must be banished. Something they blot out as they stare into their mobiles or each other’s eyes on impossibly long escalator rides into the Metro?

“The Commission on workers housing ... put the finishing touches on its grand plan for rebuilding the slums... The painter Kichak showed a full length portrait of the President, his hand extended in a vague but eloquent gesture ... In the background there was an armored train so beautiful that no one had seen anything like it.” (p.43)

The city was built to look European and it does. There are few onion domes or Stalinist housing estates in the centre of the city. The streets have the vertical uniformity of Paris: 7 story buildings street after street after street. One exception is the Church of the Resurrection of Christ (Saviour on the Spilled Blood). It was built on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by Narodniks. (Serge’s parents were Narodniks who had to flee to Belgium, where Serge was

born). At least Alexander's death spurred the construction of this carnivalesque-on-the-outside-breathtaking-on-the-inside shrine. Its walls are covered with over 7000 square feet of mosaics that really have to be experienced first hand in order to understand the immensity of the labour that went into them and their beauty. The Communists repeatedly threatened to tear it down on charges of "anachronism" (they had a point), but even they promised to preserve the mosaics.

## Moscow

"Now, let's drink. Pour, Shura. ... Shura filled some tea glasses with cognac. ... You drink too, he told her. She drank slowly with one elbow lifted the way teamsters drink in cabarets. An ambiguous half smile creased her face. Danil saw warm golden sparks in her pupils. Perhaps it was only the reflection of the candles." (87)

You would think the place would be full of dark corner bars in which to pound vodka, but not so much. In the centre are mostly elegant restaurants and pressure to eat, not just drink. Josie spots a green sign with an icon of a mug of beer. It leads us to a staircase that is good news for people needing an uncomplicated drink. Cafeteria style tables, cheap beer and vodka, no hard sell. A large, broad faced man slams his hand on the table, stands up, and makes a proclamation. The woman with him turns her face to the ground, embarrassed, but two other young women behind him smile, giggle, and seem to congratulate him. I can't understand what they are saying, but the vibe comes through clearly. He must be proposing to her. Somehow, Josie strikes up a conversation with her a little later, in the washroom, and yes, indeed, it was a proposal. I am ambivalent about travel for the most part. These tiny absurdities make it worthwhile. The internet is all sight and sound; but most of the good and fun in life has to be felt, not just seen. Being there *matters*.

"The old country is still there, deep down, under a thin layer of burning lava." The historian, Platon Nikolaevich answered: "That is so. And the lava will cool. And when the lava is cool, the old earth, by its fermentation alone will crack open the thin layer and once again push its old, eternally young green blades into the sunlight. Ashes make good fertilizer."((93-94)

How unbelievably prescient this passage turned out to be. The old is new and the new is old. The revolution has come, the revolution is gone, but not forgotten. The Orthodox Church was gone, but not forgotten, and now it is back. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the monuments and public art built as propaganda during the Soviet Era have not been torn down. The outrageously cliched "Kholkoz and Woman" stands a few blocks away from the polished, sweeping elegance of the "Monument to the Conquerors of Space." The individual is supposed to feel small looking up at 40 foot high collective farmers or a 100 meter titanium exhaust plume with Buck Rogers-esque space ship on top. One does. But even the most unthinking *apparatchik* must have snickered driving past the comically monstrous "Kholkoz and Woman."

1917 is not denied but re-woven into a longer narrative of heroic Russian history, from ancient victories over the Mongols, to Alexander Nevsky, to t-shirts of Putin riding a bear, shirtless, hunting rifle slung on his shoulder, and the message: Not going to Beat Us. Moscow is combined and uneven development for the 21st century. Impressively convoluted bank towers and winding streets that remind one of Le Marais; soviet apartment blocks, cramped little parkettes and smokes

still one dollar a pack. Modelesque youth and strong armed old women who have seen it all and survived. In Izmaylovksy Market we go to a kebab shop for lunch. A woman who cannot be younger than 70 directs traffic in the seating area upstairs. She picks up a five foot long bench with ease and shouts “no! no! no!” to two Chinese tourists who were about to sit there. Work was/is life for her.

I imagine her walking with her granddaughter once work is done, arm in arm, as women tend to walk together here. “What have you done with your eyebrows,” she would ask. “They must have cost more than I made in 6 months in the old days.” “Oh Babushka,” her granddaughter would say, “I like them like this, and so do the boys.” “Bah,” the old woman would respond (but her eyes would laugh) “boys used to like strong hips and stew.”

There is no denying the cliched stupidity of much of the monumental architecture and socialist realist art. On the other hand, the best of it, whether in public parks, the Metro, or the New Tretyakov gallery (of twentieth and twenty-first century Russian art) needs to be re-evaluated as *art*, now that it no longer serves a propaganda role. The above mentioned “Momentum to the Conquerors of Space” is brilliant. The sculpture of armed workers in Partisanskaya metro station is silent testimony to the heroism of the ordinary soldiers of the Red Army who, despite 20 million military and civilian casualties, beat back the Nazis. The socialist realist paintings in the New Tretyakov (and some of the ironic appropriations of that tradition in the Erarta Contemporary Gallery in St. Petersburg) should be looked at with unprejudiced eyes. Four in particular stood out for me. In St. Petersburg, a contemporary “painting” of the side of a rail car by Yuri Shtapakov is made from rusted roofing iron. The natural process and materials do the aesthetic work. In the New Tretyakov, the quality of three paintings portraying activist women impressed me. “Defenders of Leningrad” was a little reminiscent of Leger, but not so stylised. It pictures three columns of soldiers marching on watch in Leningrad during the siege. What is notable is that two women soldiers are in the centre. “Delegate” and “Chairwoman” (both by Ryazsky) are more reminiscent of Courbet. If not as skillfully painted and a little derivative, they still manifest the revolutionary spirit of Courbet’s realism: to give to the everyday the dignity formerly reserved for Biblical or world historical events. The women are strong, powerful, not sexualized but painted as real political and social equals. We forget that the Revolution also revolutionized the role of women (until those gains too were swallowed up by the ever changing domestic political needs of Stalin).

“She could hear those hypocrites congratulating her in advance, and she answered them, full of austere confidence, “For me, you see, there are neither big cases nor little cases, but only the service of the Party.” That would shut their mouths, all those neophytes who think they’re so great just because they are examining magistrates of the Commission.” (pp.118-119)

After my talk at the Higher School of Economics, Aaron has arranged a reception. I speak with an old comrade who teaches Mathematical Logic at Moscow State University. He had pressed me (appropriately) on the key problem of my paper: what exactly I thought the “matter” of symbolic representations was. We sip wine and he tells me that I should read Lukacs’ *The Ontology of Social Being*. “Old Lukacs much different from young Lukacs,” he tells me,” after I say that I find *History and Class Consciousness* too idealist in its conception of the natural world. He flattens the lapel of his vest and shows me a pin of Marx’s head. “See, I am Marxist.” I am

curious: what is the status of Marx amongst young political activists today? He looks dismissive. “Marxism is something high and complicated, young cannot even read or write. What can they know?”

“In the long run we’ll see. Not you or me, of course, but the working class. I’m optimistic for the long run.; as for the present, I have my doubts. ... But I’m certain we have time a half century, a century perhaps. The mechanism of the world is exposed, it’s easy to see how it turns. That is our strength. We are pushing in the right direction.”(127)

Well, (fictional) comrade, the long run is here: a new Gulag archipelago of Fortress Europe, fetid illegal migrant camps, new walls, children torn from their mother’s breast and caged in disused Walmarts is spreading. There are ever new victims of capitalism, brown and black, their cultures destroyed by imperialism, their revolutions undermined by Cold War machinations. The wreckage bred cynicism and corruption. Whether from Gabon or Guinea, Syria or Afghanistan, Guatamala or Oaxaca, they all say the same thing: we flee because we cannot live in our countries. They cannot live in their countries because of what our countries have done. We all bear a collective responsibility, therefore, because, ultimately, we authorize (even if only by our acquiescence) the policies that have ravaged most of the world. Outrage is natural, human, but reactive politics does not solve the problem: the criminals just move on to a new outrage. I think again of Ploschad Lenina, and the inscription on the statue.

