

THINKINGS 11

Collected Interventions, Evocations, Readings 2021-22

JEFF NOONAN

Thinkings 11: Collected Interventions, Evocations, and Readings

© 2022 Jeff Noonan

Photos: Cover: Andrea Mantegna, Lamentation Over the Dead Christ (1916)

Interventions: Photo: Bush Junk, Garson ON, Jeff Noonan (2022)

Evocations: Zalev Brothers' Smelter, Windsor, ON, Jeff Noonan, (2022)

Readings: Scaffolding, 401 Richmond Street, Toronto, ON Jeff Noonan (2020)

Contents

Can The Truth Still Set Us Free?	5
Borges' Library	10
Poker 101	18
Neither Washington Nor Moscow	21
Thought in Three Dimensions	23
War: The Real Crime	30
The Contradictions of Self-Determination: Afghanistan Edition	35
Death of the Outdoor Cats: An Essay on Obligation	39
Public Policy, Individual Responsibility	42
Rational Fatalism	46
What's Wrong With Giving Up?	49
Fragments for a Wednesday Morning in January	55
Social Democracy Meets Capitalist Reality	60
Freedom, Determinism, and the Persistence of Unreason	64
The Value and Disvalue, The Contingency and Necessity, of Work	68
Must Everything Be Professionalised?	71
Crimes Against Humanity, Crimes Against Education	73
Into the Mystic: John McMurtry, 1939-2021	77
Ovid	80
Golem	87
J: 1.9.6.1	91
Readings: Kathleen Stock: Material Girls: Why Reality Matters to Feminism	97
Lessons From History XIV: Georg Lukacs: The Destruction of Reason	102
Readings: Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities, Harvey P. Weingarten	109
Lessons From History XII: Marx and Engels: The German Ideology, Volume II: True Socialism	118
Lessons From History XIII: Giacomo Leopardi: Dialogue Between Fashion and Death	121

I: Interventions



Can The Truth Still Set Us Free?

Originally posted 29 May, 2022

My recently deceased dissertation supervisor and collaborator John McMurtry would often say that the truth will win in the end, once it has become known. He arrived at this principle by reflection on the many examples of government cover-ups of atrocities. He reasoned that the fact that governments of all political stripes, in different periods of history and parts of the world, try to keep mass killings a secret proves that they fear that people's knowledge of the truth would undermine their legitimacy. Even the Nazi's tried to keep the Holocaust secret.

The Nazi's did try to keep the Final Solution secret, but they did not conceal their anti-Semitism. On the contrary, they used it as a most powerful mobilizing weapon. Those who lived near the camps could also have not been under any illusions as to what was going on in them. In fact, Claude Lanzmann, in his documentary *Shoah*, proves that villagers living near Auschwitz knew what was going on, but did nothing.

If the truth is to win in the end, then it must not only be, but be accepted as being, an objective and neutral force that determines policy. The yearly reports of International Panel on Climate Change have provided detailed empirical and statistical evidence of the reality of climate change, but this evidence has not been sufficient to produce systematic global changes to energy production or consumption. In the past week, America has been scarred by yet another racist mass shooting and another slaughter of schoolchildren. But the smell of gunpowder had not yet dissipated before the usual suspects were on television arguing that regular mass killings are not grounds for gun control.

Those who buy V-8 trucks place their right to consume ahead of the evidence of the link between fossil fuel consumption and climate change. The NRA points to the Second Amendment's guarantee of the right of American's to bear arms. Both link freedom of choice to the good life, but both ignore the fact that *life* is a presupposition of a good life and life has objective conditions. They invoke their interpretation of the values enshrined in the US Constitution, but do not see those values as means of problem solving that have to be continually adapted to changing conditions. When a constitutional principle like the Second Amendment (designed to solve the problem of the possibility of British counter-revolution) is a consistent cause of death, does not the truth of the values demand changed interpretations, *out of respect for the deeper values the document is supposed to serve*?

Philosophers might think that way, but politicians do not. McMurtry was a consummate philosopher who followed the arguments where they led, but he tended to think of politics as either rational or irrational, rather than as having a rationality of its own. I would say that political rationality exerts a causal force in history, even though it is often irrational, from a non-partisan, objective perspective. I have been trying to examine this contradiction in relation to

international relations (see my posts on the crisis in Ukraine), but it is more pervasive. It operates everywhere there is a struggle for power, and affects the Right as well as the Left, albeit in different ways.

Statistical and empirical evidence about the reality of climate change has neither fundamentally altered the prioritization of fossil fuel-led economic growth by governments nor changed individual consumer behaviour for the most part. There are few overt climate change deniers; the problem is that objective scientific information is not being converted into systematically changed policy and individual practice. In fact, as some environmentalists noted with alarm, the West's reaction to the Ukraine crisis through climate considerations out the window and focused solely on finding fossil-based alternative sources for Russian oil and natural gas. Profits for oil companies have soared during the crisis. Soaring prices are an incentive for more exploration and a prolonged reliance on fossil fuels.

The left also has a problem with truth. Marx thought of himself as a scientist (he called *Capital* a 'triumph of German Science') and he clearly continues the Enlightenment attempt to expose to use objective rationality for socially critical ends. Notwithstanding those original commitment to objectivity, in the twentieth century more skeptical attitudes towards science have dominated Western Marxism and the broader socialist left. Scientific rationality itself demands a self-reflective and self-critical stance: to the extent that the left exposed the complicity between capitalist industry and the scientific establishment, it made important discoveries about how science can be dissuaded from the objective search for truth by social and economic forces. But when it strayed too far into the idea that all knowledge is socially constructed, such that logical systems like mathematics are regarded as racist, or that human identity construction somehow can change material reality, or that everyone has their own 'truth' to speak, the left flirts with analogous irrationality it like to accuse the right of perpetuating. If everyone has their own truth, then there is no truth: truth is a normative standard for the evaluation of our distinctive beliefs, stories, interpretations, etc.

Time and again liberals inveighed against Covid-skeptics to "follow the science." I agreed (although I was also critical of some of the preferred policies). In any case, the point here is that the mathematics upon which epidemiology relies (including the discovery of the differential impact of Covid on Black and working class people) must work if it is going to be a reliable guide to practice. But that application of mathematics works because natural forces can be quantified, statistically modelled, and causally explained.

My point is that if you use data for any means, you are presupposing the truth of statistical reasoning, which in turn presupposes the truth of the logical structures from which mathematics is built. The teaching of mathematics might be racist: improve it. But the logical structures are not: if $a > b$ and $b > c$, then it follows necessarily that $a > c$. The left does oppressed people no favours when it argues that methods of reasoning that prove themselves time and again to explain phenomena and enable wider ranges of action are culturally relative. There is no "Western" science. There are different uses of science, and one of those uses allied new technologies to colonial violence and conquest. But Newton's physics was not "Western." If it were, then it could not have been used to plot the trajectory of canon balls outside of England. The logical structures upon which his laws of motion depended are not functions of a Western

way of looking at nature. Indeed, the origins of the mathematics on which natural science rests are not exclusively Western. And if natural science is an exclusively Western pursuit, what does one say about the intensive efforts across the non-Western world to develop their scientific and technological capacity for the improvement of their citizens lives? Binary code is binary code, whether the language of the engineers is English, Hindi, or Mandarin.

However, the problem of the relationship between knowledge and social organization is not as simple as this cautionary note against dogmatic forms of cultural relativism suggests. In the early modern period when the contemporary form of natural science was taking shape, natural philosophers sometimes thought of natural laws as the grammar of the Book of Nature. The metaphor is apt, but not for the reasons that they thought. Nature is a book in that it must be interpreted. I do not mean that there is no difference between physics, philosophy, and poetry, that science is just (as Richard Rorty might put it), just another story we tell. My point is that because data must be interpreted, there will be disagreements amongst scientists. These disagreements are essential to the development of scientific knowledge, but they also open the door to skeptical abuse of reasoned disagreement.

The debate around Covid vaccines is a case in point. If one looks, one can find scientists that were critical of vaccine policies, and they supplied arguments to support those concerns. Vaccine skeptics seized upon the conclusions, *but ignored the counter-arguments from other scientists*. The problem here is not that critical scientists were disseminating “misinformation” as the pro-vaccination camp maintained. The solution is certainly not to have governments and social media platforms decide what arguments can circulate in the public sphere. I remain astounded at the utter political naivete (to choose the mildest epithet I can think of) of some on the liberal left when it comes to their support for censorship. There are no good capitalists and none should be put in charge of the arguments that are allowed to circulate in the public sphere. All people have brains and the left above all should not only trust people to use them, but insist that they be allowed to do so.

The problem is not so much one of misinformation as it is a failure of reasoning. When factoids or conclusions are cherry-picked and then inserted into an argument as if they were definitive, those who assert them must be held accountable by the standards of scientific truth they themselves invoke. That means that they must be able to *refute the counter-evidence that they ignore*. Take another example: climate change. Since the models that predict catastrophic outcomes if the planet continues to warm are generated from massive data sets, and that day to day weather patterns are highly variable, there is bound to be a lot of noise in the models (i.e., there will be local variations or deviations from the predictions that skeptics can cherry pick as evidence against the global phenomenon. When they do so they should be met with the calm demand to produce an alternative model, based upon an equally comprehensive data set, that provides an equally probable outcome to the model that they claim to reject on scientific grounds. If “the science” is on their side, then they should be able to answer the challenge.

If skeptics were met with a calm demand to create a better model, then they would immediately be exposed as faulty reasoners. Sadly, what typically happens is that they are met with moralistic derision, which allows them to paint themselves as bold dissidents protecting truths from big government. For much of the twentieth century the left used to make those arguments. It is a sign

of the intellectual degradation of much of the liberal left that it now uncritically embraces repressive state power and the platitudes of “good” capitalists as the solution to the problem of dissent. Hence, instead of turning the dissident’s use of science against them, to expose their incapacity to provide better evidenced models, every debate almost immediately collapses into childish name-calling. Then both sides take their toys and go to their respective camps, leaving the skeptical argument to circulate amongst the true believers, and thus *continuing to exert the pernicious effects that it was designed to produce*.

The truth does not out when the world becomes siloed in this fashion. Or rather, the truth will out, but as destructive consequences that could have been avoided had there been real arguments, dispassionate assessment of the evidence, and collective action taken on the basis of those assessments. However, that conclusion seems tantamount to saying that politics should be abolished.

There are strains within the Marxist tradition that tended towards this conclusion (politics under socialism, Lenin said, would become the mere administration of things). But even in the Bolshevik Party there was never unanimity about how the new state and economy should be administered. Early on, those debates were democratic. Soon, they degenerated into mass murder.

As I noted in [Borges’ Library](#), the fact that everyone has a brain and is positioned just a little bit differently than every other person means that there will always be different perspectives on even the most objective of objective realities. Scientists interpret data differently, some think that anomalous results disprove a long-standing theory, others work to adjust the theory to the new data. In the long run the truth does out, *to the extent that scientists allow their decisions to be determined by the data and the best explanation*. Given that careers, grants, reputations, and prizes all ride on the outcome of these debates, science is hardly free from politics. However, over the long run it does seem that the better theory does win out in the end.

Can the same be said of history? I used to think of history in a more straightforwardly progressivist way, looking at the history of struggles on analogy with the history of scientific argument. Eventually, I believed, the truth of values like substantive equality, self-realization, and ecological integrity would win out; that people would come to see that there are objective human interests and that there are better and worse ways of organizing society to satisfy them. I still believe that those objective interests are real and that there are better and worse ways of satisfying them, but I am more skeptical now than formerly if there will ever be able to generate a political movement strong enough to create the needed institutions.

That might just be a function of drawing political inferences from a too-restricted time-frame (the hardening of political position into fixed camps neither of which can increase its supporter at the expense of the other. The relative fixity of political positions in the last twenty years or so may prove to be a function of temporary conditions and give way to the sort of mass socialist consciousness that Marx always expected the crisis of capitalism would generate. Or it might be a function of changed communicative circumstances that social media has brought about. That possibility is the one that worries me. Social media is less a forum for arguing towards

agreement about the best explanation and more a platform in which the like-minded congratulate themselves for their genius and morality and deride their opponents for stupidity and perfidity.

Should those changed conditions of communicative action, to borrow a term from Habermas, prove deep and fundamental, then I am not certain that the sort of political truths that I believe exist to be discovered and defended can set us free. Of course, conclusions like this one give themselves the air of finality when in fact all human judgement is provisional: history is the record of our problem solving efforts. When one set of attempts systematically fails, new societies arise in their wake. A complete failure is imaginable (there is no cosmic guarantee that humanity must always exist), but we have also recovered from global system collapses before. Perhaps only deeper system shocks than we are currently feeling will re-awaken a commitment to objective truth as the ultimate guide to policy.

Borges' Library

Originally posted, 15 May, 2022

[1](#)

Borges' "The Library of Babel" begins with a description the universe: "The universe (which others just call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries ... From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below— one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides ... One of the hexagon's free sides opens into a narrow sort of vestibule, which in turn opens onto another gallery, identical to the first, identical in fact to all."

Borges' fantastical imagination paints a geometrical picture of infinity as composed of the endless iteration of the same finite structure. Just as one can always add a new number to the number line, one could always step into a new gallery, in which new books would be found, in which new meanings could be discovered.

But I do not think that Borges is interested in the architecture of infinity. Rather, his Library of Babel is perhaps better understood as a metaphor for the actual infinity of literary meaning. No library on earth conforms to Borges' specifications. Yet each contains an actual infinity of meanings. Indeed, every particular work of literature contains an actual infinite of meanings. The same paradox that Heraclitus expressed when he said that "into the same river every different waters flow" is released every time a new person opens a book: into the same book, ever different meanings flow.

Infinites test the limits of the human power to understand. The great German mathematician Georg Cantor, the founder of set theory, was said to have been driven mad by his mathematical-philosophical inquiries into infinite series. Not only were there different infinite series, he discovered that one could perform the same sorts of mathematical operations on infinite values as one could finite. That is, one could multiply them, add them and so forth. But what is the product of the multiplication of two infinite sets?

My mind cannot swim with Cantor in these deep waters. Most cannot. But everyone who can read holds an actual infinite set of values (meanings) in their hand every time they read a book. But how can a finite set of words, deliberately arranged by an author to mean one thing rather than another, contain an infinity of meanings? Because no two people are exactly alike, have had exactly the same experiences, or come at problems from exactly the same direction. When different people read the same book, they therefore discover something new, because something appears to them from their perspective a little more clearly than from another.

Moreover, books move through time. Historical changes reframe the context in which a book is read. The human dramas that captivate us in a novel or the breathtaking emotional valences with which the best poetry charges even the most commonplace events take on different shades of meaning in different social and historical contexts. Both Elizabethans and people living now can

appreciate the brilliant simplicity of Shakespeare's famous pun: "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York," but it would have had a political charge to people living closer in time to the War of the Roses than it does to us. The words on the page do not change, but the social framework within which they are read and interpreted do. Since there will be no end to these historical changes (so long as human beings live) as long as a book is read, it will continue to unfold new meanings.

Furthermore, individuals do not remain the same. Much of my work as a philosopher involves re-reading texts that I have worked with before. When I go back to books that I have worked with before as part of a new project, I inevitably think a thought I have not thought before, even in relation to the same passages. Over time, I have underlined every sentence of the most important pages of the books I come back to most often. The markings are artifacts of the on going discovery of new meanings. On one occasion one paragraph struck me as particularly significant; on a later occasion, another, and on a third, I found a sentence that I had ignored before to have suddenly acquired particular salience.

Readers differ, historical worlds change, one's own interests develop overtime, but the book, the source of meaning, stays the same. There is an actual infinity of meanings because there is no limit to the differences that characterize readers and contexts.

I do not know of any philosopher that has been driven mad by the paradox of a finite text containing an infinity of meanings, but it has continually attracted philosophical attention and generated completely opposed responses. Plato preferred the spoken to the written word precisely because books (or in his day, scrolls) could escape the context of their initial creation and allow for uncontrolled interpretation. The materialization of ideas destroyed their purity and sowed the seeds of dispute and conflict. Derrida, on the other hand, revelled in the endless layers of meaning contained in texts. Reading his work is like trying to remember where the exit to Borges' Library of Babel was. Once we get inside, Derrida laughs, there is no exit: There is not outside text, there is no outside context, he teased.

I agree with Derrida that opening a book unleashes a magical power into the universe. Our eyes (or fingers, if we are reading Braille) are philosophers' stones that bring dead ink marks to life. Every time a passage is read, a new shoot, a new leaf grows. There is no limit to how many branches, how many leaves, how many flowers can grow on the tree of meaning. But that is not the whole of the magic. Its power becomes more mysterious still when we remind ourselves that although infinite, the meanings discovered in any particular book are not arbitrarily created. There are objectively incorrect readings of books, but no one which expresses the complete and final truth. So the set of infinite meanings is opposed to another infinite set of misreadings.