All quotations are from Victor Serge, *Conquered City* (1932), Translated by Richard Greeman (1975).

# Readings: Kathe Kollwitz: Art and Life, The Art Gallery of Ontario

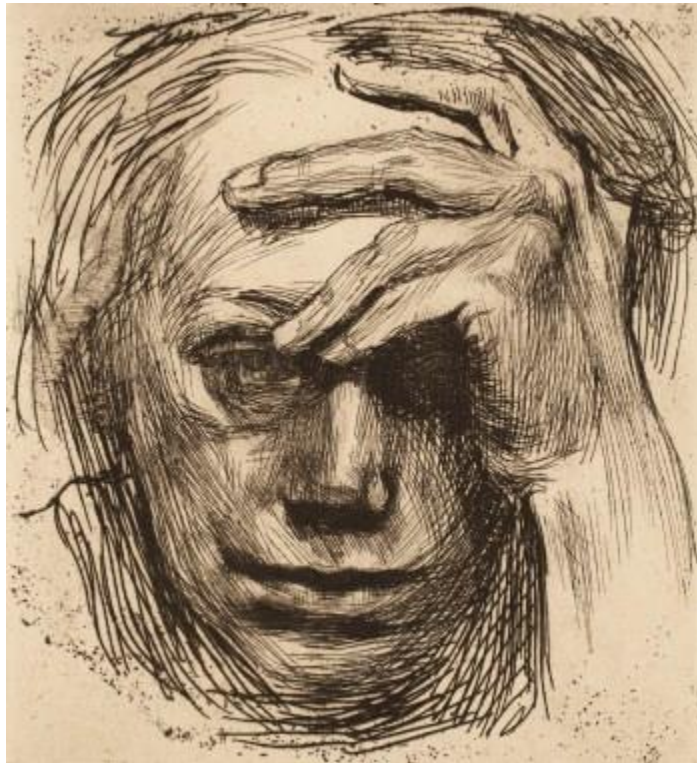
Originally Posted May 15, 2018

**Kathe Kollwitz**

**Art and Life**

**Art Gallery of Ontario**

**April 7th- Sept. 30th, 2018**



It was the face of a woman?

Yes, a woman.

And she was sad?

Yes, sad. Perhaps forlorn. Or bereft. Worried, haggard.

Because she was poor?

Because she worked, and was poor.

Only because she worked and was poor?

No. Also because she lived with others who were poor. And she paid attention to what she saw.

What had she seen?

Misery. Hopelessness. Sickness. Filth. Squalor. War.

Did she know loss?

Yes.

Who had she lost?

Her brother, in World War One.

And she was burdened by the loss?

She was burdened by it. You could see it in her face.

And what did the face look like?

Old, even when she was young. And older when she was old. And creased. And tired. But without illusions.

There is dignity in living without illusions.

Yes. She recognized that dignity in others as well.

She drew others?

Yes. Other women from the neighborhood, parents and their children.

And are they also always sad?

They lived hard lives, and she does not pretend that they did not.

But there is humanity in difficulty and struggle.

She attests to the humanity of those who bear the burdens.





Do they keep this knowledge to themselves?

No. They share it across the generations of the women of the community. They are the keepers of its secrets and its sorrows.

Does this sharing undermine the joys of youth?

The young are told what they need to know. They learn, and they bear the weight of truth.



And no more?

They carry themselves with great dignity. They affirm their humanity. They insist on being seen as human.

Even in moments of despair there is joy?

No. There is joy only in the thought of the future of others.

Who are the others for whom they hope for a better future?

They know that the future for them is fixed, and they are resolute. But their children bring them joy.



Is it not unreasonable for them to assume that their children's lives will be better?

They are not naive. But love and hope are yoked together.

Even in sickness.

Especially in sickness.



And yet children are also killed.

Yes.

Even still today.

Yes. Murdered. At fences, amidst the smoke of burning tires. And for the crime of demanding the home that was their grandparents'.

The eyes of her sad women see this too?

Yes. Physical eyes are limited by time, but the eyes of art see farther.

How is that possible?

Because humanity links us across the ages, and art brings it out.

But the most human reality is death.

This truth too she knew: "My life has been a dialogue with death."



For the poor, death is a relief?

That is not entirely true.

They seem to go willingly.

In death as in life, they do what they must.

But the children live on.

In the children there is hope.

But they still die.

They do. But others are born.

So all is not lost?

Perhaps.

# A Morning at the National Gallery

Originally Posted May 5, 2018

I was in Ottawa recently as a delegate to the Spring Council of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). The meetings did not start until Thursday afternoon, so I had Thursday morning free. I went (as I usually do when in Ottawa) to the National Gallery. I went with a specific intention this time: to let a few pieces seize me at random, and then let the works themselves guide my thoughts. I would, so to speak, go along for the ride.

Entrance (Who is an Artist?)



As I walked up Sussex Avenue towards the gallery I could see that it was under construction. The glass panels that make up most of the exterior were in need of replacement. As a result, the walls of the long ramp that leads from the ticket counter to the galleries had been considerably narrowed by plywood hoarding. They were changing the glass that forms the exterior walls of the building. The hoarding was meant to protect visitors. But why should this function not also be an aesthetic form? The scale was striking: 15 or 20 feet high and maybe 100 feet long. Looking down along the corridor, the wooden walls were seamless, clean, smooth. Maybe it was the gallery context, but the plywood transcended its lumber store utility. I remarked on its naked beauty to the security guard, but he looked at me like I was talking gibberish. From his perspective, the art was in the galleries: the things that were made by artists.

But why do we so rigorously distinguish art from work, artists from workers. After all, *it could very well have been* a sculpture, in which case he would have warned me not to touch it. It would have been the same wood, the same structure, and given rise to the same aesthetic experience, but now, the ordinary plywood really would have transcended itself, having been sanctified by the blessed name of the artist. Materially, nothing would have been different, and yet, in a sense,

everything would have been different. Is that not wrong? Could we not understand art as that which gives rise to an aesthetic effect? And as work? We call them art *works*, after all, but rarely do we think of artists as *workers*, much less workers as artists.

Etienne Zack: “Sincerely Yours” (The Point of the Work Threatens to Overwhelm the Work)

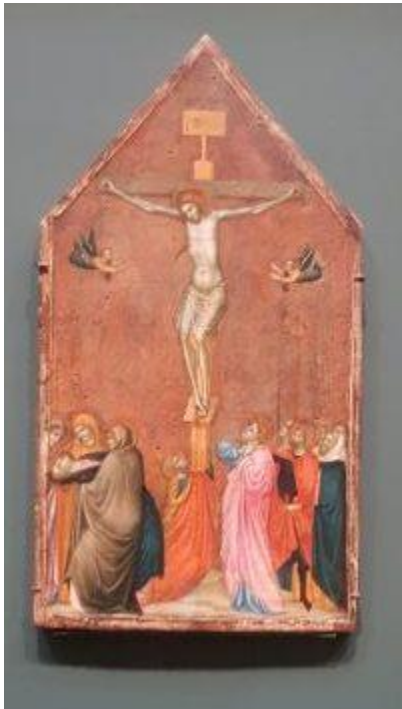


One danger of the increasing academicization of the study of art is that artists start to think that their work needs to prove something. Art has content and it embodies ideas, but if a painting or poem or sculpture is approached as if it has to give a conclusive argument for some political position or solve some cultural problem, it will condemn itself to one-dimensionality. As Bacon said of the problem of making art: “Isn’t it that one wants a thing to be as factual as possible, and yet at the same time as deeply suggestive or deeply unlocking of areas of sensation other than simple illustrating of the object that you set out to do. Isn’t that what art is all about?” (quoted in John Berger, *Portraits*, pp. 344-45). The talent (the genius?) of the successful artist is that they *invent* this synthesis of the representational and the evocative. There are no rule save the rules that emerge from the working and re-working of the subject matter in the aesthetic medium.