The opposition between true and false interpretations points towards another paradox of reading. When I read, my mind is both completely free and totally determined. One gets 'lost' in the book: the mind is absorbed in the world created by the text. But this absorption frees the mind to think new thoughts. Reading closes off attention, confines it to the pages, but this closure is itself an opening to think that which has not yet been thought. There is no predicting what these new thoughts will be: scan my brain as meticulously as you want while I am reading. You will never

discover what my next thought will be. The texts leads me down roads that did not exist before I started reading. For you, other roads will open up. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

And yet, this total freedom is also total determination. One cannot just think anything one wants if one wants to *understand a book*. If one argued that *Crime and Punishment* is about Dostoevsky's grandmother's borscht recipe, one would be wrong. If one argued that it is a defence of Christian conscience against the nihilist principle that others' lives have meaning only to the extent that they are instrumentally useful to more powerful people, one would be correct. One would also be correct to read it as a philosophical detective novel. Or one could just read it to be carried along by the human drama of the story and not think too philosophically about it. Infinite perspectives open up infinite nuances of meaning; infinite nuances of meaning create the possibility for infinite discussions of the infinite nuances of meaning. Add these together, extend them back in time and forward into the open ended future of the human project and you will realize that there is no finite number we could assign to fix the value of the possible meanings of any given work of literature.

Derrida captures this magic of reading, but I think that he misunderstands its source. It is not the text itself, or the context itself, which generates the infinite set of meanings. It is rather the persistence of the text in an objective natural and social world populated by human beings who face real problems that explains the fecundity of books. We can understand characters and metaphors because we share a material world with the novelists and the authors who write the book. We create our own interpretations because we inhabit these shared worlds as unique individuals. The reader is both inside and outside the text: inside, as our minds are led along by the language of the book, but also outside, making the words make sense in terms of our own lives.

To understand, therefore, we must follow and lead at the same time. We have to be swept along by the words the author chose, but we have to map those words onto the world that we live in. "Living" literature resonates with new meanings in changed circumstances. The attentive reader does not try mechanically impose old words on new circumstances. Rather, they freely allow the "old" world of the text and the "new" world of their present circumstances to freely intermingle in their mind.

This free play between old and new worlds in the minds of readers can only take place, I think, if reading is first and foremost a solitary activity. Our world is too quick to comment. One should write or comment only when one has something to say that has not been said before. The internet is a chatterbox that never shuts up and makes people afraid to think for themselves. Paul Virilio says somewhere, with characteristic eccentric brilliance, that knowing what everyone else thinks in real time produces a "communism of affects;" a totalitarian closure of imagination and feeling around banal sentiments. Different factions gather around different sides of the same banality; the original thought, the one that no one might agree with, is never posted.

Interpretation is thinking and thinking must be allowed to unfold free of the distractions of what we think other people will think about our thoughts. In order to understand, we must not worry about whether other people will agree. Time and other people should disappear as we wander the

stacks of Borges' Library. Perhaps Jorge Luis himself sits at a desk at the entrance to the library demanding silence as the price of admission.

Reason, and Raisons d'Etat

Originally posted, 29 January, 2022

Philosophers have long argued, in somewhat different terms, that the best social world would be objectively of rational. In the classical age of the Greeks, reason was associated with principles of divine order. The social goal was to create institutions which reflected those principles, bringing to the relationships between human beings the eternal harmony of divine perfection. In the Enlightenment, the naturalized hierarchies that classical thought tended to support (of men over women, freemen over slaves, etc.,) were challenged. Nature and society were both historicized and reason re-interpreted as a capacity that exposed the way that particular social interests presented themselves as universally valuable, reflective of an eternal order unchangeable by human beings. Hence they exposed as ideological justification for the rule of kings, nobles, and priests all doctrines of natural superiority and inferiority. Marxism, and, in the twentieth century, Critical Theory are developments of the original Enlightenment use of reason as a weapon of social criticism.

Despite the essential differences between the classical and critical conceptions of reason, the history of the political uses of reason is unified by a common theme: that a rational view is ultimately impartial, even if it supports one side or another in matters of social conflict. Hence, if it is true that reason can at least approach an objective understanding of events, then it would be able to determine which side of any given conflict is better supported by facts and evidence and which side is merely trying to impose its particular interests for the sake of augmenting its own power.

But there is a distinct and very different understanding of reason at work in the day to day tumult of opposing political forces. The philosopher's reason, even when politically partisan, strives to make and support universalizable claims that are in principle acceptable to the other side. (Habermas' reconstruction of democratic deliberation as 'communicative action' is a paradigmatic example). In contrast, 'raisons d'etat' are reasons which make sense only from a partisan standpoint, but might well appear to be irrational from an objective point of view.

The current fluid conflict between the United States, NATO, and Ukraine on one side and Russia on the other is a case study in the conflict between objective reasoning and raisons d'etat. If one abstracts one's perspective from allegiance to one side or the other and looks at the situation objectively, the conflict appears absurd—there is nothing meaningful to risk war over. If all sides contemplated the matter objectively, it would become apparent that they cannot secure their maximalist demands. Russia is too weak economically (GDP per capita, 10 000US\$, as opposed to the United States, 63 000 US\$) to hold out without ruin against severe Western sanctions. However, the West is not powerful enough to force Russia to back down if the latter believes that its very existence is at stake. However, from an objective standpoint, it is obvious both that Russia's existence is not at stake and that the claim that Russia is going to overrun and conquer Ukraine, the Baltic countries, and Poland is hysterical fear-mongering.

But we can go even further. If we abstract further from existing geo-political conditions, if we look at the earth and human beings from the standpoint of our needs and generic relationship to the earth, the differences that fuel political conflicts do not exist. Viewed from the perspective of organic life, different national traditions are not relevant to survival, but only our ability to satisfy our most fundamental needs. National borders and boundaries are arbitrary lines on a map: legal-historical fictions when judged from the perspective of earth as planet. Notions of national pride and dignity, feelings of humiliation or triumph appear as irrational emotional drivers of life-destructive behaviour.

A politics derived from these abstract rational considerations would eschew conflict and war in favour of co-operation, would abolish borders and focus on using the earth's resources to satisfy the needs of each and all, and elevate the motivations of collective action beyond reactive feelings of resentment and pride. In short, a completely dispassionate, rational assessment of the conditions of human lives would recognize immediately the irrationality of: the current inter-state system, (there is only one planet); the need for spheres of influence and control (relevant only if one has enemies to defend against); the feelings of partiality towards members of one's own nation and language group (linguistic and cultural differences will persist, but there is no principled reason to love one's cultural neighbours more than anyone else); the use of resources to maintain gigantic standing armies and the waste of intellect involved in arms-industry driven scientific research, and the 'resolution' of conflicts through mass killing episodes (each of which fuels resentments in the losers and sets up the conditions for the next round of conflict and killing). Reason pulls our gaze upwards, maybe not all the way to a "God's eye view" but high enough that it becomes possible to understand that none of these drivers of conflict are rationally or materially necessary. Therefore, they could all be abolished by collective decision.

But there is the rub: politics has its own rationality that is out of phase with reason. *Raisons d'état* grows from the soil of history. They drive the pursuit of particular material interests in objectively insane but politically coherent directions. State functionaries calculate, but not only with numbers, but emotional variables drawn from history that live on under changed circumstances. Old fears and past glories combine to generate path dependencies that if, unchecked, could lead to disaster, but have a comprehensible political logic of their own. Hence, if something like NATO exists, and a country like Ukraine, which has been the victim of Soviet aggression, is outside of it, the nation might well calculate that getting under NATO's collective security umbrella makes sense. The same situation, from the objective standpoint, looks very different. Since NATO was created to contain a Soviet Union which no longer exists, NATO no longer has a reason for being, and should have been disbanded once the Soviet Union collapsed. As we now know, the Soviet threat was largely over-hyped, and contemporary Russia can only be compared to the Soviet Union on the weakest of geographical analogies. Russia was the major national power of the USSR, but contemporary Russia, dependent as it is on natural resource exports to the European Union, is not in the objective position to threaten EU countries, much less the United States, in any real way.

Putin, reasoning objectively, must surely know these facts. He too, however, is motivated by *raisons d'état* and not purely objective reasons. He is not nostalgic for the Soviet Union, as Western commentators often argue, but he is schooled in Russian history: a history of invasion from Napoleon to Hitler that have cost an astounding number of Russians their lives. His

motivation is to prevent NATO getting any closer to his borders, while maintaining Ukraine—whose territories have deep cultural significance in Russian history— in the Russian sphere of political and economic influence. Once again, viewed through the prism of the long sweep of Russian history, his calculations make sense, even though there is no real danger of NATO or the United States invading.

While neither Russia nor NATO is any objective threat to the other— neither side has any compelling interest to invade the other and no means to conquer the other even if there were such an interest— calculations which follow from either side's *raison d'état* could lead to war. Viewed objectively, the EU (which is addicted to NATO because it provides maximum security at a fraction of the cost of a European security system) depends on Russian resources and Russia depends on EU money. There are no serious ideological differences between the blocs (overblown rhetoric about Putin's nostalgic Russian nationalism notwithstanding). Viewed from within each power bloc's frame of reference, however, neither side can appear to the other as weak. Hence the subtle dance of threat escalation, cheered on by a massive media-academic-think tank word industry in the US and the domestic political needs of Putin in Russia.

Trapped in the middle are the Ukrainians, who should be the one's preaching objective analysis and sane political calculation. Should war break out they will certainly be abandoned by the West— there is no political appetite anywhere in Western Europe for the levels of casualties a ground war with Russia would cost. Ukraine would be militarily devastated, but Russia could never achieve its objectives. No doubt Ukrainians would rise to the last person to resist and the US would no doubt impose economy-destroying sanctions. Russia would become even more of a pariah state than it already is in Western eyes.

The US, given its world leading arms industries and control over the global financial system, would laugh— as it always does— all the way to the bank. The first victim of the sanctions regime would be the Nordstream 2 pipeline. The US liquefied natural gas industry has been clamouring to gain a toe hold in the European market. Thus far, the lower costs of Russian gas have kept Germany on board with the project, but they would not be able to certify it in the event of a Russian incursion into Ukraine. US arms would surely pour into the conflict zone, as would, no doubt, mercenaries, er, sorry, private military contractors like Blackwater. Academic and media careers would be made advising the Biden administration. Fossil fuel executives, arms manufacturers, and commentators, safe at home thousands of miles away from the killing would be rolling in dough while Ukrainians and Russians would be dying.

Insane. And it takes no special insight to see the insanity. And yet the logic of conflict all makes perfect sense too. No one is acting irrationally from a political standpoint, and yet, from an objective standpoint, the logic of conflict threatens an outcome that is completely irrational: needless destruction of human life.

Social critics cannot be naive: *raison d'état* are as real as compelling as the rules of logical inference. Hence simply preaching rationality without addressing the structural economic and political drivers of conflict will never work. On the other hand, abandoning rationality as a source of objective evaluative criteria on the basis of spurious claims that objectivity is just another form of political partisanship does nothing to promote peace and save lives but instead

serves the interests of state proponents of armed violence. One or another side in a conflict will have reason on its side: objectivity is not neutrality. People must therefore take partisan stands, but if those stands are to promote peace, they must be rooted in an objective evaluation of the real situation.

Poker 101

Originally posted, 24 February, 2022

I'll not be resigning my cushy tenured position for a spot on the World Poker Tour anytime soon, but I know enough about how to play to avoid betting everything on a bad hand. Vladimir Putin and the right wing organizers of the Freedom Convoy in Canada could learn from my caution.

Since the US encouraged the Maidan uprising in 2014, Ukraine has been split between the Ukrainian nationalists that took power and Russian speaking (and Russian identifying) citizens in the East. In response, Putin orchestrated the return of the Crimean peninsula to Russian control (it was only ceded to Ukraine in 1951 by Khrushchev, before that it had been part of the Russian Empire, and before that, Ottoman). Putin's move brought widespread international condemnation and an intensified push on the part of Ukrainian authorities for deeper integration with the West, including NATO membership. Understandably, the Russian government, already encircled by NATO and the United States (people forget that Russia's eastern neighbour is the United States), fears any further tightening of the circle. However, given the current alignment of global forces, there is little that they can do to prevent it.

Hence Putin's decisions to first recognize the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and then, last night, launch military strikes against Ukraine, are disastrous to all concerned. Ukrainian civilians will almost certainly be killed, the Russian economy strangled, bringing renewed hardship to that long-suffering people, energy prices will rise around the world, stretching many working class budgets beyond the breaking point. Frightening instability has been injected into the geo-politics of Europe whose long-term implications cannot be predicted.

Already the [Nordstream 2](#) gas pipeline has been suspended and the ruble is in free fall. Ordinary Russians will see the costs of imports skyrocket (if any imports remain) and Russian businesses will find it more and more difficult to invest in the newest technologies. The Russian economy will remain trapped in an export-based system in a world which will rapidly seek alternative sources for its goods. Putin has played his hand, but in a politically and economically disastrous way.

The historical and political reasons why he has made this move are clear. US policy since the Cold War bears the ultimate responsibility. First, Putin was made possible—necessary?—m by the looting of the Soviet economy encouraged by the finest economic minds the American Ivy League could furnish. Real incomes and life-expectancy collapsed under the alcoholic shambles that was Boris Yeltsin; someone who could restore order and pride was objectively necessary, and Putin fit the bill. His latest gambit, however, is mostly likely to be his last.

As I argued in “[Reason, and Raisons D’etat](#),” that which makes sense politically from a national perspective is often irrational from an objective perspective. From an objective perspective, I struggle to see how Putin can achieve his aims. He can cut off the supply of gas to Europe, but his economy depends upon resource exports. He seems to be banking on deepening connections to China. That gives him an alternative export market, but it comes fraught with its own risks. First, China’s economy depends on energy imports, but it also depends on manufacturing exports to the US. To be sure, China shares with Russia an interest in limiting US hegemony, but its dependence on US consumers will limit the extent to which it will support Russian moves that could expose its economy to further US sanctions. Moreover, Chinese foreign policy is rooted in a very strong affirmation of national sovereignty and self-determination. They rely on that principle to justify their policies in Tibet, their treatment of national minorities, and their Taiwan policy. Whatever the [complex history](#) of the formation of Ukraine’s current borders, no one in the international community will see this invasion as anything but an illegitimate and illegal violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty. Already, China has moved to distance itself from the Russian move. Putin is going to find himself completely isolated. Beyond the pointless loss of life the invasion will cause, it is also self-undermining: it will mostly likely hasten rather than prevent Ukrainian membership in NATO (at the very least it will permanently ensconce Ukraine in the Western camp).

When you have a terrible hand, you do not push in all of your chips. You fold and wait patiently for the next hand, and the hand after that, and the hand after that, if necessary. At worst, you walk away from the table with the shirt on your back and the keys to your car. Neither Ukraine nor NATO were ever going to invade Russian territory. Putin’s impatience will have almost as dire results for the Russian people as an invasion would have caused.

Turning our attention back to my own shores, there were no tidal geopolitical forces pushing the “Freedom Convoy” down Canadian highways to Ottawa and border crossings in BC, Alberta, and Ontario, and their political miscalculations will not have global effects. Nevertheless, the leadership’s decisions are another paradigm case of mistaking weakness for political strength.

The initial aim of the Freedom Convoy were simple enough: end the vaccine mandate imposed on cross-border truckers. But this simple demand soon attracted a plethora of anti-government grievances, mostly emanating from Alberta, the traditional home of the Canadian far right which has long harboured anti-Ottawa, anti-liberal, and anti-Trudeau sentiment. (Trudeau *pere*’s National Energy Policy was a flashpoint for the Alberta right in the 1980s: remember those “Let the Eastern bastards freeze in the dark” bumper stickers).

The convoy managed to attract a few thousand active participants. One must give credit where credit is due: they displayed remarkable creativity and determination. They blockaded downtown Ottawa for 3 weeks and kept North America’s busiest commercial border crossing between Windsor and Detroit closed for a week. I went and argued with a group of Windsor protesters: there were no tactical or strategic geniuses there, only highly committed people willing to put themselves on the line for what they believed in— a strong contrast to the mobilizing failures of the left for the better part of 40 years.

Alas, the goals of the movement were either unrealizable (even had Trudeau given ground on the truckers' vaccinations, the American government has the same regulation, and would not be swayed by a few thousand Canadians, even if they did wave a lot of American flags), deeply confused (after the Emergencies Act was declared, many in Ottawa decried the violation of their First Amendment Rights, confusing the American and Canadian Constitutions), or lunatic (overthrowing the Liberal government).

While there was no chance of any of these demands being met or political goals realized, the Convoy will most likely have a lasting— and deleterious— effect on Canadian politics. None of the three major political parties comes out stronger: The Conservatives had no choice but to back the movement, for fear of losing ground to the far-right Canadian People's Party, but back themselves further into a political corner from which there may be no electoral escape for the foreseeable future. The Liberals come out looking both too weak and too authoritarian, first dithering while Ottawa froze and then imposing the Emergency Measures Act. The NDP, unsurprisingly, wanted things both ways and will be judged accordingly as incapable of making firm, principled decisions.

However, the real damage will be to the future of protest in Canada. Now that the seal has been removed from the use of the Emergencies Act to forcibly remove protesters (who were causing real damage but were far from being insurrectionary) the bar has been worryingly lowered for its future use. Even if the Act is not again formally invoked, governments and police will feel emboldened to swiftly pounce on and remove anything resembling a barricade or blockade. Picket lines and First Nations' protest encampments have always been targets; they will face much graver risks now as governments of the day will harken back to the Freedom Convoy to justify repressive measures long after the diesel clouds over Wellington Street have dissipated. There may have been no political alternative at the time the act was invoked, but no one should gloat over the long term implications of its having been used.

Neither Washington Nor Moscow

Originally posted, 1 March, 2022

The title of this post was the slogan of the International Socialist Tendency to which I once belonged. I can hardly believe that it is still relevant thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the purported end of the Cold War. However, instead of beating our swords into ploughshares, the search for new enemies began. Yes, there was a brief period of euphoria and optimism in the West, but soon a needless war had been started with Saddam Hussein. For awhile it looked as though the corrupt dictatorships that had once served US and Western purposes would satisfy the need for enemies, but they alone could not justify the massive outlays for new weapons systems and nuclear arms to which the American economy is addicted.

Enter Putin's Russia, China, and al Qaeda. The later, ghost-like, became the justification for the Global War on Terror which, at [last count](#), had cost 9 trillion dollars and about 900 000 lives (as a consequence of direct combat; the figure would be much higher if deaths due to increased disease and the break down of social institutions were factored into the figure). The figure also excludes surplus deaths in Iran as a consequence of its having been starved of funds for medicine for decades). But the real prizes were Russia and China, peer competitors (or so we are told) whose very existence is a challenge to the "free world" (yes, the term is back again) and therefore require perpetual mobilization, confrontation, and militarization.

I cannot recall mass boycotts of California wine or Disney movies to protest the wanton destruction of lives, livelihoods, and whole societies during the twenty years of the War on Terror. People cheered as wedding parties were evaporated by Predator drones firing Hellfire missiles. Those who reported on the truth, like Julian Assange, were discredited, hunted down, and tortured (if being imprisoned without trial for a decade is not torture, I do not know what is). But only the Russians and Chinese spread propaganda, our press is free.

The hypocrisy and self-righteousness of Western government and their fawning mainstream media is unbearable.

However, we must not make the mistake of painting Putin as a heroic anti-imperialist. He is certainly opposed to the expansion of NATO, but for *raisons d'état*, not because he is trying to build a coalition of non-aligned forces to promote freedom, democracy, and substantive equality. The reason he has invaded Ukraine is not difficult to understand: he reached out to the US and NATO with clear demands, and instead of seriously negotiating those demands and arriving at some acceptable middle ground, he was rebuffed and lectured. He has made a colossal strategic error. He has unleashed the murderous power of his military against the Ukraine and bears responsibility for the mass destruction of human life. He has brought about an unprecedented rain of sanctions which will destroy his economy and worsen the already hard lives of most Russians. Russians will be locked once again with their borders, depriving the world of their talents as athletes, scientists, and artists, and most likely narrowing and hardening their view of the rest of the world. Nevertheless, Russia exists within a state system and the decisions of its

leaders must be understood within that state system, no matter how irrational its political logic is when viewed from an objective perspective.

As the killing unfolds one could say of international law what Gandhi once said about Western civilization: it would be a good idea. International law is invoked only when it suits the victor's purposes. The victors themselves are free to pillage and maim as they please. The losers are always the people who do not care about international relations and just want to get on with their lives, love their families and friends, and make their way through the world. I cannot imagine, on this morning which dawns peaceful for me, the grief, anger and terror of ordinary Ukrainians as Russian bombs and missiles continue to pour down, so I will not try to write as if I do.

I am long past the point of being able to convince myself that fundamental geo-political conflicts will be resolved. I have read too much history: time and again the states system is reconfigured around a new hegemon, and all the old shit (preparation for and then actual war) begins again. The solution is simple: everyone stop wanting what they do not have, relate to others with openness and understanding, cultivate a peaceful and caring disposition to all things. That is the deep message of most religions and the best of philosophy, but it is ignored time and again. Why will this time be different?

So we must content ourselves with managing catastrophe after catastrophe. Once one begins, as now in the Ukraine, the best one can hope for is a quick negotiated resolution. But has Biden or any Western leader called for and encouraged negotiations? No, they have rushed to flood arms to Ukrainians. Ukrainians have the absolute right to self-defence, but we have seen many times before what happens when arms flood into a war zone: it prolongs the fighting and increases the number of dead— but also, of course, the profits of weapons makers.

Covid could have been treated as a wake up call telling us to learn to cooperate across borders and simplify our lives. Who has not learned during the pandemic that the only really important thing in life is our ability to connect with the people we care about and love? But the virus was not treated as teacher but an enemy to be defeated. Now that it is in retreat, the world falls back into its life-destructive normalcy.

Thought in Three Dimensions

Originally posted, 9 March, 2022

When confronted with any political problem we face three interrelated tasks. The analyst must understand, assign responsibility, and decide how to respond. How we respond will be a function of understanding and responsibility.

Responsibility cannot be assigned unless the problem is understood. When I say “responsibility” in this context I am not talking about legal responsibility, still less moral blame worthiness. Legal and moral questions arise in political life, but to understand a problem politically both, and especially the later, must be bracketed. Legal responsibility (say, for war crimes) is a matter for the courts. Morality is something else again. Nothing is easier than charges of wanton inhumanity, but when we think of political conflicts in terms of abstract categories like “good” and “evil” we grossly oversimplify their historical emergence and impede rather than deepen understanding.

The current conflict between Russia and Ukraine is a case study in how conflating responsibility with moral blameworthiness impedes comprehensive understanding. The Russian army may be committing [war crimes](#) and Putin may be, as his legion of critics maintain, “evil.” But he did not invade *because* he is evil or *for the sake* of committing war crimes. Make no mistake: Putin and his inner circle are *responsible* for the invasion. They are legally accountable for whatever war crimes are committed, whatever reparations are owed, and for any other negative consequences that their illegal actions are causing. Putin and those who execute his orders are also, like every human being, moral subjects who may justly be judged for the pain and death their decisions have caused. But proper political understanding must bracket those two dimensions of the web of human agency and action.

Political understanding must do so because both isolate actions from [historical context](#) and fix blame on *individuals*. The US and the EU knew from at least [2008](#) that Russia was unequivocally opposed to NATO expansion but both have persistently ignored those concerns. One cannot understand the actions of political agents, which, as I have been pointing out in the past few posts, act on *raisons d’etat* and not objective reasons, on the terms in which we would evaluate the day to day actions of people not in positions of power. Political agents, especially when the problem has the world historical implications of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are not acting as legal or moral individuals, but as historical subjects shaped by and carrying with them the cumulative effects of past actions.

From a legal and moral standpoint, Putin is an individual subject to legal and moral judgments that others will render. But as the person who ordered the invasion of Ukraine, he is the President of the Russian Federation and the embodiment of the history of that Federation and its

relationship with the West since he assumed power in the 1990s. The only way we can *understand* his actions is by understanding that history. When we understand that history, we must acknowledge that [NATO and the United States](#) have played a role in generating the tensions that Putin is now trying (and failing) to overcome by force.

Moralistic explanations always crash against the rocks of one-sidedness. If the explanation for the war is that Putin is an evil megalomaniac, then there is no reason to investigate the history of Western relationships with Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. If we shout loudly enough about his inhuman tactics in Ukraine, we can silence critics of our own side's use of the same tactics. One of the main headlines last week was that Russia had used or was preparing to use a thermobaric weapon. What those same outlets failed to report was that the US used thermobaric weapons in [Afghanistan](#): a country without an air force or air defence systems. One could go on for pages and pages with similar examples of the abject hypocrisy of Western leaders. The point is not to distract attention from Russia's actions in Ukraine and argue that the US and NATO are the true evil empire. [Ukrainians](#) resisting the war have rightly cautioned against arguments from Western Marxists like [David Harvey](#) who have downplayed Russian responsibility. I agree with those [criticisms](#). However, one must still factor in the history of aggressive NATO expansion when we try to *comprehensively* understand the current conflict. The clear fact of the matter is that had the United States betrayed its promise to Gorbachev and the disintegrating Soviet Union to not expand NATO, and that is the starting point of the causal chain that leads up to the on-going Russian bombardment of Ukraine. Moreover, had the US sat down and [seriously negotiated](#) with Russia in the run up to the war, the war might not have been launched.

I do not want to distract from the current reality by introducing counter-factuals or to reduce Putin's responsibility for the war. He gave the orders and there was no compelling strategic necessity to do so (in fact, this decision will probably rank as one of the great strategic errors of all time). The point is that the West calculates its moves not in terms of good or bad but in terms of strategic interests *just like Putin* or any other *political agent*. The horrors of war are unleashed not because the leaders of any bloc are psychopathic monsters, but because they act according to an inhuman calculus of political and strategic power and weakness; they evaluate their success not in terms of how many lives are wasted in pursuit of the objective, but in terms of whether the objectives are met. One may wish it were otherwise and I and all peace loving people do so wish, *but that wish changes nothing*. Those in charge of policy understand that lives hang in the balance of their decisions— Western experts predicted this war but refused to negotiate nonetheless— but they do not make decisions on the basis of the only moral principle that ultimately matters in international affairs: preserve peace and maintain life above all costs. No major political power in history has *ever* made decisions on that basis. Only 6 year olds think that history is a struggle between “good” guys and “bad” guys. The structural conditions of geopolitical conflict are enough to ensure that no one who thought and acted on the principle that lives should be preserved at all costs would ever get anywhere near power. They would be incapable of making the decisions that the “balance of power” forces people to make, and they would never be acceptable to the economic political, and military interests that rule states and have ruled them in different forms for thousands of years.

Hence the real fruit of dispassionate understanding of the depth causes of international conflict in general and the present one in particular is (for me at least) despair. In order to finally overcome the structures that continually cause violent conflict the world would need new political agents capable of achieving total disarmament such that large scale warfare becomes impossible. But who would disarm in the middle of a fight? And when is there not a fight going on somewhere? Hence the objective conditions for the emergence of the political subjects who are needed to take bold new steps towards permanent peace are never met. Genuine voices of peace always emerge, but they are always marginal.

Unfortunately, these voices of peace are too often silenced and cowed by the much larger chorus of braying xenophobes and chauvinists who insist on simplistic moralistic demonization of the whole of the people who constitute the ‘enemy.’ One can certainly understand Ukrainian animosity towards Russia (although many in Ukraine have reached out in exemplary fashion to ordinary Russians to urge them to work to stop the war). One might not like the consequences for everyday Russians the severe of the economic sanctions will have, but Putin’s aggression could not go unanswered. Critics of the current global system will be troubled by the hypocrisy and double standards (why is the US never sanctioned, and who is the US, given its history, to try to teach lessons in humane treatment), but the reality is that there is no third party in heaven floating above the fray who can intervene to stop this war. There is only the nations of the rest of the world, and the most powerful agents in the rest of the world are the US and the EU. Sanctions are the only real weapon short of actual armed intervention, imposed on the Russian

Putin’s decisions are thus the root cause of these sanctions and he will have to answer to his people (who have been demonstrating in impressive numbers, given the strength of the internal security apparatus they face). General economic sanctions were therefore inevitable and justifiable. On the other hand, quite unjustified and dangerous are the wild rash of sanctions in individual Russians and even digital representations of Russian. Why should paralympians be banned from the Beijing Games? What possible causal force could they exert to stop the war? Why then are they being held responsible? Even more absurd: why have [sports video games](#) deleted the avatars of Russian national teams. Were they supposed to spin themselves into a digital golem and stop Putin? And even worse: why was a class on [Dostoevsky](#) (the study of whose peerless looking into the human heart of darkness is most needed at the moment) cancelled by an Italian university? Universities are places of *free* inquiry; whomever imposed this ban should ban themselves from their post— they are clearly unfit for intellectual work.

Will we soon be hearing calls for the internment of Russian Canadians?

Moral hysteria is not an effective basis for solidarity. It contributes to the unthinking demonization reduction of complex cultures and individuals to “enemy” status. Such demonizing drives supply the motivational fuel that keeps major conflicts burning. They prevent otherwise intelligent and good-hearted people from understanding history, causes, and the role their own nations have played in stoking conflict. They serve to perpetuate those conflicts, not resolve them. Look to history: when people are backed into a corner and despised *en masse* because of the actions of their leaders, they do not turn their backs on each other and their history but band together even tighter. The Taliban rule Afghanistan again after 20 years of US and NATO war and Iranians have maintained their revolution despite 40 years of American sanctions. Above all,

the world has to mobilize to prevent Ukraine from becoming another Afghanistan: a land laid waste by forty years of great power politics. The way to help Ukrainians is to insist on a ceasefire and negotiations, not to mindlessly chant Cold War slogans about godless and heartless Ruskies out the destroy the free world.

Why Universality Matters

Originally posted, 23 March, 2022

No sensible human being can look on at what the Russian army is doing in Ukraine and not be appalled. The strategy has become obvious: major cities will be pummelled from afar by artillery and missiles until Ukrainians submit to Russian demands. Ukrainians, sadly, have become, (as so many other members of smaller nations have become in the past), pawns to be sacrificed in another round of the “great game” of global power-jockeying for geo-political advantage. This case is a particularly egregious example of life being wasted for no tangible political gain for the aggressor. The very ‘security’ demanded by Russia has been undermined by the invasion designed to achieve it. They may eventually bleed some confession of neutrality out of Ukraine, but at the cost of economic and political isolation that will have disastrous consequences for a generation at least.

I have argued in previous posts that the great game operates according to its own morally upside down logic: good and bad is calculated in terms of gains or losses of power, not preservation and development of life. Once the game shifts to a military phase, no one can say how far it will degenerate. No one intended World War One to last four years, and no one could have predicted that World War Two would end with the dropping of atomic bombs. There is no political reason why the war in Ukraine could not end up with a nuclear exchange between Russia and NATO.

That outcome is unlikely, but not excluded by the rules of game. The rules permit great powers to pursue their aims by military means up to the point at which they are stopped by superior military power or the the adversary capitulates. In the present conflict, Ukraine has been left to do the fighting (with an ever-increasing supply of NATO weapons). If media reports are accurate they have inflicted heavy losses on the Russian invaders, but have not been able to stop the relentless shelling. Arms shipments are good for the arms dealers, but any prolongation of the war will prolong the suffering of Ukrainian civilians. If Biden is serious about wanting to serve the interests of Ukrainians, he should be doing everything that he can to to bring about a negotiated solution. However, he has said almost nothing about the on-going negotiations. Amazingly, the “leader of the free world,” he has not even spoken to Putin.

But as amazing as this failure is from a perspective situated outside the fray, it suits his role as “leader of the free world” perfectly. For while America is not party to the actual combat, it is centrally involved in the struggle. Its aims directly contradict the interests of the Ukrainian people. From the standpoint of America-as-great-power, the longer the conflict goes on, the better it is for their relative position in the world. Russia bogged down in Ukraine weakens one half of the Russia-China alliance that is worrying American foreign policy experts. Sanctions on Russian energy increase opportunities for [American energy](#) companies. And of course, arms makers are ecstatic as Europe is on a [weapon-buying](#) binge of historic proportions.

These realities do not square with the good cop, bad cop framing of the conflict in the mainstream media and popular imagination. The viral spread of moral support for Ukrainians and the herd-mentality demonization of all things Russian abstracts from the more unpleasant complexities of global *real politik*. Nevertheless, people are not wrong to reach out in sympathy and solidarity. But unless the moral basis of the identification is understood in its true universality, popular care and concern for Ukrainians risks being captured by Western leaders. On the one hand, they will cynically exploit it to hide the role they have played in creating the conditions for the war. On the other hand, expressed without reflection against all things Russian, it can become an example of the xenophobia and hatred its deeper moral sentiments are supposed to overcome.

I have discussed the geo-political dimensions of the conflict in preceding posts. Here I want to focus on the moral problem posed by the reaction to the war in the West, and in particular the exclusionary and inconsistent valuation of human life it expresses. The Internet is capable of marshalling tsunamis of grief and outrage, but not organizing moral posturing into consistent and coherent criticism. People are rightly horrified and dismayed by the loss of life and the wanton destruction that Russian forces are causing. However, these same forces of destruction have been put to work by NATO and the US across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Eastern Africa for two decades. There was widespread opposition to the 2003 Iraq War, but it soon settled in to become background noise once Saddam had been toppled, even though the Western caused violence to the Iraqi people did not cease. Millions were not raised and borders certainly not flung open to welcome Iraqi refugees.

The war in Yemen, fuelled by American weapons, has not resulted in invitations to Houthi choirs to sing the equivalent of the Houthi national anthem. 400 000 people have been killed thus far and one of the world's poorest countries laid waste by the Saudi intervention into the civil war. Millions of people were killed in the Congolese Civil War: refugees from it and other conflicts in Africa are met by armed EU patrol boats in the Mediterranean and turned back. Last week, the UN reminded the world of the civil war in Ethiopia and argued that residents of the Tigray region were at the [highest risk of famine](#). I have seen no move to boycott Ethiopian restaurants and see no one flying Tigray flags on the cars.