This successful (I think) painting by Etienne Zack, a contemporary Montreal painter, put me in mind of this problem. The painting works because it is well painted. If one tarries a moment in front of it, what strikes the eye is the way in which the painting is almost sculptural or architectural: the books and ledgers are constructed to form what look like vertical office cubicles, and the illusion is further supported by the fluorescent and overhead light bulbs that hang from some of the walls and ceilings. The paint is particularly well-handled when painting the overhead light bulbs. It could be a painting of Borges’ “Library of Babel.”

Had the gallery left it at that: a painting hung on a white wall for viewers to look at and feel and think along with, all would have been well. But in keeping with the “educational mandate” of seemingly every public institution today, the curator has hung an explanatory note. It informs the viewer that the painting is “about” the proliferation of information. We think this creates more dense webs of communicative interaction, but which can in entangle us in boxes and silos from which we cannot find our way out. After reading the note, the architectural elements seemed less inventive and more mechanical attempts to prove a thesis. I began to worry that it is not as good a painting as the one that seized my attention. Now I thought: “What came first, the idea for the *painting*, or the *idea* which the painting then tried to illustrate or prove.” Those are very different starting points.

Master of the Medici Alterpiece (1310-20) (Escaping Context)



How is it that an atheist like me can so love medieval panel paintings of the Crucifixion? I think that it has something to do, first, with their *flatness*. Their severe two-dimensionality (there was no perspective in European art until the Renaissance) threatens to make them cartoonish, but does not. Instead, it emphasizes the humanity of the scene. The flatness acts like a Brechtian distanciation effect, forcing the viewer to pay attention to the meaning of the scene by making it abundantly clear that they are not looking at unmediated reality.

I may not believe in the literal truth of the Passion and Death of Christ, but I do believe in sadness. These paintings are not best thought of as illustrations of an historical event, but rather explorations of the human drama of sacrifice, loss, and mourning. You have to get close to them and see that their truth is expressed through the faces of the people they represent. In this superb example, Christ looks almost angry that he had to suffer and die, while the mourners (including Mary Magdalene, who collapses at his feet) are deeply saddened, not because God is dead, but because their friend is. If they really knew that Christ were God, they would have known that his death was not permanent, and there would have been no reason to mourn. They thought he was really dead, and that is what undermines them. Hence the humanity of the painting is what allows it to communicate across the metaphysical threshold dividing belief from atheism.

Daumier: “Man on a Rope” (Serendipdity)





Like most people, I had no idea that Honoré Daumier painted. Fewer than a dozen of his paintings were exhibited in his life time. I knew him as a cartoonist of the Belle Epoque. Prints of his famous works are still ubiquitous. I only learned that he painted when I began reading John Berger's *Portraits* this past winter. But he did paint, and the National Gallery has an excellent piece. As Berger points out, what is most striking about his paintings are his use of light. His figures are silhouettes that stand out only against the light background. When you get close, there is almost no detail to the figure; but when you stand back more and more definition emerges as the contrast between light and dark takes effect. The paint is also brilliantly handled, constructing figure and ground out of accumulations of paint which are almost blotchy in spots next to spaces of nearly raw canvas. As you step back from close inspection, the power and concentration of the central figure begins to appear. The physicality of human life is central here, not its psychology.

The Bible says: search and ye shall find, but I have found the opposite is also true: Don't search, and ye shall be surprised but what you find. This was a find, and surprising, and delightful for having been unexpected.

Jean-Paul Riopelle (Accident of Birth)





Automatism as a theory of artistic creation does not interest me, but Riopelle's paintings certainly do. Signatory to the *Refus global* that in many ways inaugurated the Quiet Revolution in Quebec, his early works have always had a powerful effect on me. His handling of colour and composition makes him a more interesting painter to me than Pollock. Whether the paint actually did just organize itself through the process of painting as he claimed, or whether he had a pattern in mind that he worked out in paint, there is a relationship between part and whole in his early works that is aesthetically powerful. Each individual palette or brush mark is its own painterly world, and you can lose yourself in their complexity if you get up close. At the same time, the whole comes together in the same way as a stained glass window does: meaningless units of tinted glass soldered together into meaningful units. There is no figuration in his early works, but there is the construction of a whole from linear components. I don't know why, but I find the red in this painting dominant. Looking at it made me feel as if I were in Saint Chapelle in Paris.

He spent time in France, but he was not Parisian, but a provincial. I wonder whether his standing in the global art world is not held back by that fact. How much quality is missed, in the art world, just because of the accident of birth? The geo-cultural chauvinism of the great cities makes the appreciation of twentieth century art dependent on the name. A Riopelle show would be big news in Montreal, but what about New York? Would the work be any less good there?

John Tiktak "Mother and Child" (Humanity)



The curators have reorganized the Canadian and Indigenous Galleries to try to break down the division that can make it appear that the “Art” derives from European traditions while Indigenous practice is “Craft.” Re-organizing them was an excellent idea that allows visitors to view both (internally complex) traditions in new lights. As with all ideas, sometimes the practical realization is lacking. Some galleries are too crammed full of stuff and it is difficult to focus on individual works or relations between them and the other works. The organic connection that the curators hoped to reveal is not evident.

When it does work, however, we really do see connections that might otherwise be missed. Tiktak’s sculpture is a case in point. Had it been shown in an exclusively Inuit gallery, I think it might look more literal than it does here. Looking at it, I was reminded both of cubist sculpture and two pieces that I have seen twice at the British Museum. The latter are the oldest known sculptural representations on the human face. They were found in what is today Jordan and are about 12 000 years old. The link between Tiktak’s sculpture, cubist sculpture, and the Jordanian pieces is that they all strip away detail from the face, but in so doing make it all the more resonant as a human face. It is as if by abstracting from the details the universal humanity of the face shines through. I do not think that Tiktak was influenced by European sculptural traditions: the piece is resolutely Inuit. And yet (perhaps in keeping with the English translation of the Inuktitut word “Inuit” –The People–) it speaks from across differences to a core humanity within us all, and the creativity that drives us in vastly different environments.

# Readings: Susan Haack: The Real Question: Can Philosophy be Saved?

Originally Posted March 5, 2018

Eminent philosopher Susan Haack posed this question in the October/November (2017) issue of *Free Inquiry*. The article was her response to the editor of the journal (Tom Flynn), who worried that a new religious sensibility was invading philosophy, undermining the “strict scientific naturalism” that he believes essential, both to good philosophy and social and political progress. Wisely and wittily, Haack dissents. Her response exposes the difference between “strict scientific naturalism” and philosophy, eloquently vindicates the independence of philosophy from science, and shows that religious sentiment is not the main threat to the future of philosophy. Instead, a dogmatic belief that science can solve all problems, combined with institutional pressures that valorize quantitative inputs (money) and outputs (splashy, headline-grabbing research) are conspiring to undermine properly philosophical virtues and values. Her argument welcomes scientific insights while gently reminds of its limits as a model for philosophy, but only goes part way to comprehending the socio-economic causes of the institutional pressures she identifies.