The point: individual people cannot solve all the world's problems by expressions of outrage, no matter how justified. Instead, what they can do is to demand consistent, life-affirming policy from their governments. If a short term response to a conflict demands that other nations accept refugees, then they must accept all refugees from all conflicts. Refugees need *refuge*: consistent and coherent valuation of life responds to the need, not the identity, of the needy person.

Life is not valuable because it is Ukrainian or European. Life is valuable because it is unrepeatable. War is not only wrong when "the enemy" launches it. It is always wrong (but sometimes, according to the logic of geo-politics, inevitable) because it destroys unrepeatable lives. The dead do not rise once victory has been achieved. Typically, their ghosts haunt the living and fuel the next round of historical resentment and hatred.

A morality rooted in life-value affirms as its first principle that all lives, those of friend and enemy alike, are equally valuable. The person who values life does not cheerlead for one side or

another in armed conflict, but demands that the root causes be understood and addressed through negotiations. The person who values life does not insist that people who have no causal power over their government's decisions be erased from the world. The person who fully values life does not demand escalation, support arms shipments, or insist on interventions which would only widen and deepen the conflict and cause more death.

Those who value life have no option but to demand a negotiated solution. Yet— in the surest proof that the US pursues only its own *raisons d'état* and not peace— the US has been [actively working against](#) successful negotiations. The State Department, casually at ease sacrificing Ukrainian and Russian lives, has been encouraging Zelensky to hold out. Suddenly, the 20th century's greatest violator of national sovereignty is concerned with the right to self-determination of nations!

Morality begins with sympathetic resonance to human vulnerability. It begins with feeling, but it must become articulated with critical intelligence if it is to do more than make one group feel morally superior to others. Once it becomes articulated with critical intelligence it can combine appropriate condemnation for unnecessary violence with an understanding of the causes of conflict. It can then understand the causal sequences that lead up to conflict in their full complexity. Once we understand the complex causes of conflict, we can also see that there is never just one responsible party.

The articulation of moral sentiment with critical understanding also allows us to recognize similar situations and distribute our sympathies according to the principle that life is the foundation of value. All people in vulnerable situations require support according to the degree of their vulnerabilities and not according to their geographical location or identity. The expression of sympathy is essential but easy. The work of understanding and changing structures is equally necessary but very difficult.

War: The Real Crime

Originally posted, 21 April, 2022

I have always thought that there was something oxymoronic about the ‘laws of war.’ Is not war itself the ultimate lawlessness? When existing legal principles cannot resolve a dispute, when good faith discussion and negotiation cannot find common ground, the parties to the dispute retreat to their bunkers and hangars and return with the express intention of destroying each other. Not only do they intend each other’s destruction, they actively bring it about. What matter the means, if the end is the death of the enemy and the destruction of their infrastructure of life-support?

The lawyer will respond: the laws of war are necessary to protect civilian life, to prevent atrocities, to ensure proportionality between provocation and response, to limit escalation into wars of global annihilation. But civilian populations cannot be protected, war itself is the atrocity, military calculations once hostilities have commenced will always be conducted in terms of tactical advantage in pursuit of strategic objectives, not constraint and proportionality, and no mere law will prevent conflict-escalation. Words are too weak, Hobbes argued, to constrain the actions of people unconstrained by superior physical power. If those in charge of nuclear arsenals decide that the logic of conflict requires their use, they will be used, the United Nations be damned.

These reflections come to me in the midst of the debate about Russian war crimes in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine. These allegations must be carefully investigated and, if substantiated, the perpetrators must be held accountable. However, those of us who are not war crimes investigators and are not direct combatants have another responsibility: to expose our own government’s hypocrisy when it comes to recognizing and protecting the supreme value of human life.

Since the start of hostilities in Ukraine, the Ukrainian government has been demanding more arms from NATO and NATO has obliged. But pouring arms into the war zone is not the support that Ukrainians need. The more arms that enter into the country, the more destructive the conflict will become and the longer it will last. I suppose if one really prefers death to dishonour the eventual withdrawal of Russian forces after the complete flattening of the country could be regarded as a victory: but who will be left to celebrate it? Zelensky is perhaps not in a position to openly admit what is clearly the case (not only in terms of Ukraine, but throughout US history from the promulgation of the Monroe doctrine): being an ally of the US means signing on to being its sacrificial victim.

The current US administration no more values the lives of individual Ukrainians than Kennedy or Johnston valued the lives of Vietnamese civilians, or Bush and Obama valued the lives of Afghans. Here is the supreme crime of war: it reduces the value of life to an instrumental function of the strategic advantage of the contending powers. We can test this proposition in real

time: not only has the Biden administration not called for negotiations to end the war, they are [openly advocating against negotiations](#). This position was not adopted *ad hoc* in response to the crisis. In 2019 the RAND corporation published a brief: “[Overextending and Unbalancing Russia](#)” which analyzed ways in which Russian power could be undermined by a combination of sanctions, restrictions on export markets for its energy supplies, and encouraging a brain drain of its most talented scientists and youth. Ukraine provided the pretext for implementing *exactly these tactics*.

The number of Ukrainians that will have to die in order to achieve these goals is unlimited, just as the number of Aghanis or Iraqis that had to die to achieve (or, in those cases, fail to achieve) American objectives was unlimited. The violence whereby fellow human beings are sacrificed by the decisions of our government (directly, or in alliance with America) runs deeper than the kinetic force of the shrapnel that kills them. It begins with their dehumanization, their reduction to the status of mere means to the realization of geo-political ends. To be sure, Russia is guilty of the crime of war too, but thinking people have to go deeper into the causes of war as such. If one values life one does not cheerlead conflict or demand that policies be adopted which ensure only more death and destruction.

Life is not valuable because it is cloaked in one national identity rather than another. Those identities are arbitrary historical constructions without ultimate value. 5000 years ago there were no Russians or Ukrainians: who cares about trivial differences of language or dress when lives are at stake? Life is valuable because it is unrepeatable: when you are dead you are dead; you will not be present to reflect upon the glory of your demise either attacking or protecting a rotting steel mill.

One cannot be naive: if invaded, countries have the right to defend themselves. The principle of self-defence is not in question. That which is in question is the motives of my own government as it allies itself to a policy which serves short-term American geo-political interests and sacrifices Ukrainian lives to achieve them. As with all past conflicts we are led to look away from the life-interests that connect human beings beneath differences of national identity and towards childish constructions of friends are good and enemies are evil frames of moral reference.

This simplistic and false frame of reference conditions us to believe that life is valuable only if it is on our side. From there it is a short step towards hatred directed against entire nations. From hatred against entire nations it is another short step towards willing their complete destruction. That is what is happening in Russia vis-a-vis Ukrainians, but it is also what is happening here and in Europe against Russians. There is no moral value in hatred; hatred always leads to greater life-destruction, greater life-destruction to resentment, resentment to the desire for revenge, and revenge attacks to another round of conflict further down the line.

At some point, humanity must break out of this vicious cycle. Nations need to move beyond their list of historical grievances. People need to stop wasting intellect and creative power on inventing new ways of killing. Economies need to be re-oriented towards the production of life-goods. What deeper moral rot could there be in a society than an economy in which growth is achieved by selling the means of death on the false pretext that accumulation of more weapons

systems protects life? The only thing that accumulates is capital, in the bank accounts of corporations far, far removed from the conflict zones where the reality of their products literally blows up in children's faces.

If you support weapons shipments rather than demand peace negotiations, you become party to the crime.

Accumulating Political Capital with Ukrainian Lives

Originally posted 5 May, 2022

If there were any confusion about what value the United States and NATO countries put on Ukrainian lives, it should have dissipated by the Biden administration's admission this week that *its* goal is to use the conflict to [strategically weaken Russia](#). In order to accomplish that goal, Biden is asking Congress to authorize [33 billion](#) dollars of aid (mostly military) so that the war can be prolonged. If the war is prolonged, more Ukrainians will die and more Ukrainian cities will be razed to the ground. If a policy knowingly causes more death and destruction it cannot be coherently defended as serving the interests of the people who will be killed. As with other proxies in its century-long imperial history, the United States is willing to sacrifice an unlimited number of Ukrainian lives in order to achieve its own strategic objectives.

And these objectives are justified by appeal to the right of nations to self-determination!

Nations do have the right to self-determination. Ukrainians, as I have stressed in each of my critical interventions on the causes of the war, have an unquestionable right to protect themselves from invasion. But this right should be exercised intelligently. One must be wary of advice from "friends" like [Liz Truss](#), the UK foreign minister, who encouraged Ukraine to continue to attack Russian territory and argued that the war should not conclude until Russians have been expelled from the whole of Ukraine, including Crimea.

The right to self-determination means that Ukrainians should set their own war aims, but they should be mindful of being used. America and Britain will not be pulverized by Russian artillery, Ukraine will. Two administrations in domestic political trouble see the war in Ukraine as a means of rallying their citizens round the Ukrainian flag. So far, they seem to be succeeding, at least in terms of maintaining [domestic support for the war](#).

As for actually solving domestic problems, the policies being pursued by all sides: Russia, Ukraine, the US, UK, and NATO are making and will make looming economic problems decidedly worse. Inflation will undermine real incomes in the West (making a massive defeat for the Democrats in November mid-terms much more likely), sanctions are destroying the Russian economy, war, the Ukrainian, and pricing foodstuffs out of the reach of consumers in the [Global South](#).

And yet all sides proclaim they are waging a heroic struggle for: de-Nazification! self-determination! the Free World!

Those most under threat, the Ukrainian people, should ask themselves if they really want their government to be a pawn in the US's geo-strategic game. They must ask themselves if they want a needlessly protected war for the sake of the domestic political interests of Joe Biden and Boris Johnson. They must ask themselves if it is in their interests to assist the West in irrationally

prolonging Cold War conflicts with Russia for which there are no longer any political and economic reasons.

I pose these questions in light of the complete loss of momentum towards a peace agreement. A couple of weeks into the war, it looked as though Ukraine and Russia had the framework of a peace deal worked out. The Biden administration was notable only for its silence about the negotiations. [Were they working behind the scenes](#) to actively scupper a deal? No direct evidence emerged at the time, but the latest round of remarks and [high-level visits](#) (Blinken, Austin, and Pelosi) support the conclusion that American officials have been whispering in Zelensky's ear that Ukraine can win.

Like all nations, Ukrainians have the right to defend themselves. However, Ukraine— again, like all countries— has internal divisions. Zelensky has been busy [banning opposition parties](#) that he has deemed to be traitors because pro-Russia. But these parties are not so much pro-Russia as pro-Russian speaking Ukrainian citizens in Donetsk and Luhansk. There was a framework (the Minsk agreements) in place to resolve the civil war that has been roiling since 2014, but Zelensky, under pressure from far-right nationalists (amongst whom there really are [neo-Nazis](#)) refused to implement them. Peace was possible, war is actual.

Given the unending stream of US weapons, highly motivated soldiers protecting their homes, low Russian morale, and world-wide opprobrium directed against Moscow, Ukraine might well one day win. However, the Taliban also “won,” after 40 years of country-destroying warfare. Is that the type of victory most Ukrainians want to celebrate some day in the distant future when— just as the Taliban and the United States did— they negotiate a settlement with Moscow? American [military contractors](#) will find much to like in a scenario of open-ended warfare, as will the American corporations who will no doubt sweep in after the hostilities have concluded to “reconstruct” (i.e. pillage the assets) of the country. But thousands and thousands more Ukrainian lives will have been lost than would have been the case had peace been concluded sooner. Russia will still be there, surrounding Ukraine on 3 sides, still nuclear armed, and still therefore a threat. The US will still be thousands of miles away, have lost no lives and no infrastructure. Its politicians will laud the Ukrainians for being martyrs to the cause of protecting the “free world.” But once there is no more money to be made, their attention will turn to the next country that they need to destabilize in the name of self-determination and democracy.

The Contradictions of Self-Determination: Afghanistan Edition

Originally posted, 18 August, 2021

Almost exactly twenty years after the 9/11 attacks that prompted US invasion, Afghan has fallen to the movement that the US forces attacked to expel: the Taliban. Weepy liberals and hard-headed conservatives have united to denounce Biden's decision to finally and fully withdraw US troops from the country. Always willing to play fast and loose with other peoples lives— those of the poor Americans who make up the foot soldiers of the US armed forces and anyone in the Middle East, Central Asia, or East Africa who happens to be in the way of their grand strategy— both sides of the aisle and the think tanks who live by suckling at the teat of the Pentagon decry Biden's "betrayal" and demand more, more, more war. That any of these people can maintain employ as policy analysts and public intellectuals in the face of the complete absence of connection between their prescriptions and political reality proves that they do not exist to provide sage counsel, as they proclaim, but to justify the astronomical sums that America spends on defence. Too many withdrawals and people will start talking about the "peace dividend" again. (Does anyone remember that vain hope from the end of the Cold War?)

Whatever one's feelings about the plight of ordinary Afghans (and anyone sentient must acknowledge the horror to which they are being and have been subjected now and for the past twenty years), to understand what is happening in the country today one must dispassionately analyze the forces on the ground contending for power. If a well-equipped, Western trained army leaves the field rather than fights only one conclusion follows: the soldiers made a rational decision that the puppet government was not worth dying to support. All puppet regimes face this problem: as long as the imperialist sponsor is there to protect it, enough locals will support it because they need to make a living to give it a veneer of credibility. But when the choice is between death fighting for it or living another day by abandoning it, most will abandon it. If Kabul looked like Saigon in 1975 it is not because the helicopters looked the same, but because the Afghan government had the same degree of political legitimacy as the South Vietnamese government in 1975: none.

Analysts are expressing shock that the Taliban took over in less than two weeks. This reaction must be staged for public consumption. There must have been honest intelligence analysis somewhere that stated what should have been obvious even to the casual but objective observer: the Taliban were the most politically and militarily cohesive force in the country, have roots in the Pashtun areas that make up half the country, and would rapidly win in a fight with a national army that had equipment but not motivation. They were driven from power in 2002 but never defeated. US propaganda reserves to itself the right to define who is and who is not a "real" member of a dominated nation. Locals who support American objectives are called by the name of the nationality, opponents are labelled by the name of the political movement they support. Thus supporters of the South Vietnamese government were Vietnamese, opponents were Viet Cong. Those who supported the American puppet government in Afghanistan earn the right to be called Afghani, opponents are Taliban. But despite these propaganda tricks the members of the

Taliban are not from outer space, they have organic roots in the country. They may not enjoy majority support but there is no way that they could have conquered the country in under two weeks unless they enjoyed some mass support in the Pashtun areas. As in Vietnam, they did not win any battles against American forces, but they have inflicted a massive political defeat on American imperialism.

Western critics of the American pullout are quick to point to the antediluvian politics of the Taliban. They are not wrong that they espouse a reactionary fundamentalist ideology. However, one has to be unconscionably naive to believe that the purpose behind the American invasion was to promote women's liberation and human rights in Afghanistan. Major world powers do not invade for the sake of human rights promotion. The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan was pure *real politik* motivated by the need to remind the world, after the shocking vulnerabilities exposed by 9/11, that America will hunt down and destroy any enemy that dares threaten it. As Doug Bandow has argued, "[endless war advocates](#) ever willing to work with the most brutal movements, like Afghan warlords, and aid the most repressive nations, like Saudi Arabia, became born again human rights activists, with a special emphasis on the status of women, when withdrawal was mentioned. But that isn't why the US intervened. It isn't what Washington emphasized over the last two decades. And it wouldn't cause America to intervene today." Only after the Taliban were dislodged from power did the need for new justifications for continued military operations emerge. Hence the justification of the Afghanistan war morphed from pure revenge and a warning to other anti-American forces in the region to the first "human rights war" of the post-9/11 era (Iraq, Libya, and Syria, would follow in the next two decades, all with disastrous results).

Be that as it may, is it not true that in the wake of the return of the Taliban to power Afghani women will be exposed to the misogynistic violence of the Taliban and that the tentative steps Afghanistan made towards becoming a liberal democracy will be rolled back? The answer to this question leads us into the heart of the contradiction of support for the principle of self-determination.

Whether we like it or not, the nation state has been the dominant political form since the beginning of the 19th century. Struggles by oppressed minorities for their own nation state have been by far the most pervasive mass struggles of the twentieth century. The number of national liberation struggles since the turn of the twentieth century far exceed the number of socialist revolutions. Indeed, for the most part, the struggle for socialism and the struggle for national liberation coalesced in the wake of the Chinese revolution. Unlike Russia, China had been the victim of imperialist (both British and Japanese) adventures and Mao was clear (as are today's leaders of the Chinese Communist Party) that after 1949 the days of China being subordinated to foreign rule and exploitation were over. What followed in the wake of the Chinese Revolution was, I would argue, the most extensive chapter in the history of human liberation struggles. By the time that the government of Rhodesia was overthrown by the forces of ZANU-PF under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, white/European rule was ended in Africa (with the exception of South Africa). India had achieved independence from England, China was ruled by the Communist party of China, and Vietnam had defeated the United States.