Haack is not anti-science, but she rightly distinguishes between scientific and philosophical knowledge. The key difference is that science is a method for accumulating knowledge of empirical regularities, while philosophy contains an irreducible normative moment. “Evolutionary psychology, for example, might tell us a good deal about the origin of moral sentiments ... but it couldn’t tell us whether, or, if so, why, these sentiments, ... could constitute the basis of ethics ... Neuroscience might tell us a good deal about what goes on in the brain when someone forms a new belief ... but it couldn’t tell us what believing something involves.”(43). Natural science takes things like beliefs and norms as empirical facts, and explains (perhaps) the physical causes that brought them into being. But it cannot say whether a given norm is a good norm, or what justifies our holding one belief as true. It cannot because philosophical problems are second order problems not resolvable by describing causal processes of coming to be, but involve *standards* which are not physical artifacts but structures of meaning and evaluation.

The real issue then is that philosophy studies the natural and social worlds of material elements, facts, and causal interactions as meaningful entities, events, and relationships. It does not require supernatural explanations to explain meaning, but it must insist that meaning is irreducible in explanation to underlying physical elements and forces. Haack does not put the point in exactly these terms, but her defense of a properly philosophical standpoint against “scientism” on the one hand and religion on the other clearly implies my interpretation. “Our editor is by no means alone in supposing that, if we reject supernaturalism, we must conclude that there is “nothing but matter and energy and their interactions,” and that this means that philosophy must look to the sciences for answers. Even if we can articulate an interpretation in which this “nothing-but” thesis is true, the conclusion that the sciences can resolve philosophical questions doesn’t follow. Indeed, reasoning as if it did follow exactly parallels the reasoning of religious people who, asking rhetorically, “can science explain everything” take for granted that, if the answer is “no,” then

religion must fill in the gaps, and it is no less faulty.”(42) Philosophy thus occupies a middle space between scientific naturalism and religious dogmatism.

While she does not attempt it here, it should be obvious to anyone that thinks even for a moment that there is *no way* to make the “nothing-but” thesis true. Human beings are real, and their bodies are obviously made up of matter and energy, but our social labour creates things which are obviously real, yet not “matter and energy.” Consider any institution. It is not the set of buildings in which it is housed, but the rules that define its operation. Parliament could move across the street, my university could relocate to downtown Windsor, without ceasing to be parliament or the University of Windsor. The things that house and populate the institution are matter and energy, the institution is a set of rules and the possibilities for action those rules alone create. “Prime Minister” or “Professor of Philosophy” are not products of the interaction of matter and energy, but of the rules that define Parliament and the University of Windsor. No mere state of matter and energy can explain either their existence or their powers.

And they do have powers. As Professor of Philosophy I can teach courses and evaluate students; the Prime Minister leads the party entitled to pass the laws that govern the country. Those laws materially affect citizens lives in decisive ways, but they are the product of institutional power, which derives from the power of social organization and social labour more generally. Neither can usefully be understood as a state of matter and energy.

Of course, in a way which is totally banal and totally abstract, Prime Ministers and Professors, Parliaments and Universities, depend upon the material universe. But surely neither scientific nor philosophical explanation can rest content with mere slogans. Both require explanations that deploy concepts adequate to the object to be explained (as Aristotle long ago argued). Human realities require concepts that can grasp the instituted, symbolic, and meaningful nature of social life and experience. If there really is nothing but matter and energy, why do the authors who announce this truth from the mountain tops sign their given name, even though human names are not part of the physical fabric of matter and energy? It is because they want the *social* rewards that come from authorship; they want to be known as the person who cast out the darkness from their fellow citizens lives. In other words, they want recognition for having done something good, but the good they do (if it is in fact good) is not explicable by physics. Their whole argument is a performative contradiction, presupposing the truth and efficacy of values that their explicit argument denies.

So how have the worshipers of science become ascendant? Not due to the intrinsic superiority of their arguments, or for any actual “progress” in the solution of philosophical problems, but owing to extrinsic institutional pressures, which are themselves responses to extrinsic socio-economic and political pressures. Here, Haack’s argument is limited to effects, not causes. She attributes the ubiquity of scientistic philosophy to institutional changes. “Some of the problems are the result of changes in the management of universities affecting the whole academy: the burgeoning bureaucracy, the ever-increasing stress on “productivity,” the ever-spreading culture of grants-and-research-projects, the ever-growing reliance on hopelessly flawed surrogates measures of the quality of intellectual work, the obsession with “prestige” and so on.”(p.40) These are all real problems in the contemporary university. Teaching and research are now subject to assessment by a variety of “impact factors” that all circle around the idea that both are products to be consumed:

by students, other researchers, or, ideally, businesses who turn intellectual work into a priced economy.

What Haack does not do (at least in this essay) is connect these institutional changes to socio-economic and political pressures. Universities have never been the ivory towers they are mocked for being: they have always reflected the contradictions of the society in which they exist. Nevertheless, it is true that the direct role that political power and socio-economic pressure to produce commodifiable research have intensified in recent years. Governments (like that of Ontario) have forced universities to sign “mandate agreements” aligning their academic mission with government policy. Funding agencies (like the Social Science and Humanities Research Council) increasingly demand that researchers justify their research in terms of “*knowledge mobilisation*” a monstrously ugly bureaucratic term whose meaning is not entirely clear but prioritises the immediately useful over social critique and interest-based work whose short-term extra-disciplinary implications are not clear. Enveloping all is the ultimate dogmatic conflation of the good for human life with the good for the owners of money-capital.

These social and political pressures create an institutional environment where professional schools, better positioned to prove their “worth” by manufacturing “job ready” students, produce advice and support to business, and create marketable commodities attract the lion share of the funding (for jobs, for graduate programs, for infrastructure). Philosophy can no longer defend itself successfully by invoking traditional scholarly virtues, and so it tries to adapt.

Haack is absolutely right to remind everyone of the importance of those virtues. “In an environment like this, an environment of perverse incentives that reward, not the truly serious, but the clever and quick-witted, the flashy, the skillful self-promoter, and the well-connected, it is no wonder that the very virtues that good intellectual work and perhaps especially good philosophical work, requires— patience, intellectual honesty, realism, courage, humility, independent judgement, etc.— are rapidly eroding.”(40) Once those virtues are gone, they will never return because they must be cultivated, and they cannot be cultivated in a younger generation if they are absent in the older generation.

But they also require institutional protections like job security, academic freedom, and tenure— all institutional safeguards which are being rapidly and deliberately destroyed. The intellectual virtues alone cannot save these institutional protections, only political action can. And there are not enough professors anywhere to save these protections on our own. The future of philosophy, along with all other real intellectual and creative work, depends on building political alliances with people outside the academy, which in turn depends on explaining the social, not money-value, of tenure, academic freedom and so on. To people outside the academy, many precariously employed and working poor, these unique features of academic labour appear to be baroque luxuries of a privileged and not very hard working caste. As difficult as it is to defend philosophy within the academy, it is even more difficult— especially in an age of rising right-wing populist assaults on “elites”— to defend the academy outside its walls. We had best put our heads together to find a way.

# Lessons From History IV: Nicos Poulantzas' Final Interview

Originally Posted December 23, 2017

On October 12th, 1979, the journal of the Italian Communist Party, *Rinascita*, published what would turn out to be the [final published words](#) of Greek-French Marxist theorist Nicos Poulantzas. He initially came to prominence as a defender (along with Louis Althusser) of a deeply problematic structuralist interpretation of Marxism. This final interview is interesting, in 2017, the year of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, because it shows him to be re-thinking one of the pillars of his earlier theory: that the state is nothing more than a programmed function of capitalist society, whose necessary and sole task is to protect capitalist class interests.

In the interview, he discusses the relationship between state and society and claims that Marxism must re-think the role that the existing institutions of liberal democracy will have to play in the transition to, and the political life of, a future socialist world. In particular, he argues that twentieth, (now twenty-first), century Marxists have to jettison the vanguardism of Lenin's understanding of the worker's party.