Not one of these post-Revolutionary regimes was able to build a stable socialist democracy. For a host of reasons that I cannot examine in detail here, national liberation was not followed by the sorts of social and economic developments that political leaders argued were the material conditions of democracy and socialism. Some of those arguments were true, some were self-serving. Nevertheless, this period of history is the most extensive chapter in the history of human liberation struggles because they put paid to the *racist myth* that the peoples of Africa and Asia were nothing more than the objects of history. Whatever the post-revolutionary failures, the revolutions themselves won. These victories proved two things: imperialism imposed an intolerable burden on its victims, and its victims were social self-conscious human beings, not backward and inferior subhumans in need of American and European tutelage. Whatever one thinks of the ideology of the Taliban, they are part of that history of struggle for self-determination.

I have no truck with politicized religious ideologies of any sort. I continue to be amazed that billions of humans believe nonsense about sky gods, spirits and demons, chosen people, and divine models for human law. I reject all attempts by conservative reactionaries to justify their rule by appeal to purportedly natural limitations on acceptable social roles for different groups of people. I believe that all arguments that some subset of human beings, (in this case, the Taliban's beliefs about women), are by nature fit for only one social role, have been definitively refuted by historical developments. All such naturalistic ideologies have been refuted, ironically, by the very history of struggles for self-determination of which the Taliban are a part.

That irony does not mean that anyone concerned with women's rights and freedoms should support any sort of continued American or Western military presence in Afghanistan. It would be naive to believe the Taliban's reassurances that they have learned their lessons. A spokesperson said that "we move with responsibility in every step and make sure to have peace with everyone... We are ready to deal with the concerns of the international community through [dialogue](#)." It would also be wrong to dismiss this openness out of hand and treat the Taliban as some sort of irrational monstrosity incapable of rational dialogue. The more important point is that those who support women's rights and freedoms presuppose the legitimacy of the principle of self-determination. Women have rights and can live freely because they are human beings, and human beings are distinguished by our capacity to self-consciously shape and steer our own future.

If one supports the principle of self-determination, therefore, one must support the struggle of Afghani women to define their own forms of satisfying life. (One must also support their right to emigrate, if that is what some Afghans choose to do. Western nations must be willing to accept the refugees that twenty years of war has produced). Nevertheless, not everyone will want to leave. If the Taliban are going to impose a form of life that is contrary to the humanity of Afghani women, then Afghani women will have to be the one's to lead the struggle against them. There have already been [small demonstrations](#) in Kabul against the Taliban organized by groups of women fearful of the Taliban agenda.

One might object that if women resist Taliban rule they will be subject to violence. They probably will be, just as women who struggled in Europe and America for their freedom were subject to violence. I do not recall European women calling for invasions to support their

struggles. They regarded themselves as fully capable of overcoming the structures that oppressed them and able to re-define their social roles in ways that befitted their humanity. The same recognition is owed to Afghani women. They are fully capable of deciding how they want to live and defining the social roles that they believe best allow for the full expression of their self-creative human capacities. Those roles might look differently from those favoured by liberal norms, they might ultimately coincide, or they might attain some sort of hybrid equilibrium. What is certain is that no group of humans is free whom others regard as incompetent to determine their own future. If the American military is required to protect the women of Afghanistan, then they will never be free.

What American armchair human rights generals forget is that the American armed forces are violent. Invasion is violent. Bombing wedding parties is violent. Assuming that there is only one satisfying way for women to live is violent. There is no question here of fatuous cultural relativism. Human values are universal. Every human beings ought to be able to access the resources that they need to survive and freely develop. We all have a right to make an active and meaningful contribution to the rules and laws that we have to obey. We should all be able to express ourselves and share our talents in valuable and valued ways with our consociates. We should all feel ourselves to be free subjects in charge of our own lives. However, the concrete ways in which these values are lived differ according to different traditions and histories. The Taliban no doubt stand in the way of all Afghani's fully realizing these values. However, they are also a reminder that life under foreign domination is intolerable and that human beings will resist it. Struggles for self-determination are often self-contradictory. They justify themselves by appeal to the value of self-determination and then deny that very right to other groups within the nation they claim to have liberated. But there is no alternative for those groups oppressed by forces like the Taliban to organize themselves. Solidarity with the victims of repressive governments has to be rooted in respect for their human ability to ultimately solve their own problems.

Death of the Outdoor Cats: An Essay on Obligation

Originally posted, 5 April, 2022

It has been one month since my partner Josie and I have seen Skinny and about three since we have seen Fluffy. Skinny and Fluffy were our names for two feral cats that we fed for the past decade. They had the misfortune— or good fortune, depending on which perspective one takes— to show up in our backyard at the same time as another stray, Jack, whom we ended up taking into the house. Jack had a severed tail. His ailment elicited Josie's greater sympathies. We already had another cat and introducing a second was enough trouble. Four would have been impossible. So Jack came in and Skinny and Fluffy stayed outside.

There is a small community of people who help care for the feral cats of our neighbourhood. Josie learned from them how to build two shelters from packing containers, styrofoam insulation, and straw. We gave them food and water everyday and with the help of our neighbour trapped them once to bring them to the vet. But food, water, outdoor shelter and the brief companionship of mornings defined the extent of our obligation. On the one hand, we kept them alive; on the other, they had to endure some very difficult cold snaps and snow storms. On the one hand, they were denied the access to our home that we extended to other cats over the years; on the other, they were allowed to "live free," as a man we met in Buenos Aires said of the feral cats of Recoleta cemetery.

I miss Skinny and Fluffy, but not in that searing, visceral way one misses a loved one. They were a presence in our lives every morning and we cared about them. However, when the origin of care is a chance encounter, it seems to me that one is free to choose the scope and depth of the caring activity we direct to the other. We were not responsible for Skinny's and Fluffy's having come into the world in general or our world in particular. What ground could there be for the argument that their showing up in our backyard constituted a claim on being adopted?

There are many feral cats in the neighbourhood, more than anyone couple could feed, much less adopt. Ought implies can. Therefore, if one cannot care for everything in need, one is allowed to be partial. Jack seemed more in need because of the trauma he suffered to his tail, and so the choice was made to take him in and limit our relationship to Skinny and Fluffy to feeding and shelter.

Sometimes, particularly when it got very cold, Josie would wonder if we were doing them any favours helping them stay alive. But they kept coming, and that fact seemed to me to communicate a desire on their part to keep going. I fed them almost everyday for ten years, so I built some sort of very limited communicative connection. I do not know exactly what Skinny's meows and Fluffy's hisses meant: cats, like Nagel's bat, remain inscrutable to our attempts at imaginative identification with their inner life. At the very least they meant that they were hungry and were relieved that I was there to feed them. I suppose that if they lost the will to live they could have stopped showing up, but they never did, until now.

Winters would have been harsh, but the summer and fall nights here are long and warm. Perhaps, as our Argentinian acquaintance suggested, they felt free and did not envy our domesticated cats. Occasionally, one or both would wander into to house. The sense of confinement seemed to spook them and they would turn tail and dash out very soon after sneaking inside. We could probably have domesticated them, but would that move have been the correct one?

An important philosophical principle is exemplified in our relationship with Skinny and Fluffy: obligations arise from our needs for each other, but are limited by our capacity to satisfy them. Josie and I could afford to feed Skinny and Fluffy but decided that Jack needed an indoor home more than they did. (Ironically, Jack never lost his desire for living free and he returned to the alleys of the neighbourhood never to be seen again a year or so after he came to live with us). The choice to start feeding Skinny and Fluffy established a dependence on us that generated an obligation to keep feeding them until our circumstances changed or they died. Once established, the bond between us was objective, but because it took shape through a random encounter, we were free to determine its limits.

I think that the way in which a chance encounter ended up generating objective but limited obligations teaches a more general lesson. In a sense, all experience is a random encounter: the world is composed of people, processes, and things which operate according to their own decisions and powers. When we turn on the news we do not know what events we will hear about; when we walk out the door we do not know who we will meet. Any of these encounters could generate obligations, most do not. But in an age of too-close digital interconnection, too many people talk as if every chance encounter with a person in need generates a duty to “do something,” and every becoming aware of an atrocity somewhere generates a duty to “take a stand.” But if one is not in a position to do anything, or one really has no understanding of the issues on which one feels the need to take a stand, the public declarations are empty. Not every stray cat can be fed; our intellects are finite, we do not need to weigh in on every one of the billions of events that happen across the world every day.

Perhaps we ought to modify an aphorism from Wittgenstein: of that which one cannot change and of that of which one lacks understanding, one must stay silent.

Silence is not inactivity or indifference. Silence is the condition of learning. If people only ever talk (post, tweet) how can they ever learn? However, if everyone keeps talking at the same time, no one hears anything at all. Therefore, they never hear something they have not heard before, and therefore they have no opportunity to realize that their perspective is not uniquely true but must be weighed against other perspectives and the truth worked out through analysis and argument.

The world is too noisy with people who shout: “All cats must be fed and housed and loved!” but have no means of realizing the principle and no plan for acquiring them. Better to feed the one cat in your back alley than to lecture everyone about what they *should* do. Others will decide for themselves, on the basis of more detailed knowledge of their situation, what they *can* do.

Public Policy, Individual Responsibility

Originally posted, 27 August, 2021

One of my first published essays (“Socialism, Individuality, and The Public Private Distinction,” *Re-Thinking Marxism*, Vol.12, No.4, 2000) lamented the failure of the Left to protect the idea of individual freedom from being appropriated by the right. As I have argued subsequently in many different contexts, the fundamental institutional goal of socialism is to satisfy the conditions of individual freedom. We do not live our lives as a mass or as mechanical functions of cultural codes: we each have our own senses and brain, which we use to forge our own paths in life. One way of understanding the dehumanizing effects of capitalism is to see how it systematically undermines individuality. It forges a “labour force” out of distinct individuals and distributes employment according to calculations of profitability. It does not care about whether one’s employment satisfies one’s hopes or challenges one’s intellect. Socialism is about overcoming these dehumanizing, de-individuating forces. Its justifying value was not (as Marx made clear) abstract equality. Its justifying value was all-round individual freedom.

Where Marx and the socialist tradition differs from the liberal-capitalist tradition (although left-liberals have learned much from Marx and socialism) is that Marx does not treat individuals as abstract islands of self-interest, but as social beings. However, we must be careful how we interpret this all-important term. What Marx does not mean is that human beings are mere functional units in an organic whole that has value independently of their individual experiences and activities. Libertarian critics of socialism have consistently made the mistake of thinking that socialism treats society as a reified entity above and superior to the individuals whose actions and interactions produce and reproduce it. Socialism does not sacrifice individuals for the sake of a reified “greater good.” Marx explicitly warns that we must not counterposing ‘society’ as a super-individual to abstraction real individuals. Societies and cultures are not organic wholes apart from individuals but the living, emergent product of material and symbolic labour of associated people. New generations are born into societies and inherit their traditions, but those traditions have no value apart from the service they render to existing individuals. When they fail to satisfy our needs for meaning, they are changed.

Libertarians are not the only ones who misinterpret the meaning of social individuality. Some socialists also talk as if values like equality or justice have meaning apart from the contribution that they make to enabling individuals to differentiate themselves and live their own lives. Marx always warned against levelling types of socialism: socialism for him (and his remains the gold standard expression of the values of a socialist society) was a world in which individuals were completely responsible for the people they made themselves to be, *because society furnished them with everything* that they needed to make themselves into the individuals that they became. The goal of the struggle for socialism is to establish collective, democratic control over the sources of wealth and to use it to ensure the all-round satisfaction of our needs, *for the sake of the maximal richness of individual experience, activity, and mutually affirmative relationships.*

Like individual freedom, individual responsibility is a value that socialists should protect from right-wing appropriation. Socialism is not about paternalistic minding of grown adult behaviours.

It is about ensuring that everyone has access to the natural and social resources that they require to assume responsibility for their actions. The on-going Covid crisis gives some practical urgency to these reflections.

We are now coming close to the two year mark of the onset of the global crisis. While responses have varied, every society has, for a longer or shorter period of time, imposed some degree of restrictions on freedom of social interactions. The most extreme have been in China and Australia, where (an obviously futile) eradication strategy has been pursued. The failure of this approach is most evident in Australia, where millions of people are enduring their fifth or sixth lock down as the government employs totalitarian means (including deploying the army in Sydney) in quixotic pursuit of its goals.

Eradicationists point to the lower number of deaths than in countries like the United States and Brazil, where right wing governments have ignored the virulence of the disease (a virulence that has dramatically increased with the emergence of the Delta variant). The astronomical number of deaths in countries that have pursued a libertarian response is objective refutation of the material rationality of carrying on as if everything were the same as in pre-Covid times. Nevertheless, the value of human life is free activity, open horizons of experience, and mutualistic relationship. Life ceases to be worth living if these become impossible (hence the growing acceptance—finally!— of self-chosen medical assisted dying). How long will citizens of China and Australia tolerate being locked down every time there is an outbreak? [Recent demonstrations](#) in Australia show that citizens are increasingly rejecting their government's draconian approach.

Libertarians say that each individual must now assume responsibility for their own health and well-being. The state has no place on the streets and in the cafe's of a free society. Eradicationists respond that the government has an over-riding responsibility to protect the health of its people. The libertarians are wrong because they ignore the fact that individuals depend upon social institutions and social interactions to survive. But the eradicationists are wrong too. Governments do have responsibilities to ensure the health of their citizens. But health must be understood actively and holistically: a healthy life is one filled with self-directed activity and experience. Being imprisoned at home by state fiat might maintain respiratory function, but it is not a life worth living over the long term

However, government responsibility is not total. Individuals have brains and must be allowed to use them: to decide what to eat and how much to drink, whether and how to exercise, what careers to pursue, and so forth. In matters that regard their own lives, Mill is correct: the individual is the best judge of their own interests.

But Covid complicates the line between self-regarding and other regarding action. In normal times, the decision to eat out is self-regarding. But if you unwittingly spread Covid to the waitstaff, who have to be there because they need the money, your free choice costs them their health. So some degree of restrictions on choices that used to be purely self-regarding are warranted. Moreover, if people understand themselves as social beings, as individuals whose well-being depends upon interactions with others, they should willingly accept some degree of on-going limitation.

But more than personal restraint and responsibility is required. [Colin Leys](#) recent article in *The Bullet* rightly argues that sound public policy and investment is needed to manage our future with Covid. We exercise our personal responsibility as social individuals by insisting that governments invest tax dollars appropriately. We need well-funded public education campaigns to combat anti-vaccination nonsense. We need publicly funded elder care facilities, money to pay for adequate staffing levels in hospitals, and for investments to ensure that public buildings like schools and universities have up to date ventilation systems. Workers need paid sick time so that they are not pressured to go to work sick. Mask mandates and occupancy limits are necessary and legitimate restrictions on individual choice. They are legitimate because they *enable* social life to continue by mitigating the spread of Covid. However, once those measures are in place, social authority has done all that it can do, and people must be left to act on their own individual assessments of risk. Some people will choose not to eat out, and that is fine. But restaurants have to be allowed to stay open for those who are less risk averse.

We are past the point where lockdowns on all social interaction are warranted, even if, as appears to be the case, the Delta variant can infect fully vaccinated people. It is now clear (and has been for some time) that Covid is endemic. It will not be eradicated. Therefore, we must adapt to it and live with it. If people are fully vaccinated, they almost never get seriously ill. As I have said before: human beings, like all complex organisms, cannot eradicate disease. Social policies which are premised on the goal of preventing all infections are irrational and increasingly totalitarian. We are under no obligation to be ruled in perpetuity by a Star Chamber of epidemiologists. We need to teach and learn together in shared public space. We have to be free to see our friends at the time and place of our choosing. The purposes of human life are incompatible with total security. *Social* risks ought to be managed and minimized by social authority; *existential* risks define the framework within which human life plays out. They can be eliminated only by eliminating that which makes life human: uncertainty, vulnerability, and mortality. Any further calls for a complete lockdown must be resisted on the grounds of democracy and the value of human life.

That is not to say that restrictions on individual choices are illegitimate. Vaccine mandates are spreading and these are legitimate because they protect everyone's health *at no cost to the vaccinated individual*. Anti-vax positions are not rooted in any credible scientific evidence that the vaccines are dangerous. I think the society-wide, legally enforced universal vaccination would be warranted, but if governments will not force every eligible person to get vaccinated, they had better not try to sell another lockdown should the unvaccinated start to overwhelm ICU's again.

We respect people's choices by letting them suffer the consequences of their actions. If people refuse to get vaccinated and then get seriously ill, they should not be placed at the head of the triage line, as they were in the first 3 waves. There is a readily available alternative to the ventilator: the vaccine. The vast majority of people who have been vaccinated (I am speaking of my own context living in the province of Ontario) cannot be made to suffer for other people's stupidity. We do not close bars because people drink and drive, we charge the individual who commits the offence with DUI. By the same reasoning, we cannot shut down the province again because 15 % of the eligible population refuses a vaccine. If they get sick and die, they have brought it on themselves. If we allow everyone free choice, then we also have to accept that

some choices work out badly, and the person who made the mistake has to bear the consequences.

In any case, it should also be clear by now that lockdowns do not offer a long term solution to Covid. What would a lockdown to slow the fourth wave accomplish other than to set up society for the fifth wave, and the fifth wave a sixth wave, and so on? Either we choose against lockdowns once for all (as the UK has wisely done) as nothing more than a delaying tactic and continue to adapt so that we can live freely with Covid, or we will be in the same boat as the unfortunate Australians who now wake up each morning to see the army positioned in their streets to enforce their imprisonment.

It would appear that even universal vaccination of every person on the globe might not eradicate Covid if the Delta variant can spread to and from fully vaccinated people. Therefore, the on going obsession with case numbers has to stop. If people catch Covid but do not get seriously ill, then there is no social interest served by counting their infection and reporting it as part of the daily sum of cases. The only thing that matters, socially, is the number of cases that require hospitalization. The more people are vaccinated, the fewer will end up in hospitals. Beyond that and the other public health measures discussed above, there is nothing more that can be done. Covid is not going to disappear so we must continue to adapt to it.

Rational Fatalism

Originally posted, 7 December, 2021

In Greek mythology, not even the Gods could control Fate (Moirai). Looming just off the horizon for mortal and God alike was a future that had to be accepted because it could not be avoided. Oedipus knew that he would slay his father and marry his mother. He took every precaution to avoid committing those terrible deeds. However, since it was his fate to commit them, every step he took led straight to his doing that which he was trying to avoid.

Natural science has banished gods from the heavens. The stars are fusion reactors, the constellations fantasy projections of over-active human imaginations. Fate is a superstition. The future unfolds on the basis of past actions; there is no preset outcome towards which we are inexorably drawn. The more we understand the universe, the more we are able to control it; the more our fate, we might say, is in our own hands.

Yet, despite the obvious explanatory power of natural science and the productive power of the technology it has helped create, human beings are still subject to the play of forces beyond our complete understanding and control. This month marks the second anniversary and the beginning of the third year of the Covid pandemic. There are no signs that it is abating, under control, or about to disappear. All the evidence suggests that it will join the pantheon of pathogens with which we have to share space on the planet.

Is there not a lesson here that a rational fatalism can help us understand? On the surface, reason and fatalism are opposed, but fatalism does not have to involve belief in supernatural forces. While our future might not be steered by a personified Fate, it might nevertheless be shaped by a set of causes too complex to ever be fully understood or controlled. We should keep trying to understand them, but we would be guilty of the same hubris that undoes the tragic heroes of ancient myths if we think we can ever fully master them.

That does not mean that we should pluck out our eyes in despair at our powerlessness over the future, as Oedipus did. It means that we must cultivate some humility in the face of the awesome complexity of the causes that shape our future. Our technology enables us to do much, but it does not enable us to do everything. What remains is a zone of receptivity in which we must learn to accept that some problems are intractable and must be borne rather than overcome.

The Covid pandemic has been humbling. A strand of RNA blowing in the wind brought the global economy to a near stand still. It has killed 5 million people and infected more than 250 million. In response, governments have imposed a cycle of lockdowns and travel restrictions which continue in different forms and different intensities to this day. Every time a restriction is imposed it always comes with the same promise: once we flatten the curve, life can return to normal.

Then, about a year ago, a new front opened in the war: vaccines. Their rapid creation seemed a scientific master stroke, the silver bullet that we needed to slay the werewolf of Covid once for all. The mantra shifted from “stay home to flatten the curve” to “get vaccinated in bring this to an end.” But it has not ended. While vaccine hesitancy has been high in some areas, even in countries with nearly universal vaccination rates like Israel, immunity waned and the virus has started to spread again. Not only has it spread, it has mutated. No one knows yet how severe Omicron will be, but Delta has certainly been bad enough.

Governments have returned to the lockdown playbook. But people are increasingly reaching the limits of their endurance. Riots have spread from Australia, to Guadeloupe, to Belgium and the Netherlands. People have had enough. No one but lunatics think that the virus is not real and in some cases (but not many, 1.89 %) deadly. But the protesters are correct: two years in, freedom of social interaction must now become the priority. We should get vaccinated, we should wear masks, we should invest in better ventilation and look for treatments. But we should not lockdown again.

The reality is clear: we have to adapt, because Covid will become endemic. Endemic: part of our *lives*. But life is not just breathing and metabolizing glucose, it is activity and experience. In order to be meaningful and worth living, life requires free social interaction and relationship.

Rational fatalism is rational because it is rooted in the scientific conclusion that the causal nexus from which the future develops is too complex to be fully mastered. It is fatalistic because it concludes that since the future can never be mastered, we must accept that which comes. That which comes will involve suffering and death. Such is the ultimate fate of all people. Like Greek heroes, we have to develop the strength of character to bear reality. Only children believe that every story has a happy ending.

The rulers justify their increasingly militarized response to protest movements against lockdowns by claiming that if we give “the science” (notice how it is always personified, rather like “Moira” in ancient myths) just a little more time, it will tame Covid. But it has been two full years and the virus continues to spread and evolve. By all means, researchers should continue to research, vaccines should be distributed equally across the world, boosters should be boosted, and masks worn indoors. But let us also be blunt: The virus is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and some people will die from it.

It is time to give up the language of heroic battle. It is time to put an end to totalitarian lockdowns and other repressive measures. It is time to live with our fate: Covid will infect people and some will die, just as other pathogens have infected people for tens of thousands of years and will do so for as long as humans are biological organisms.

Mechanical biological functions, respiration and metabolism, do not make life worth living. Each wave of the virus has been met with the same response: lockdown social life, but force people to keep working. The left has been very good at demanding welfare measures to support those who lost their jobs and new protections for essential workers. But Marxists and social democrats alike have completely dropped the ball on the deeper issue: the state does not cease to be a repressive apparatus just because it invokes a public health emergency to justify its repressive measures.

Too many on the left have fallen too much in love with lockdowns and the state power that enforce them.

Lockdowns were initially defensible on grounds of necessity. However, emergencies cannot last into an indefinite future. Vaccines might not prevent all spread, but the evidence suggests that they do prevent serious disease in most cases. Vaccine mandates can therefore be justified, but further repressive measures must be met with politically coherent, organized resistance.

Humans will always get sick. That is the fate that we must rationally accept at this point in the pandemic.

It is time to say “enough!” No more extraordinary measures. No more lockdowns. No more Star Chambers of unelected “experts” deciding what grown adults are allowed and not allowed to do. During the AIDS crisis (which killed at a far higher rate than the 1.89% of Covid sufferers who succumb), the individual’s right to have sex was not suspended. Public health authorities backed by armed police and the military did not legally mandate locks on peoples’ zippers. AIDS patients were treated horribly and homophobia was rampant, but the public health response was to recommend condom use, not a global ban on fun. The majority of people used their own brains and started practicing safe sex.

One might rejoin: but Covid spreads more easily than HIV. Plus, there are a lot of irrational people who refuse to take the necessary precautions. The first point is true, but the evidence suggests that mask wearing is Covid’s condom. Pass and enforce laws requiring masks indoors. What about the vaccine hesitant? Pass vaccine mandates and enforce them. But beyond indoor mask mandates and the wide diffusion of vaccines, the time has come for the state to withdraw from the living rooms, bars, restaurants, and churches of the nation.

Absent free human interaction and open experience in shared spaces, life is not worth living. That principle must be the basis of intelligent adaptation to *life* with Covid.

What's Wrong With Giving Up?

Originally posted, 21 January, 2022

I am not the biggest Monty Python fan, but some performances prove impossible to forget. One such skit is the Black Knight, who keeps fighting until he has been completely dismembered by his opponent. We might say he did not know when to quit.

Those who continue to insist on the need for strict Covid restrictions are our world's Black Knight. If the goal was to eradicate Covid, then the strategy has been chopped to bits. The virus has mutated, evaded vaccines, and cropped up even in those countries like China which have imposed the strictest lockdowns. Australia, which, after China, probably instituted the longest lasting and tightest lockdowns in the world now finds itself facing record case counts following the relaxation of restrictions.

I am sure that there are some scientists in Australia who are arguing today that the relaxation came too soon, especially in light of the higher transmissibility of the Omicron variant and that the soaring case counts make the prior sacrifices all for naught. On the other hand, one might argue in retrospect that the lockdown strategy was doomed from the start and that what we should have done was focus our energies on the most vulnerable, wear masks, but otherwise carry on.

However, the past is only important relative to the future. We can learn from it, but there is no point arguing about should have been done in a moment now behind us.

The justification of the strict lockdowns everywhere, at least initially, was that they were necessary to eradicate the virus. The virus, however, has proven ineradicable. Short of the impossible: a true global lockdown of every person on the planet for an indefinite period of time, Covid seems destined to crop up for the foreseeable future.

Hence the time has come to give up. To stop clanging our swords with Covid. To learn from the Black Knight's struggles in vain against a superior opponent. To save a limb or two of social sanity. The main public danger that Covid now poses is to public mental health. Too many people are preventing themselves from returning to pre-Covid life because of largely groundless fears of contracting the virus. [Leading epidemiologists](#) have argued that the heightened virulence combined with the weakened severity of Omicron means that most people will likely contract- and almost certainly survive- Omicron.

From a rational perspective, there is no point trying to avoid the inevitable- or to fear it, for that matter. In addition to vaccines and new treatments, the world also needs a dose of rational therapy: give up the illusion that Covid can be eradicated, give up the illusion that no one will die from it, remind ourselves that, as the sanitarium director in Thomas Mann's *The Magic*

Mountain said in an unforgettable passage: “we come from the dark, and we go into the dark again, and in between lies the experiences of our lives.” The good of life lies in the quality and range of these experiences. Those who want to willingly deprive themselves of experiences for fear of Covid should by all means be allowed to continue to destroy their lives. They must, by the same token, be prevented from dictating policies that ruin mine (and yours).

The public responsibilities of social self-conscious agents do not include personal guarantees, redeemable by every other individual, that they will refrain from ordinary and necessary activities: working, socializing, entering public facilities, that might inadvertently cause others harm. The lockdown and gathering restrictions that were defensible during the first two years of the pandemic are no longer justified. I would argue that people have a duty to get vaccinated, to wear masks, to stand six feet away from others. But we also have a duty to accept the normal risks of living life as an organism subject to pathogenic invasion. Covid, like all other diseases to which we are subject, is going to continue to circulate, infect some people, and kill some of them. As [Freddy DeBoer](#) asked in an excellent recent essay, beyond vaccinations, mask wearing, social distancing, what more can we possibly and reasonably do to control Covid?

The eccentric and brilliant French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis argues somewhere that secular-scientific societies did not so much give up belief in God as transfer the fantasy that an omnipotent saviour god floats above us, looking out for our well-being, to the fantasy of an omnipotent saviour technology. But just as the imagined god always failed to stop calamity, so too technologies fail to resolve the ultimate existential-ethical problems of human life.

After the goal of eradicating Covid became largely abandoned, the justification for renewed lockdowns became that they were necessary to give people time to get vaccinated. In the Global North, mass vaccination campaigns were rolled out with impressive logistical sophistication. I was never a fan of state-imposed house arrest (which is what lockdowns essentially are) but I agreed that they were justified the first two times that they were enacted. The vaccines, unfortunately, proved to be less effective than originally hoped. The protection they offered against the Alpha, Beta, and Delta variants rapidly waned and they are hardly effective at all against the transmission of Omicron.

Hence, our hope that vaccines would free us from the curse of Covid was dashed.

However, the vaccines have proved efficacious against serious disease. Science has not and will not eradicate Covid, but it has, in the words of [Devi Sridhar](#), Chair of the Department of Global Public Health at the University of Edinburgh, “defanged it” through a combination of vaccines, emerging treatments, and mitigation measures like indoor masking.

The problem now is lingering irrational fears about a virus that is deadly to the elderly and those with pre-existing conditions but not to the general population. When I say it is time to give up, I do not mean it is time to do absolutely nothing to mitigate spread, but time to give up restrictions on public life and the irrational motivations that keep them in place in some areas. No one has to go to a bar, restaurant, theatre, or gallery. Those who do not feel comfortable in those venues should not attend. But their reticence can no longer be the norm. The rest of us cannot be ruled any longer by others’ unreasonable fears.

As Dr. Sridhar argues:

“This is part of a larger question about how much we continue to alter what “normal” social relations are, given the circulation of Sars-CoV-2. Humans are social: we need to hug, dance, sing and recognize each other’s faces and smiles. A sense of community and connection are vital to wellbeing too. Public health is not about one disease; it is broadly about wellbeing, which includes mental health and being able to pay the rent, feed your family, stay warm through winter and have a meaningful role in society.

Slowing the spread of Sars-CoV-2, even stopping it completely in certain countries, helped save lives. It allowed two transformative antiviral pills to be made available. It allowed doctors to develop better ways of treating patients, and to understand what we’re facing. It allowed a better understanding of transmission and risk.

But now, two years into this pandemic, we need to find a better way of living alongside Sars-CoV-2 using the tools we have. We have created ways to minimize the impact of Covid-19. And now is the time to start to recover and heal as a society and move forward, treating this virus like we do other infectious disease threats.”

I have been making the same sort of argument, from a philosophical and not scientific perspective, for over a year. We cannot have a society worth living in if both broad sections of the public and politicians continue to panic every time there is a Covid outbreak. Neither our absent gods nor our impressive but limited technological-medical powers can save us from becoming ill– if not of Covid, of something else. Choosing life means choosing living, and all living comes with risk.

The aggregated mortality rate of Covid-19 in Canada since the beginning of the pandemic is approximately 1.3% (31 837 deaths out of 2 822 614 total cases). If one were to disaggregate the deaths according to age and co-morbidities, the death rate for healthy children, adolescents, and adults would shrink to insignificance.

And yet there are still members of the general public and some scientists and politicians who are acting as though Covid is the Black Plague.

It is not, and it is now time to stop acting as if it is going to kill everyone.

It will not.

Choose *living*.

Critique, Don't Cancel!

Originally posted 12 October, 2021

Once again, I feel the need to intervene on recent controversies in which the repressive and regressive tactics of self-styled progressive activists are placing them on the wrong side of history and in the service of a constricted, suffocating vision of an emancipated future. The (strangely, perhaps) intertwined controversies engulfing Sussex University Philosophy Professor Kathleen Stock and superstar comedian Dave Chappelle emphasize the need for progressive activists to re-learn the political history of censorship and to re-embrace a spirit of comradely critique, and eschew once for all reactionary-totalitarian cancel culture.

Historically, totalitarian movements have been the ones to demand complete unity of opinion and expression. They know full well that such a goal is impossible to achieve, so they have exiled, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered dissidents. *That is the primary reason why freedom of thought and speech is a non-negotiable left-wing demand.* The left has had its flirtations with maniacal group-think- The Cultural Revolution in China perhaps being the most extreme example. And while the treatment of Stock has not yet reached those levels, the walls do seem to be closing in on her.

This morning I was forced to read a shockingly backward intervention from her own [Union](#) local which calls upon the University to uphold its commitments to create safe spaces for trans people, *while failing utterly to defend their own member from organized anonymous threats from the self-identified trans activists demanding her dismissal.* This letter is the most shameful abdication of responsibility to protect a member's academic freedom that I have ever read. It explicitly criticizes the Vice-Chancellor's defence of Stock's academic freedom. The letter argues that there should be no contradiction between trans rights and academic freedom— and there should not be. But there very definitely is a contradiction between academic freedom and the way Stock is being treated by the anonymous mob of trans activists threatening her, *and the union is doing nothing to protect her.*

The letter tepidly adds that they do not think Stock should be fired, but its whole thrust is to re-iterate the false accusations that she is some sort of dangerous transphobe upon which the demands for her dismissal are being based. The letter is the most shameful pandering imaginable to an anonymous mob which refuses to argue and instead begs the established powers to fire a worker— and then presents themselves as an alternative to established power!

Alisdair MacIntyre joked, in his book on Marcuse, that the 1960s student rebellions in the United States were the world's first parent-financed revolution. Today we have the even more absurd spectacle of self-styled radicals asking the bosses to advance the cause of social freedom. And the Union is on board!

The members should remove this leadership immediately. They have shown themselves unwilling and incapable of fulfilling the basic duty of officers of a union to defend the members. If Stock is unsafe then no one is safe. Those who have read her book will understand that she is

not transphobic and does not demand that anyone be erased from history. She disagrees with some political demands made by some sectors of the trans movement because she argues— as is obvious— that females have faced unique forms of oppression as females (hello Texas attacks on abortion). Since there are female specific problems there is still a need still a need for organization and mobilization as females. None of these arguments have any negative bearing on the rights and interests of trans people.

If some sectors of the trans movement nevertheless believe that Stock's argument is wrong and harmful, then they should by all means make that case loudly, but through counter-argument, not reactionary demands for the bosses to fire her. Academic freedom is not the right of academics to say anything they want. It is a collective right to conjointly search for the truth through the process of dialogue and constructive disagreement. There can be no prior constraint (much less politically correct pre-determination) on what is true or false, but only a commitment to advance the search through reason and evidence. Where good faith arguments are offered- and Stock's is obviously a good faith argument- good faith criticisms must be offered in return.