In Marx there exist elements that are completely contradictory with respect to Lenin's theories. Despite the criticisms of the formal character of liberties, there was always a preoccupation with the institutions of representative democracy that is difficult to find in Lenin.

This contrast between Marx and Lenin on the (at least instrumental) value of formal political rights anticipates the defense of Marx as a deeply democratic thinker decades later by August H. Nimtz Jr., (in *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough*). Nimtz proves, by paying close attention to Marx and Engels' political writings, that they did not regard "bourgeois democratic rights" as *nothing but* ideological camouflage for class violence, but as vital tools for working class political organization. Forty years on from Poulantzas' remarks, in an era where people's thoughts have been liberated from their heads and can be broadcast at will to the world through social media, it is even more important that the Left come to terms with political pluralism and civil and political rights.

Whatever merits Lenin's version of democratic centralism had (and it has one that I will discuss below), the core of his revolutionary theory: the need for one working class party that will rule unchallenged, proved a disaster. Yes, the revolution was undone by the severe depredations caused by the Civil War, foreign opposition, and, above all, the failures of other European Revolutions, but the belief that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" meant "dictatorship by the one party of the proletariat" cannot be absolved of all guilt for the catastrophe of Stalinism. Neither one single mind, nor any disciplined collection of minds, can understand every nuance that needs to be understood by those charged with governing a complex society. There needs to be political argument between competing interpretations of policy and programme, and those interpretations require organization outside of a single party.

Not even Stalinist dictatorship, the imprisonment and execution of millions, could destroy opposition. It lay dormant, until ultimately exploding in 1989. The lesson is: it is impossible, in modern conditions, where people expect to think for themselves, that all will arrive at the same conclusion. There will be different interpretations of core political values and the wisdom of different policy options, and the only way to resolve those differences is through full and free debate between different possibilities. Thus, any viable democratic socialist project needs competition between political visions. This argument has been a staple of liberal democratic critique of Marxism, and, in that respect, the liberals were right.

Even Gramsci, widely lauded for injecting a more fulsome understanding of democracy into revolutionary socialism, remained trapped, according to Poulantzas, within a Leninist worldview. He failed to think through the real value of multi-party systems and constitutionalism (*Rechtstaat*):

Gramsci did not have a positive theory of the exercise of power, of the institutions of representative democracy in the transition to democratic socialism. Missing are a theory of a plurality of parties [*pluripartidismo*] and of the *Rechtsstaat* [*del estado de derecho*].

In the twenty-first century, the two most exciting attempts to renew democratic socialism, Bolivia and Venezuela, abandoned the language of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the practice of Leninist vanguardism in favour of constitutionalism (especially the radically democratic institution of the constituent assembly to write new constitutions). Unfortunately, they have not successfully maintained a steady course towards socialist transformation. The problems that the Venezuelan government has faced, especially since the death of Chavez, reveal a paradox of political pluralism that complicates the picture Poulantzas was beginning to paint.

The real strength of Lenin's idea of democratic centralism is that it insisted upon disciplined political unity. After full and free debate (in the party) everyone was required to publicly endorse the decision chosen. Such a demand is not undemocratic, because everyone was allowed to have their say and to choose whether to be a member of the party. If you were allowed to make your arguments, but your side lost, and you were free to leave but chose to stay, then you were (in a curiously Kantian way) the author of the collective act. You could have refused to acknowledge its legitimacy by leaving, but you chose to stay, knowing you will have to publicly support it, which is equivalent to having chosen the option you did not prefer. Since the transition to a new society will be rife with conflict, the party that is leading the transition will have to be internally unified if it is to prevail, and its prevailing is the key to securing the natural and social conditions of the robustly democratic socialist society that the majority of people are fighting for (in a revolutionary or transitional situation).

That is the theory. Subsequent history has shown that the reality is different: all the differences, even within the socialist camp, cannot be housed under a single party with unified leadership. The unity at the top will prevent full and free debate in the party ranks below (not to mention all the people outside the party who still have an interest in future law and policy). There is no spontaneous virtue within the working class, or any other social group, that ensures that every decision it makes will be right and just, simply because of the class (or any other) identity it shares:

Indeed, it seems to me that the categories of Marxism tend to consider the problem of the relationship between the working class and political democracy as “naturally” settled. I wonder, is there not a relation between Lenin’s underlying underestimation of the importance of formal democracy and a theory that takes for granted the “spontaneously” democratic role of the working class?

It is about understanding, as experience teaches, that no class by itself, by its very nature, is destined to be a guarantor of freedom without the intervention of a conscious project to that end. It is necessary to know how to look, without illusions and hesitation, into the stratifications, the divisions, the internal complexities that characterize the working class. It needs democracy and democratic institutions not only to defend itself against its enemies, but also to “defend itself” at the moment it assumes political power. Understanding this is important in order not to underestimate, as some Marxists did, the immense work of invention necessary for the elaboration of a democratic political theory of the transition to socialism.

The only way multiple parties can be avoided is through police action to destroy them, but that sort of action destroys democracy in the name of a democracy to come, which (we know now, and Poulantzas could see in 1979) will never arrive.

However— and here is the paradox that Venezuela above all has revealed— a gradual transition, which pays compensation for re-appropriated collective property, that allows independent, even outright oppositional political organizations, risks being undone at any moment by organized counter-thrusts. If socialists ‘liquidate the class enemy,’ then they militarize the struggle and indefinitely postpone democracy (but not totalitarian rule). If, on the other hand, they try to preserve political pluralism, they in effect keep their class enemies alive to fight another day, ensuring that whatever steps towards socialism they make, through legislation and the creation of new institutions of popular power, will be precarious and subject to legislative roll back should the government change.

There is no theoretical solution to this problem, but only a choice to be made. Unless the socialist left can build consistent support for its ideas, realize those ideas in institutions of popular self-government that extend into economic life, and defeat, by superior results and arguments, class enemies, it will never achieve its goals. Any sort of militarized conflict will lead to mutually destructive civil war (as in Syria). Socialists have to win by political organization and argument, democratic struggle, international solidarity, and demonstrable achievements. Such success is imaginable only over the long term- and, in spite of the danger of reaction and roll-back— gradually.

The interview also touches on a problem which perhaps resonates differently in 2017 than in 1979, but is perhaps also more important now. It concerns what Poulantzas calls the “pan-politicization” of society. When he made this argument in 1979, his concern was that critics were treating capitalism as CAPITALISM, an omnipotent, omniverous system that ruled out any space for free activity and self-organized experimentation.

I ask myself more and more often if it is fair to say there is a political defect in our society. Are we sure we will not fall into “pan-politicism”, one of the biggest ideological illusions inherited from the history of these recent years? At its heart, perhaps, the problem consists in recognizing



that not everything is political, that there are limits to the politics of “politicization”. It is necessary to adapt to thinking that spaces of freedom may exist for new collective projects, for the expression of new subjectivities that escape politics—or better, certain limits of politics.

He implies that capitalism might not be as monolithically oppressive as critics suggest. Capitalism is a contradictory system, and social contradictions are spaces of possibility. Capitalism commodifies life-necessities, it is true, but their life-value exist independently of commodification, and this potentially available for non-commodified appropriation and use. Expanded civil rights and legal flexibility allow for experimentation and self-organization (co-ops, community run spaces, self-help groups, skill exchanges...). His point seems to be that as we work against capitalism, we should not miss opportunities to live differently within it. Not every argument needs to end with: “if you want x, you have to overthrow capitalism.”

This point remains relevant today even as changed political conditions reveal a new dimension probably not intended by Poulantzas. The cultural politics of outrage and censorship strikes me as a new form of over-politicization which threatens to suffocate the emancipatory vision of socialism. All past history is marred by structures of hierarchy and oppression. It therefore follows that traces of oppressive and hierarchical thinking can be found everywhere, from the crassest popular culture to the highest of high art. It does not follow, as too many left wing guardians of virtue think, that art works that bear the traces of this oppression consciously endorse it, and that therefore public display should be banned because it supposedly reinforces it.