Stock's accusers have failed in their duty as students and academics to constructively engage the issues that she raises in favour of childish name calling and threats. If she is wrong, prove her wrong: she is a philosopher, and an English one at that, so she will be well used to people having an hard argumentative go at her. But to align one's self with the bosses power to dismiss is as backward a move for the left as can be imagined. If you don't like disagreement join a cult or a fundamentalist religious movement. Otherwise, make a better case than your opponent or concede the point.

The Chappelle controversy is less serious in so far as he is in no danger of losing his livelihood. But the same political problem and the same political solution is at its heart. I am a fan of Chappelle and I laughed long and hard at *The Closer*. I was certainly made uncomfortable by some of the jokes (especially the jokes that cut to the heart of white racism— I don't think I am a racist, but I am part of a white world that is, and none expose that tension better than Chappelle). Chappelle's *sh tick* is to telegraph that something outrageous is coming, pause a moment, just long enough for the audience to think that he is going to back off, and then hit a punch line is even more outrageous than the audience expected.

Not everyone finds it funny. Some find it hurtful. But we cannot ban artistic expression just because some find it hurtful. There would be no art left. Do we ban the Bible because some Jews see in it divine sanction to expel Palestinians? Do we burn the Gospels because some Christians have misinterpreted its message to justify violence against non-Christians? Do we put the Dharmapada on the Index because some Sinhalese interpret Buddhism in a way that justifies their war against Tamils? Do we knock down the pyramids of Teotihuacan because virgins were thrown off of them in acts of ritual sacrifice. On and on and on we could go.

Humour does not cause violence, just as heavy metal music did not cause America's teenagers to become suicidal or murderous satanists, as Tipper Gore and other backward church ladies argued in the 1980s.

Enough!

If you do not like Chappelle's humour, criticize it, as those who disagree with Stock should criticize her. The trans comedian [Dahlia Belle](#) did just that in a recent piece in *The Guardian*. It is a model for how people— academics, artists, people on the street— should deal with disagreement: expose the problems with the other person's position and demand (and provide) better. Belle understands that the progress of any art depends upon criticism. She takes Chappelle to task for telling weak jokes. Whether one agrees with her or not, the point is, that coherent agreement and disagreement is possible, because she makes an argument, which is more— shamefully- that can be said for the executive committee of the University and Colleges Union at Sussex University.

The struggle against oppression is complex and people will disagree about strategy and tactics. But the struggle against it is for the sake of a free world, a world where differences proliferate and people get along. But getting along does not mean that we all agree, or even like each other. It means that we do not kill each other because we are different. Philosophy and comedy challenge and provoke, but killing begins where they end. Leave the re-education camps to the fascists, please.

Fragments for a Wednesday Morning in January

Originally posted, 5 January, 2022

Academic Freedom Under Threat Again?

News is slowly trickling out of Alberta that Associate Professor Frances Widdowson has been fired by Mount Royal University. According to the President of the University, Widdowson was fired for creating a “toxic work environment.” However, there is serious concern that Widdowson was fired because of her long standing and vocal criticisms of Indigenous governance, political movements, and Indigenization policies at Mount Royal and across Canada. I have not read her work (only the controversies that it has generated) and have seen no detailed account of the precise details that led to her dismissal, so I will keep my comments general.

I know from over twenty years of work in my Faculty Association, including a two year term as President and two years on the grievance committee, that often there is more to dismissals that meets the eye and people are wise to withhold drawing firm conclusions until all the facts have been publicly released. The Mount Royal Faculty Association has grieved the termination (which is a vast improvement from the performance of the Universities and Colleges Union in the UK regarding the harassment of Prof. Kathleen Stock). However, the fact that the parties are in arbitration means that there is a paucity of information. I have not heard anything specific from the Canadian Association of University Teachers. CAUT was born in order to defend academic freedom and has consistently stood up to protect it. I have confidence that if there are academic freedom issues here, CAUT will mount the appropriate critical response.

While awaiting the details we should keep in mind why academic freedom is indispensable to universities, and why “toxic workplace” programs are a serious threat to workers of all sorts. Let us treat the last problem first.

People have different personalities. People have different political beliefs. Not only do we not love one another (sorry Jesus) we do not like everyone, and not everyone likes us. Social life and social institutions have to allow for people who may not like each other, who may actively dislike each other, to work together. The only legitimate grounds for dismissal should be non-performance of duties over a sustained period and backed by objective evidence. People are not paid to harass and harangue their colleagues, so a pattern of vituperative abuse of colleagues that prevents them from doing their job can be grounds for termination. But vague terms like “toxic work place environment” and testimony that focuses on nothing more than peoples feelings give bosses too much power and expose all workers to the danger that they will be the victims of mobbing, organized slander, and scheming to have them fired. Unions do a profound disservice

to their members when they allow parallel disciplinary procedures outside of the Collective Agreement to take root.

Everyone is beautiful to themselves and their mom. But everyone is also an asshole to someone else. Ask not, therefore, for whom the toxic workplace bell tolls. Someone, somewhere, is tolling it for you.

If there is an academic freedom issue in play (and it is hard to imagine that there is not) an appropriate response has to start from a clear understanding of the purpose and value of academic freedom. Too often academic freedom is treated as being identical to free speech, and academic freedom cases evaluated in terms of whether or not the speech in question should be protected. But academic freedom is not identical to free speech. It is a collective institutional right of academics to teach and pursue and publish research without deference to any religious, cultural, disciplinary, administrative, or political authority *of any sort*. Quite simply, universities cannot exist without academic freedom.

Universities are not transmission belts for traditions and orthodoxies of any kind save the traditions of intellectual inquiry in all fields of human experience and knowledge. Because human beings are not omniscient, our knowledge develops historically, through trial and error and *argument*. There can be no growth of knowledge without argument and no argument without disagreement, sometimes very sharp disagreement, and over fundamental issues. For centuries universities *were* transmission belts for religious orthodoxy. Intellectuals who insisted on freedom of inquiry were burned alive, as Giordano Bruno was burned alive in 1600, or exiled from their community, as Spinoza was expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam. And it was not only outliers who were in danger. St. Thomas Aquinas was accused of heresy, but in his case, the charges did not stick. The line between public immolation and canonization is very, very thin.

No one knows the whole truth. No position is so pure that there can be no grounds for criticism. Aristotelian physics ruled the Arabic and Christian worlds for a millennium and it was, as physical science, totally and utterly wrong. Knowledge can only grow and develop if there is absolute freedom of inquiry, argument, and criticism.

But inquiry, argument, and criticism is not “speech.” Speech is the genus, academic freedom— inquiry, argument, and criticism- is the species. Academic freedom protects the rights of academics to melt down all sacred cows, but it does not confer an absolute right to say anything anyone feels like saying. It protects even the most controversial scholarship provided that appropriate methods of evidence and argument are demonstrably followed. There can be no confession of faith, literally or figuratively, required of academics. If colleagues and students do not like controversial conclusions, they are free to argue against them, in both scholarly and public fora. But mass petition campaigns to have academics fired or attempts to boycott academic presses who publish controversial work – as has happened in the case of Widdowson- are unacceptable violations of academic freedom which will destroy the university institution if they are allowed to succeed.

And the politically virtuous amongst us should keep in mind that attacks on academic freedom are more often than not directed against the left by the right. We need look no further than legislative bans across the US South on the teaching of critical race theory to see the ill effects of mixing self-righteousness and learning. If you do not like your beliefs being challenged, academia is not for you: start a podcast and talk to your friends. The life of the mind is a life of intellectual conflict.

Not You Again!

I awaken to what this morning? Not a lockdown, exactly: Ontarians are still free to leave our homes, thanks be to God (er, the Ontario Science Advisory Council), but more restrictions (piled on top of the earlier round of restrictions imposed just before Christmas), one year after a full lockdown, which itself followed about one year after the first lockdown). Are we sensing a trend here? I won't repeat the various arguments (and kvetching) that I have made before, but surely I cannot be the only person bothered by that fact that as we move into the third year of Covid, we are still pursuing an essentially reactive policy. I do not mean that we should be able to anticipate mutations: all life involves reactions to unforeseen particularities. I mean that we should have been working on ways to mobilize more medical and hospital resources so that when a wave crashes down upon us, we do not need to frantically shut everything down.

There is no such thing as a medical emergency that goes on for three years. Crises that go on for three years are social, not epidemiological. After three decades of underfunding our public health care system was woefully unprepared for the pandemic, *and nothing has been done to expand capacity more than two years into the pandemic*. Hence with each wave the best the scientific advisory panel can do is to sell the need for a new round of restrictions on public life. Once again, the restrictions primarily target institutions and spaces where people gather to enjoy life and celebrate the powers and riches of human creativity: private homes, bars and restaurants, performance spaces, theatres, galleries. Perhaps if we ask kindly and promise to keep walking around the living room the scientist-priests will permit us to have 6 people in our homes rather than five. After all, their superior intelligence has decided that it is ok for thousands of people to keep wandering around malls.

This Could Be the Last Time.

The latest wave of the pandemic has been met in Canada with typical passive aggressiveness. In the US, it has been met with typical schizophrenia: half the country simply carries on as if Covid does not exist, the other half tries more sober and sane mitigation strategies. The result: over one million cases on Tuesday, January 4th.

Wow.

Clearly, social life cannot just carry on as if Covid did not exist. However, slowly, finally, new thinking is beginning to emerge amongst infectious disease experts. Since Covid is unlikely to disappear, we must learn to live with it. The accordion song of lockdown and open up must end. This tune has not lulled Covid to sleep and won't in the future.

Social life cannot be devoted solely to the protection of biological functioning. Biological functioning is the precondition of leading lives worth living, not worthwhile living itself. The value of life is realized in the content of experience and activity. Societies have to invest in institutions and resources that ensure health, but health is only one dimension of valuable lives.

Ask yourself if you would agree to be born into the following scenario: Immediately post partum you are connected to monitoring devices and nutrient input systems. Every internal system is regulated to ensure optimum nutrient levels and chemical balances are maintained. Lest any accident befall you, you never leave the hospital bed but spend your days living in the total security of constant monitoring. You never break a bone, you never get into a car accident, you never get sick. Let us say that you can live three hundred years in this environment. Would you accept it?

Who would accept a life without thought, language, touch, laughter, music, art, exploration, or challenge of any sort? All risk would be eliminated, but at the cost of all *living*. We have reached the point where living in three dimensions must resume. It must resume with precautions and reasonable adjustments, but we have to start eating, drinking, creating, and learning together once again. If you are frightened of Covid, then just meditate on the thought experiment above.

No one would desire total total security if they thought through clearly what it would actually entail.

As Hank Williams once sang, “No matter how I struggle and strive, I’ll never get out of this world alive.”

Being born is also a death sentence. Let us struggle and strive to mitigate Covid, but it is here and not going anywhere. We have no choice but to live with it.

Concluding Scientific Post-script.

No one would should take medical advice from a philosopher (and I mean that seriously). So take it from medical doctors.

Let’s begin with [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#). He replied to criticisms of the updated CDC isolation requirements by reminding Chicken Little critics that whether they like it or not, living involves risks.

“So you either shut down the society, which no one wants to do, or you try and get a situation where you can safely get people back, particularly to critical jobs, without having them be out for a full 10 days, so long as they are without symptoms.” He went on: “I think what people need to understand — there is risk in everything when it comes to SARS-CoV-2. That’s just the reality. Some people think if you do this, there is no risk. There’s a risk to everything.”

Former CDC director [Dr. Robert Redfield](#) recently made essentially the same argument:

“This virus will be with us for the duration. We have to learn how to live with it... I’ve always felt that we need to look at situations and see how to do them in a safe and responsible way,” he said.

“As CDC director, I never advocated shutting down schools. It wasn’t in the interest of the kids K-12. We have to learn how to keep them open in a safe and responsible way. That’s the way I feel now. One of the things we can do is expanded access to testing.”

Let us hope governments, teachers, and university administrators get the message: education requires real time and space social interaction; it *is* social interaction.

I will leave the last word to [Dr. Andrew Pollard](#), chair of the Oxford Vaccine Group that created that AstraZeneca vaccine:

“We can’t vaccinate the planet every six months. ... The worst is behind us and the world just needs to get through the winter ... At some point, society has to open up. ... When we do open, there will be a period with a bump in infections, which is why winter is probably not the best time.

That which one cannot change one must endure (so said the cowboy in Brokeback Mountain). We cannot change the reality of Covid; I cannot change the reality of these latest restrictions.

But this has to be the last time living and learning spaces are closed down.

Social Democracy Meets Capitalist Reality

Originally posted, 9 October 2021

The contradictions in the contemporary Democratic Party are percolating to the surface during the debate over the [Build Back Better Act](#). Biden's tepid by comparison infrastructure bill is being held up by the social democratic wing of the party that has coalesced around Bernie Sanders but whose most articulate spokespeople are Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar, Cori Busch, and Pramila Jayapal. They have already started down Nancy Pelosi and the democratic establishment, wisely preventing separate votes on the infrastructure and Sanders' bills. They know that if they pass the first, Sanders' bill is doomed. Standing in the way of the passage of Sanders' bill is a united Republican Party and two right wing democratic senators, Joe Manchin and Kristen Sinema. Mainstream journalists love to track the day to day of political intrigue, but understanding the conflict demands that we dig beneath the drama to the social forces at work.

There is a naive view of public policy that sees it as a dispassionate, technocratic response to social problems. There is a partisan view that sees it as an arena of competition between different political parties vying for votes and power. The truth is more comprehensive. There is a technocratic element to public policy and the partisan dimension is obvious, but both play out within a framework of social structures and forces. Those structures and forces determine how problems are framed and defined and they also limit the range of options possible *under the given set of structures and forces*. The total set of possible solutions to a given problem is not mechanically determined by the existing structures and forces, but some solutions are only possible if the structures and forces are themselves changed. In order to understand conflicts such as the one playing out within the Democratic Party, we need to understand what sorts of constraints capitalist structures and forces put on public policy.

The basic structure of capitalist society is defined by private ownership of universally needed life-resources, competitive markets for labour and raw materials, competition between producers and retailers over relative market share, locally, nationally, and internationally, and a sovereign state with authority to determine the legal and policy frameworks within which competition takes place. Since the function of the state is to ensure social reproduction, and the capitalist form of social reproduction demands that firms are profitable, the general tendency of state policy is to satisfy the demands of business for laws and regulations that maximise their profitability.

But there are countervailing tendencies at work in states with liberal democratic political systems. Firms make profits by exploiting labour (paying less in wages than the value of the goods that labour produces). Since firms compete with each other for market share, each faces pressure to produce more efficiently than the others (to produce more value in the same amount of time). Hence there has been a tendency (slowing recently) towards increasing the productivity of labour. As labour productivity increases, the size of the surplus that different social groups can fight over becomes larger.

Imagine a simple example. In society 1, labour produces 10 dollars of value for every one dollar expended on it. In society 2, labour produces 100 dollars of value for every dollar spent. In a capitalist society, the ruling class, which owns the means of production and purchases labour power will struggle to appropriate all 9 or 99 dollars for themselves. Workers, who depend upon wages for their means of life, will be motivated to re-appropriate as much of that 9 or 99 dollars for themselves as possible. In liberal democratic societies, where different social interests and forces are able to elect political representatives, the state becomes a new site of struggle over the social surplus. The more that there is to fight over, the more important state power becomes. Since states have the right to tax, they have the power to redistribute income from capital to labour, or protect capital from workers' struggles, (in actual conditions, they do both, depending on the relative strength of the opposed forces). What is playing out in the United States today is thus not first and foremost a struggle between the right and left of the Democratic Party, or even a struggle between the Democrats and Republicans, it is a struggle over the surplus generated by the exploitation of labour playing out in the political arena.

Why are these structural considerations important? I do not mean to suggest, as some dogmatic socialists might, that the struggle to reform capitalism is pointless because of the constraints that private ownership of the means of production, competition, and market forces generate. Those constraints are real, but they are not mechanical determinations on what is possible. Reforms that re-appropriate resources, channelling them from profits to public spending, both improve peoples lives in the short term, and can also open up future possibilities for deeper structural changes which might have appeared impossible before that reform was achieved. In 1790, legal trade unions seemed to be an impossible goal because the full weight of ruling class and state power was set against their organization. Political persistence eventually changed the law, unions were formed, and over the next century succeeded not only in raising real wages (a feat that most classical political economists regarded as structurally impossible) but also helped democratize the work place, by giving the collective of workers some say in the organization of production (via collective bargaining).

But the history of trade unions also reveals why it is important to understand the pressure that structural constraints exert against reformist policies. So long as there are classes there will be class struggle. So long as there is class struggle there will be push back against reforms which, from the capitalist perspective, stray too far into their ownership and control of life-enabling resources and the profits that accrue to them through the exploitation of labour. The structural constraints that I referred to above are not a mechanical-physical force, they are defined, ultimately, by the class interests of the capitalists. Where labour productivity and profits are high, capitalists are willing to allow some re-distribution through taxation, both for the sake of dampening workers opposition and because they too drive on roads, flush their toilets, and turn on the lights. These public goods must be paid for, and taxation is the source of the state revenues which pay for public utilities.

But when profits are threatened capitalists will push back: not because they are greedy (although they might be) but because they will go out of business if they cannot turn a profit. Thus structural constraint and class interest coincide: capitalists push back because their businesses are threatened, but their businesses are threatened because profitability is a condition of survival in capitalist society.