Instead of learning to read art critically, with an eye and ear for nuance, with the ability to detect contradiction, tension, and irony, instead of understanding art as invention, not description, and, above all to recognize the liberatory potential expressed by aesthetic form (whatever the ‘literal’ content appears to be), too much of the left— especially on university campuses— is dominated by a philistine and censorious sensibility. We need to leave banning art to right wing religious fanatics and the cops. We need to remember that historically it is gays and lesbians, radicals, and iconoclasts— Wilde, Marx, Joyce— who suffered most at the hands of a conservative state, and radicals who fought for freedom of speech and expression (the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in the 1960’s, or Toronto’s flagship LGBTQ Glad Day Bookstore, in the 1970’s and 80’s for example). The Left must stand on the side of iconoclasm, free thought and expression, appreciation for the artistic exploration of the dark side of the human character, and of beauty as a socialist value. Socialists above all should understand that life is not always nice and safe and pretty, and defend the right of artists to spread discomfort and challenge polite sensibility.

# Readings: John Brown: New Work

Originally Posted November 29, 2017

John Brown: New Work

Olga Korper Gallery

17 Morrow Avenue, Toronto



## Field of Forces

### a) My Hand ...

Writes me into being,

Not straightaway and all at once,

but in loops and curls.

The body of the man hides

the imagination of the child;

in old age,

the reminiscence  
restores strength  
to the failing body.

At the end,  
one is suspended  
between the light and the dark.  
Endings are awful,  
but human.

**b) Public Service Announcement**

We your benefactors have heard you,  
and we have taken care:  
to prevent the unexpected,  
to exile the unanticipated,  
to organize experience  
predictably, in advance,  
to anticipate the possible,  
and organize it  
in the interest of your happiness.

All this we have done for you.



### c) The Other's Hand

The eye

that makes the observation

is connected

to the hand

that takes the notes,

that compiles the data,

that discloses the pattern,

from which you are a deviation.

The mind

prescribes the remedy,

the hand

writes the prescription,

which restores the natural order,

by curing the affliction.

The mind  
imagines the numbers,  
the hand  
writes the code,  
that drives the apparatus  
of security and surveillance,  
of comfort and control.

In love for you our hands are joined  
to write the rules and regulations  
that:  
divide in from out,  
like from unlike,  
known from unknown,  
us from them,  
citizen from refugee,  
the desired from the shunned.

Within this architecture of security  
an obligatory good  
has been elaborated

by us, for you.



**d) Being There**

Anxiety: to vibrate out of phase

with the promised sleep

of pacified happiness.

No network application

can still the mind

that has felt

the impermanence

at the very heart

of things.

Where you are now

you cannot stay.

Being here

is a moment

of the nowhere

you will someday be,

forever.



All Photos © 2017 Olga Korper Gallery.

# Readings: David Camfield: We Can Do Better

Originally Posted October 20, 2017

In *We Can Do Better: Ideas for Changing Society*, David Camfield presents his “reconstructed historical materialism” as the theoretical key to practical social transformation. It is both concise and wide-ranging, but never becomes so dense that it ceases to be accessible to non-experts. Camfield avoids academic jargon and pecayune analysis in favour of readable prose and familiar, effective examples. At the same time, the book engages with complex philosophical problems and challenging impediments to socialist political organization with enough sophistication to engage the attention of academics and seasoned activists. Philosophically, his reconstructed historical materialism retains the core strength of the original theory while providing novel solutions to older problems of misinterpretations like economism and mechanical theories of historical causality. By stressing collective agency as the driving force of history, Camfield’s reconstruction prepares the ground for a new politics of struggle from below in which class, race, and sex-gender are intertwined rather than set against one another. Camfield thus manages to develop a theory which coherently informs practice, and theorizes a practice that could plausibly produce the sorts of unified and global movements that progress towards socialism will require.

In the first part of the four part book Camfield examines three alternatives to historical materialist explanation: idealism, biological determinism, and neo-liberal market fundamentalism. According to the first, history is driven by ideal entities of some sort: divine will, Platonic forms, or values that exist independently of the people who hold them. According to the second, social history is determined by natural history. Humanity’s genetic structure essentially programs certain forms of behaviour which recur in different forms in different societies. According to the third, human beings are programmed to compete, which means that history is dominated by various forms of market relationships. Capitalism is the final form of society because it perfects and universalises market relationships. Hence, it is both in accord with our competitive nature and the most efficient and just way of utilizing resources.

Camfield shows that each of these alternative explanations fails as a coherent explanation of historical development and social dynamics. Idealists beg the question, asserting that ideas determine historical development but unable to explain how the ideas arise in the first place. Biological determinists have an account of where ideas come from, but their mechanistic and reductionist explanations cannot account for how a more or less identical genetic code can give rise to wildly different societies, cultures, and symbolic beliefs. Market fundamentalism provides sound explanations of prototypical behaviour in capitalism, but cannot explain the dispositions, property forms, and social relationships that typified earlier egalitarian, non-market societies, nor the various forms of cooperation that underlie all forms of social life. Of course people compete, but cooperation, not competition underlies all forms of society, because it is a presupposition of life itself. The shared problem of all three approaches is thus that they reify and falsely universalise one aspect of human nature and society.



The great strength of historical materialism is that it exposes the problem of reification. Reification refers to the process of turning a complex human practice or belief into an independent entity and then positing it as the cause of the practice. Marx's critique of reification has its roots in Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion. Feuerbach argued that our idea of God is a reified projection of our own essential powers. Just as human beings are really the origin of the idea of God, so too are we the creators of economic value and the agents whose collective activity shapes the ideas according to which we act. Historical materialism can therefore do what none of the alternatives can: explain the role of ideas, genes, and markets in historical context without according them independent existence and agency.

Camfield's reconstruction of historical materialism is the content of Part Two. He begins— as Marx's original did— with the natural history of humanity. We are a mammalian species with definite needs which force us to interact productively with the natural environment. However, given our evolved neural architecture and social interdependence, we have developed forms of thought and communication that allow us to create what no other species can create: a social-symbolic universe out of the givenness of nature. History is thus always two-sided, a dialectical interaction between material production and symbolic explanatory reconstruction-justification of material production. Ideas and values are thus interwoven with life-sustaining labour. "Because humans create cultures, our context is never just a physical location. It is always a cultural setting too. The circumstances in which we find ourselves include ways of making sense of the world, giving it meaning and placing values on things. ... Such ideas matter, but we must not make the idealist error of treating ideas as if they exist separately from people."(p. 29)

We must certainly avoid the error of mechanical reductionism, but we also need to solve a trickier problem, (which Camfield's reconstruction can help us solve, although I did not find myself convinced that the job is fully accomplished here), about the relationship between the ultimate material foundations of social life— reproductive and productive labour— and the histories of ideas, values, identities, and behaviours that develop out of those underlying processes. The problem for historical materialism is how much relative weight to assign to natural as opposed to cultural factors in our explanation of individual behaviour and belief. As an example, consider Camfield's discussion of gender. He quotes Connell in support of the view that gender "is not an expression of biology, nor a fixed dichotomy in human life or character. It is a pattern in our social arrangements, and in the everyday activities and patterns which those arrangements cover."(37) On this view biology determines our sex, but gender is a cultural product which is not determined by our biological sex characteristics. While it is true— as the creation of a variety of trans identities prove— that sex does not mechanically determine gender identity, does this mean that biological sex plays no role? Are male and female *irrelevant* to the ways in which gender has been constructed across cultural time and space?

The point is not to argue that biology determines gender identity, or anything at all in any mechanical sense. At the same time we have to avoid cutting culture off *completely* from natural and biological bases. In the 1960's the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro (in *On Materialism*) warned against the naive optimism of culturalist interpretations of historical materialism which ignored the way in which our bodies and their infirmities act as frames that limit human possibility. More recently, ecofeminists (for example, Ariel Sallehin *Ecofeminism as Politics*) have argued that women's biology makes it possible for them to valorize nurturing

relationships in a more profound way than men. They do not thereby claim that women's biology mechanically causes them to be nurturing, or that men cannot learn to be so, but they do argue for a closer relationship between biology and behaviour than Camfield seems to want to allow. Camfield may not be wrong in his arguments, but there is more discussion to be had about this difficult issue than he is able to explore here.

Nevertheless, his stated position, read charitably, is the right one to take. He argues that while productive and reproductive labour are foundational for human life and function as frames outside of which political, or religious, or artistic history could not exist, none of the forms those institutions and practices take are directly, mechanically determined by the economic structure, but have to be explained by concrete analysis of actual historical development. Thus, from the fact that any capitalist society must exploit labour and create a political-legal structure that justifies and enforces it, no one can predict what state and legal form, beyond the generic necessity to justify and protect the exploitation of labour, any society will adopt. Capitalism can be fascist or liberal-democratic, liberal-democrats can be nationalists or cosmopolitans; the law can enshrine formal equality between the sexes and gay marriage or it can enforce a sexual division of labour and demonize gays and lesbians. The *function* of law is consistent, we can say, while its content differs given different traditions of struggle.

In this view, the key to understanding historical materialism is the dialectical relationship between context (the result of past activity) and action (interventions into the given reality which produce changes in it and generate a new context). Camfield consistently affirms the agency of people: we reflect, argue, and then act, and those actions are not, strictly speaking, predictable, but give rise to patterns from which we can learn if we study them. However, while the argument he wants and for the most part does make is dialectical and affirms human collective agency as the primary driver of history, there are moments where a more mechanical argument creeps in.

Take his unfortunate claim (which he derives from John Berger) that "traditional Western European oil painting ... is a "distinctively capitalist kind of culture."(55). This assertion seems to me like saying that calculus is a distinctively capitalist kind of mathematics. My point is not that art is an autonomous zone unaffected by social and economic forces. There are social reasons why most known artists prior to the twentieth century were men, and we cannot explain art markets unless we understand how capitalism commodifies everything. At the same time, art has its own history which a complete understanding of its value to human life has to examine, and which is not served well by overly general claims such as the one that Camfield makes. From that sort of mechanical and generic claim no one can say whether "traditional" painting will take the form of Carravaggio or El Greco, Rembrandt or Breughal the Elder, Gericault or Courbet, nor account for what is of permanent aesthetic value in them. Clearly, any adequate historical materialist understanding of painting is going to have to actually study the history of painting as a practice, in the different contexts in which it developed, and include the aesthetic debates between artists as they continually pushed traditions in new directions. Of course, these debates take place in a historical and political context, but they have an internal history too, and historical materialists, if they want to have anything to say about the practice, have to study the internal history and not just the social situation of artists. The same would hold true of science, or religion, and other cultural-symbolic human practices.

However, for the most part Camfield avoids the error of mechanical determinism and provides as clear and accessible demonstration of what it means to think dialectically about society as one could hope to read. There is no mystery to dialectical thought. At root, all it really means is that one sees history as a process driven forward by struggles between opposed social forces. Marx argued that the fundamental forms of opposition are between productive and appropriating classes. Camfield does not alter this Marxist fundamental, but in Part Three makes clear, in a way that Marx occasionally noted but most often only implied, that the members of classes are not sexless and raceless abstractions but real people with definite sex, sexual, gender, and racial identities, with wider or narrow ranges of ability, with or without religious beliefs, and that all of these factors play into the contours of political struggle.

The real strength of Camfield's book, its major contribution, is to provide a new theoretical and in practical synthesis of the efforts of a number of thinkers over the past twenty years to develop a model of class struggle that is adequate to the real complexity of the working class: the fact that most workers are non-white women, that class exploitation also exploits existing racial and gender hierarchies and any other means of dividing the working class that it can find or invent; that, therefore, anti-racist struggle, for example, is not some "extra" outside of the main class struggle, but *is class struggle*, because white supremacy has been essential to capitalism from the beginning, and that the same can be said for patriarchy and struggles against all sorts of oppression.

Thus, if one wants to revive the old Marxist slogan that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself, one must remember that this self-emancipation is not only from the capitalists, but also from sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and so on. "The goal of a self-governing society could only be reached through a process controlled by the great majority of people acting in their own interests. All the way along, such a transition would have to be a process of self-emancipation. No minority, such as a party or armed force, could be a substitute for the democratically self-organized majority."(126) When we combine this principle with the concrete explanation that Camfield gives in the third part of the book of the ways in which class exploitation, patriarchy, and white supremacy have intertwined in the history of capitalism, we are presented with a hopeful program for movement building which respects the contextual need for autonomous organizing within a non-dogmatic commitment to ultimately unified struggle.

Camfield's hopeful politics is never naive but honest about the real challenges this politics faces. He concludes Part Three with a chapter whose title faces the problem squarely: "Why isn't There More Revolt." He answers the question with admirable candor: "Because the working class has become more decomposed, collective action by workers to address their problems does not seem very credible ... ordinary people have become more prone to directing their anger against other people who suffer social inequality in one way or another. Muslims, migrants, poor people, foreigners, women, people who face racism, Indigenous peoples— the victims of scapegoating are many and varied."(107) How far we travelled away from Marx's belief that the dynamics of capitalism would themselves produce working class consciousness and that all workers would realize that they "have no country" and that all that they have to lose in revolution "is their chains!"

False theory is false theory and it has to be rejected no matter who formulates it. At the same time, one worries that Camfield is holding on to the goal of the theory— an ultimately unified movement

against capitalism— without replacing the materialist foundation which provided the explanation of why that unity would happen. What we have seen in the two major waves of revolt provoked by the 2008 crisis of capitalism, the Arab Spring and Occupy, is not ultimate unification but sudden mass mobilization followed by fragmentation and division. The door was thus opened to reaction and repression. This opposition was not only structural, as between Islamists and liberals in the Arab Spring, but also divided all variety of subfactions in Occupy whose members all shared broadly similar goals of resistance and anti-capitalism.

That division is worrying because it seems to suggest that the left faces a problem first identified by John Rawls with regard to liberal society in general: that unanimity is impossible because of the fact of reasonable pluralism. In modernity, Rawls argued, where people are educated and allowed to speak, they will do so, and they will disagree, and nothing can ever overcome the fact of disagreement about political issues. The ease with which anyone can broadcast their voice on social media today has amplified the problem—if we want to call it a problem— of pluralism. Marx's structural theory of class consciousness could be read as one way of solving this problem: capitalist crisis will awaken different workers to their shared objective interests. I agree with Marx and Camfield that there are objective interests, but the facts from the most recent round of struggles suggest that these interests will always be interpreted differently by different groups, which means that the moment of unity may not arrive.

Or it could mean that it will arrive in a different form than the one that Marx expected. The fact of reasonable pluralism on the left seems to rule out the possibility of reviving vanguard party building, and that is not bad, given its obvious failures. At the same time, it poses a problem that the left has not thought through fully enough: how does a unified movement allow the expression of different interpretations of objective interests and remain coherently unified? Where there is a disagreement about particular momentary demands the problem is easy enough to solve: take a vote and majority rules. But when it is over deeper questions like the relative weight of different histories of oppression, for example, with the question of whether white members can adequately comprehend their own privilege, or whether Islamic dress codes are compatible with women's liberation, final answers that will prove satisfying to all members might be more difficult to attain.

I would have liked to have seen more reflection on this sort of problem, because I think Camfield's reconstruction might yield important insights about how it can be addressed. He does not go far enough along that road here. However, theory, like practice, is open-ended, and I look forward to further developments of his productive reconstruction of historical materialism and socialist practice.

# Lessons From History V: Right Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort

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Government should come from us. Now it comes at us with a propaganda machine in Washington that Hitler's propaganda chief, Goebbels, would have just envied. We've got to put the country back in control of the owners. And in plain Texas talk, its time to take out the trash and clean out the barn, or its going to be too late.

The day is not too distant when economic nationalism will triumph. The ... tidal wave of imports from Asia ... [will take] down industries and [kill] jobs ... there will arise a clamor from industry and labor for protection. If that cry goes unheeded,, those who turn a stone face to American workers will be turned out of power.

We're now one step closer to liberating our citizens from this Obamacare nightmare, and delivering great health care for the American people. We're gonna do that too. And now tonight I'm back in the center of the American heartland, far away from the Washington swamp to spend time with thousands of true American patriots. [Chants of drain the swamp] We have spent the entire week celebrating with the hard working men and women who are helping us make America great again. I'm here this evening to cut through the fake news filter and to speak straight to the American people.[Chants of "drain the swamp" from arena].

Barns, swamps; shit, methane- yes Washington has stunk for sometime. Goebbels, fake news, yes, the lies have never ceased. Lost jobs and a bloated bureaucracy weighing down patriots who just want a hand up, not a hand out. The glare of Trump's narcissism has blinded us to history, but as the first two quotations remind (the first from Ross Perot, the second from Pat Buchanan) there is nothing new in Trump's rhetorical appeals to internal corruption and external threat as means of consolidating hos own power. The only difference is that he succeeded where Perot and Buchanan failed. But his ideas have long vintage in the political history of the United States, a fact which comes through very clear in the brilliant history of right wing populism by Chip Berlet and Matthew M. Lyons. Though published in 2000, *Right Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort* is required reading for anyone who wants to move beyond the vacuous whinging of CNN talk-bots and actually understand the reasons why a Trump could be elected, and what needs to be done to move beyond him.

Berlet and Lyons trace the history of right wing populism in America from Bacon's rebellion in 1676 (in which a Virginia colonist mobilized a rebellion against the colonial administration but which in practice was a pogrom against Native Americans) to the hard-right attack against Bill Clinton's government at the end of the last millennium. The history is compellingly told and

frightening to read. The conspiratorial, zealous, angry, xenophobic, racist, misogynist, anti-gay and lesbian, and always violent right-wing populist movements are “too close for comfort” because they do not differ save in degree from the “acceptable” wing of the American right. Trump is but the latest in a long line of American politicians going back to Andrew Jackson in the 1820’s who has mobilized white “productive” Americans against “elites” accused of coddling “unproductive” demonized others. The demonized characters can change (American Indians to Blacks to Communists to sexual deviants to Islamic extremists) but the formula is always the same: manufacture a political identity by contrasting an ethically pure “American patriot” against a threatening outgroup.

Trump fits the mold of what they call “right wing repressive populism” perfectly:

We use the term *repressive populist movement* to describe a populist movement that combines antielite scapegoating ... with efforts to maintain or intensify systems of social privilege and power. Repressive populist movements are fueled in large part by people’s grievances against their own oppression but they deflect popular discontent away from positive social change. ... Right wing populist movements are a subset of repressive populist movements .... A *right wing populist movement* ... is a repressive populist movement motivated or defined centrally by a backlash against liberation movements, social reform, or revolution.(p.5)

Barack Obama was not a revolutionary by any stretch, but he was Black and a reformer, and that was enough to mobilize the backlash that Trump channels. At the same time, as Berlet and Lyons are at pains throughout the book to remind us, despite the oft-times outlandish and unsupported claims made by populist leaders, the oppressed who vote for them are moved by real unmet needs (but only a vague or wrong-headed idea of the causes of their deprivation). This point is of essential importance: right-wing repressive populism cannot be overcome by demonizing its supporters as incorrigible racists, uneducated idiots, or backwoods oafs. It can only be overcome by building a left wing alternative that listens, that provides a better explanation of the causes of deprivation, and that builds alliances amongst all oppressed groups on the basis of a convincing program for progressive social change. At present, the Democratic party is very far from being able to meet this challenge. Instead of political reconstruction, it is looking to the *deus ex machina* of the Russia investigation to save it from its own defeat. It will not work.

The attempt to stop Trump through Congressional investigation and legal intervention from above rather than patiently building a democratic movement from below is typical of American history. In the 1930’s, in the midst of a growing fascist movement, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was founded.(pp.151-152) Yes, this is the same Committee that, in the 1950’s would launch McCarthy’s ant-communist witch hunts. In the 1930’s the Committee tried to substitute state power for popular anti-fascist mobilization, for fear that the latter would develop into left-wing opposition to capitalism. Instead of seeing fascism and communism as opposites, the committee saw them as twin “Un-American” dangers, and tried to stamp out the first without activating movements for the second. (p.152) Still, many anti-fascists understandably supported the committee, unwittingly feeding a monster that would eviscerate the American left in the 1950s.

The problem here is general and *a propos* of our current political moment. The problem is “the false belief that the U.S. state apparatus can be trusted with repressive powers. The laws,

congressional probes, and political police that liberal anti-fascists hoped would be used against the Hard Right boomeranged forcefully against leftists, workers, people of color, gay men and lesbians. Far from being the means to free the United States from hatred and fear, these institutions became tools to safeguard and reinforce systems of oppression.” (p. 173) Today, the danger is two-fold. On the one hand, the Mueller probe into alleged Russian interference in the election can reinforce domestic oppression. On the other hand, it will encourage the same violent interventionist American foreign policy that Trump has questioned in the past and which a trillion dollar American military budget relies upon for justification.

The anti-Russian hysteria is already strengthening repressive forces masquerading as patriotic opposition to Trump. Included in the latest sanctions bill is a threat against anyone accused by the US State Department of “engaging in transactions with the intelligence and defence sectors of the Russian federation.” Well, you wonder, so what, I am not engaged in transactions with the Russian defense industry. No, but when you then realize that the sanctions includes such outlets as *RT News* (accused of being a propaganda vehicle for the Russian government), the implications come more sharply into focus. Well, so what, you say, maybe RT is nothing but a propaganda vehicle. But then you dig further and find out that Google recently announced that it has created— *quelle surprise*— an [algorithm to root out “fake news.”](#) But the “fake news” it is going to filter out (by not including links to the web sites that carry it) just happen to be websites with a generally critical disposition towards the established structures of power, mostly left wing, but also including libertarian sites opposed to interventionist foreign policies. Slippery slopes are not always fallacious.

The threats to the free dissemination of information are real, but not as destructive as the foreign policy implications of the Russian witchhunt. Here the hypocrisy of American liberals, so shrill in condemning the still [unproven Russian “meddling”](#) is stupefying. Russia may or may not have meddled in the election, but they did not cause Trump’s victory. But we do know for certain that [America under Obama did actively intervene](#) to help the overthrow of Russian-allied Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, and hand picked his successor, Arseniy Yatseniuk) This adventure has done nothing to advance the cause of democratic development in the Ukraine, but it has given new life to liberal interventionism. As yet another new American “democracy development” think-tank exposed by [Glenn Greenwald](#) proves once again, liberal interventionism is nothing more than American imperialism masquerading as democracy. And that has domestic consequences for America as well.

Instead of creatively addressing the real problems of the white American working class, challenging the racism that is still too virulent within sections of it, inventing a platform that can advance the interests of working men and women of all colors, defending immigrants and combating xenophobia, political energies are wasted in a grand distraction that will make not one iota of difference to any working American’s life no matter how it ends, but does endanger the rest of the world as it flails around in anger at manufactured enemies and bogey-people.