That which applies economically also applies politically: where there are opposed class interests, these will be represented in the political arena. The United States is unique in the western world for not having had an active mass workers' party for most of the twentieth century. Since the end of the Great Depression and the New Deal, the Democrats have positioned themselves as the party of working Americans, but they were not and still are not a social democratic party in the European mold. European social democratic parties, for all of their problems, were originally the political expression of the workers' movement: mass parties whose membership was overwhelmingly working class and which fought for reforms which (so their main theorist, Eduard Bernstein hoped) would generate an evolutionary dynamic that would lead to socialism. The absence of a social democratic party for most of the twentieth century has generated an amusing historical irony: while workers everywhere else have become disillusioned with social democratic parties because of their repeated betrayals, America is the only place where social democratic ideals are generating excitement, because there has been no party to fail to live up to promises.

Sanders' two primary runs brought a much needed jolt of creative youthful energy into the Democratic Party, but also a certain naivete about the party's history and class allegiances. As is now par for the source with today's left, Manchin and Sinema are subject to abstract, moralistic critique for their positions, but the structural forces that underlie their opposition are ignored. If Manchin and Sinema were not opposed to the Build Back Better bill, someone else would be. And even if there were no political opposition, capital would be opposed, and it is never without the power to fight back. Capitalists are under no obligation to invest in one place rather than another, or invest in the real economy rather than speculate on exotic financial instruments, or invest at all ([Venezuela](#) was largely undone by a capital strike in which businesses refused to invest which, combined with sanctions, led to shortages and hyper inflation). Progressive Democrats need to worry about those sorts of responses more than Manchin and Sinema, because the long term future of their movement will depend upon showing tangible results to working people.

The weakness of any reform movement that does not address the underlying source of social power of capital is that it leaves its opponents alive to fight another day. If the Republicans seize control of the House and Senate next year, then they can repeal those features of the act that they find most contrary to the spirit of capitalist enterprise. The only way that reforms can be secured long term, short of revolution, is to make them so popular that no party who promises to repeal them can be elected. Public health care in Canada and the UK is an example. Despite repeated electoral victories of right wing parties, none dare dismantle public health care (although they do cut here and there and fail to invest adequately). None dare because they know that they would be unelectable if they vowed to eliminate public health care in favour of a re-privatised system. Obamacare has survived for analogous reasons in the US: despite its limitations and flaws, it works for the tens of millions of people that it helped insure.

However, in order to enter into the public mind as a good no longer open for negotiation or repeal, a policy must be first enacted. Progressive forces in the Democratic Party have to push a maximalist line *up to the point where the choice is compromise or failure*. To come away from this conflict with nothing would be fatal to their cause, because they will be painted as ideologues who cannot get anything done. The choice at this point in time is not between reform

or revolution but between reform or no reform. It is easy to overplay one's hand but much more difficult to raise the political capital to sit down at the table again. They need to expend their energies building mass support for the policies in the bill, not engaging in social media stunts that get clicks but do not build a movement.

Freedom, Determinism, and the Persistence of Unreason

Originally posted, 11 July, 2021

I read an [article](#) last week that posed the problem of how to assess the relative weight of objective as opposed to subjective factors in the determination of individual action. The article focused on the Black conservative interpretation of the role of character and culture in the persistence of racism. The article is worth reading for the political insights it offers, but what struck me was the clear way it posed what I regard as *the* problem of social philosophy: do external, objective dynamics determine individual behaviour, or are we self-determining? Unless we can answer that philosophical-scientific question it seems impossible to settle the practical matter of knowing when individuals are the cause of their decisions (and therefore blameable)

Those who know my work might be surprised that I would pose this problem as a question, since from the very beginning of my career I have examined historical events as the product of individuals being brought together by objective circumstances but *deciding* to respond to them in one way rather than another. That is, I have followed Hegel and Marx and argued that individual (and collective) action is a product of a reciprocal or dialectical interaction between objective (structural and dynamic) conditions and subjective (interpretative, evaluative) assessments.

The article made me wonder about whether the dialectical synthesis actually explains anything, or just provides a description that seems to cohere with experience but leaves the deepest scientific and philosophical problems unresolved. Let me explain by examining the two poles that the Hegelian-Marxist approach attempts to reconcile. On the one hand, human beings are organisms that exist within nature and are subject to the same causal forces as impact every material being. Our brains no less than our arms and legs are material systems and their functioning therefore cannot escape the laws that govern the behaviour of all material systems. Think of how much of our life depends upon quote general physical conditions: (blood) pressure, heat, hydration.

Everyone (who is not completely irrational) will admit that this claim is true as regards the general parameters within which human life unfolds. I have yet to meet a skeptic about the reality of human organic needs willing to put a bullet in their head to prove that all needs are socially constructed. Yet, despite the hourly proof that our technologies provide that the natural scientific account of the basic elements and forces of the world is an accurate (although incomplete) account of how they function, the belief persists, and not only amongst the religious, that human beings are *both* acted upon by to those forces *and* nevertheless ultimately free to choose how they act. In this view, freedom is not simply the power to add to the causal factors that determine action, but to somehow escape the chain of causes altogether. If the scientific account of nature is true, and we are natural organisms, then it is difficult to see how that belief can be true, even if the reasons why we form it are evident.

The persistence of that belief is rooted in our experience of ourselves. When we reflect on our decisions we do not always find some immediately preceding cause that mechanically determines us to decide one way rather than another. Sometimes we do (most people will obey a man waving a gun in our face, because we react instinctively to threats to our life). Nevertheless, most often we (in effect) “stop” the instinctual drive and think things over. Somewhere in the conversion of external physical forces to internal electro-chemical signals to intellectually and emotionally meaningful units of information a space seems to open up where one’s “self” appears. One of the most important philosophers of mind of the twentieth century, Daniel Dennett, warns us against Cartesian illusions: according to Dennett (in *Consciousness Explained*) there is no substantial self but just distributed brain functions. Be that as it may, there sure is a phenomenological self that appears to “do the deciding” as George Bush might say.

The world-interpreting self seems to make a conscious decision backed by reasons that are distinct from mechanical forces. If I knock the coffee cup next to me in just the right way, it will fall over and spill. But if you emotionally “push” different people in the same way, they will respond differently. How can that be unless there is some self that is not totally determined by objective forces? We praise the person with self control and blame the ill-tempered. But ought we?

Determinists will say no. The self-composed person is not better than the rage-o-holic. The only difference is that they have been subjected to different experiences. No doubt, they capture part of the truth. But can we really reduce character evaluation to experience assimilation? On the other hand, if we want to retain a space for meaningful evaluation of people’s actions, then we require what seems scientifically impossible: an account of how exactly the free, deciding self emerges from the casual networks in which all material systems operate.

The lingering philosophical problem, which I have certainly never solved, is to explain how that space for choice emerges in the transformation from energy to symbolic information. Terrence Deacon provides the best account I have read (*The Symbolic Species*) of how the sense of human freedom depends upon the fact that we interpret rather than simply respond to an environment. Nevertheless, even there the moment of transition from raw information to meaningful wholes remains a black box.

Determinists understand part of the problem— the causal networks— quite well. However, they seem to leave out what has always struck me as the most important— and most philosophically difficult— part of the puzzle. Unlike other material systems, even computers, human thinking interprets and evaluates the world, and not only in crude survival terms. A neural net can be trained to “make” decisions by assigning weights to different outcomes and the recursively re-programming itself in light of the feedback it registers. Even if human beings make decisions in this way, the fundamental difference between our decisions and those of a neural net are that our interpretations of the world are not functions of (instinctual) programming.

Unfortunately, the best examples to illustrate the freedom of our interpretations from survival instincts are instances of deliberately irrational behaviour. We have a paradigm case in front of us at the moment: vaccine hesitancy amongst people at almost no risk of the known side-effects. If rationality is, in the most basic terms, the ability to make decisions in light of the best available

evidence, then the rational thing to do is to get a vaccine. Two doses of the available vaccines provide almost 100% protection against serious disease, slow its spread, and thus also prevent more mutations.

But people who refuse the vaccine do not assess the evidence in this impartial way. They see it through the screen of libertarian philosophy, suspicion about central governments, or unscientific conspiracy theory. One could reconstruct the steps by which people assimilate those ideologies but what one cannot reconstruct is how people convince themselves of their truth, when they are not supported by evidence. The beliefs seem formed “free” from the influence of material reality, but at the same time are threats to the health and well-being of the individuals who hold them and the societies to which they belong. The irrationality seems “freely chosen.” They are not immediate reactions to an unexpected situation, they are, in a sense, thought out. They can articulate their “reasons.” But the reasons are unhinged from present realities. The people who hold them seem blameable, but are they? Or are they seeing things from a different perspective because they have had a different set of experiences from people who accept the vaccines and the protection they offer?

Or is there a dialectical explanation? I believe that there is, but I also wonder whether it can be fully proven. The dialectical argument would maintain that we cannot explain human behaviour in the same terms as we explain the behaviour of particles, precisely because human beings act on our interpretations of the world. Thus, we have to examine the social and political context within which interpretations form. If we can understand the emergence of libertarian ideology, then we can understand individuals who adopt it. Once we understand the individuals who adopt it, we have our answer to the question of why some people reject vaccines even in the face of overwhelming evidence of their efficacy.

But have we solved the explanatory problem or merely provided a description of belief-formation? Not every Republican, for example, is a libertarian. Thus, people which shared general political beliefs can still differ on the particulars. Against the determinists, there seems to be some “elbow room” (to use another phrase from Dennett) within which the self makes choices. But that simply returns us to the problem of the self as a black box.

I think the reason why the problem has not been resolved is because it is impossible to become completely object to ourselves. No matter how abstract the language of neuroscience is, the neuroscientist remains an interpreting and self-interpreting being. They can talk the language of transmitters and connections all they like, they know full well that even as they use it, they are feeling, caring, emoting subjects of a life that cannot be reduced to brain states. If someone in their lab screws up, they would hold them accountable. They would use terms like “honesty” and “responsibility” (and the person who screwed up would probably fall back on objective circumstances to argue that “it was not my fault.”

There is no avoiding the language of what neuroscientists call “folk psychology.” There is no avoiding it because it expresses the whole ethical texture of human social life. But could it be that the language of responsibility is just a way of talking about processes which, in truth, are as meaningless as the swarm of electrons surrounding the nuclei of the atoms that make us up? The fact remains that all of these feelings and so forth *are* symbolically interpreted brain states.

Saying that we are the subjects of a life *describes* human reality, but it does not explain that crucial moment of transition.

Perhaps, then, we will never get beyond Kant, who argued that we must always remain opaque to ourselves at the most basic level of our being both, at once, biological organisms and human persons. But (again, as Kant argued) this opacity makes no practical difference. The language of science is required by some purposes (understanding how nature works) and the language of responsibility is required for others (organizing and governing societies). When we blame someone we are not making a metaphysical or scientific claim but an evaluative claim about what people ought to and could conclude and do on the basis of available evidence.

The Value and Disvalue, The Contingency and Necessity, of Work

Originally posted, 10 November, 2021

Last week [John Deere](#) workers voted down a tentative agreement that provided wage increases which, when judged by the standards of the last two decades, were impressive. But as inflation spirals in the wake of the pandemic, workers are realizing that comparatively good is not good enough. In [New Brunswick](#), health care workers, exhausted by the demands of Covid, were on strike for a week before being legislated back to work by the provincial government. Other health care workers are walking away from the job, burnt out, unable any longer to make up through extra effort the problems caused by chronic under-staffing and under-funding. Younger people are leaving careers they would have died for in the pre-pandemic world. Poorly paid and exhausting positions in the service industry are going unfilled. In response, governments are withdrawing income support programs to try to force people back into the workforce.

Any stirring of the collective power of labour after decades of defeats is a welcome development. Progress cannot be made on any front without the organized power of workers because the resources that we require to live and do anything else at all are the product of collective labour. Since fundamental economic changes always impact workers first and most harshly, they need to be involved as collective agents steering, rather than reacting too, leading, rather than being run over by, the forces exerted by the economic system. I am not going to lay out a blue print here for the changes that need to be made. I think that the general directions are already well-known: we need to shift gradually but decisively away from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources. We need to scale back the intensity and extensivity of human economic activity to preserve (and then expand) life-space for other living things. We need to shift away from competitive struggles between firms to maximize their profits to a democratically planned economy that satisfies fundamental natural and social needs. We need to use technology to reduce socially necessary labour time and distribute the savings as increased free time for workers. We need to democratize work places so that decisions about how to produce are made by workers and not unaccountable managers. None of these changes can be advanced without the organized power of workers.

But liberal-capitalist society must draw attention away from collective power. Society can only be changed radically through collective action, so ideologues of the status quo are always trying to shift our focus from the collective to the individual. In the case of work, problems that are functions of the organization of work under capitalism are presented as problems of work as such. When individual workers choose to [quit](#) rather than suffer any longer the indifference of management to the stress and burn out they are experiencing, the mainstream media portrays these choices as a heroic new path forged by young people turning their back on the work comes first ethic of their parents. Not only does this picture de-politicize workplace-related mental health, it ignores the real value, indeed, the imperative necessity, of work.

Work is not essentially wage labour. Work becomes wage labour in a capitalist society, but work as such is the collective means by which human beings create and recreate their social lives. Work cannot cease without human life ceasing. If one person quits their job it does not mean that the need for the job goes away, it means that someone else will either have to do it, or those who rely on the work will suffer the consequences of the work going undone. Unless we pursue collective solutions to the problems that individual workers experience, we simply shift the suffering from the individual who leaves the job to the individual (probably with less power to survive for a period of time without employment) who fills the vacancy. The most taxing and demanding jobs end up falling to the most disempowered groups (migrant workers with fewer formal rights than citizens, new immigrants desperate to start building a new life). The object of exploitation changes without the causes of the exploitation being addressed.

Those causes do not lay in work as an external demand upon our time but rather in the economic forces that determine the nature and availability of work in a capitalist society. Work appears like an oppressive burden only because it is despotically governed, fragmented into meaningless and mindless detail labour, precarious, poorly remunerated, and not respected. But if we divided socially necessary labour time more equally, if we used technology not only to free us *from* the mind-numbing tasks but also *for* creative and caring work, if we governed work-places democratically, and slowed down the pace of life, work would cease to be the alienating experience it typically is today and become what we sometimes, rarely, feel it to be: our contribution to the collective health of our societies and a vital source of individual meaning.

Good lives require rest and repose, but they also require reason to get out of bed in the morning. Utopian literature since Thomas More can be divided into that which paints the best life as freedom from work and that which (like More's *Utopia*) paints it as freedom to work in meaningful, creative, and life-productive ways. I can well-understand the motivations of people who dream of a world where every second of one's life time is one's own, but I think that they fail to appreciate how important being needed is in a meaningful life. Freed from its capitalist form, what else is work other than the social expression of our being needed? The educator is needed to help educate, the nurse to help heal, the engineer to design systems that support life, and the builders to make those designs real.

A life of pure leisure would soon become intolerable. Think how quickly kids complain about being bored because they "have" nothing to do. A truly post-work world would be a world in which no one would "have" anything to do because they would not "have" to do anything. Machines would run things and we would be free to do what? Make art? cultivate relationships? Appreciate the sunshine? But the sun does not shine all the time, and art is very much a form of non-alienated labour and not a leisure activity. I would say the same thing about relationships: in order to be a good friend, partner, or lover, one must work upon oneself in order to make one's elf friendly or lovable. Pure leisure would be pure inertia.

I think that such a world would be as damaging to peoples' mental health as a world in which the external pressures to produce according to deadlines and market demands drive people out of their jobs. Leisure is valued today because it is the other side of the Protestant ethic: work hard and play hard is the motto that keeps the capitalist machine running. No one can be blamed for

quitting the treadmill, but social freedom cannot be achieved by a few individuals choosing to drop out.

Since work is fundamental to both the maintenance and meaning of life, solutions to the problems that it causes individual workers have to be solved by collectively transforming its organization. But we cannot transform the organization of work without transforming the core institutions of socio-economic life and the structure of private ownership of universally required life-resources that underlies those institutions. Demands for mental health support and politically correct work environments spectacularly miss the mark. The bosses are only too willing to organize hand-holding “healthy workplace” seminars and sloganeer about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, *so long as they maintain control over the resources and wealth upon which our lives depend.*

Of course, work life within capitalism can be better or worse, and we should always demand changes in the day to day organization of work that make it better. What capitalist work must be, however, is capitalist: exploitative, alienating, and undemocratic. It is exploitative because workers are employed to produce surplus-value, not goods and resources that our lives require. It is alienating, because we are not in control of our bodies and minds when we are at work. And it is undemocratic because bosses hire and fire at will, according to market conditions, and they alone have the right and power to interpret market signals. One cannot escape the overall impacts of this organization of work by quitting, because quitting perpetuates the structural problems. Someone else will take your place, or the place will be moved to a region of the world where people have fewer choices and will take whatever job is offered. The solution to structural problems is structural changes. The boss’s workshops and platitudes will not bring about those changes; they can only be achieved by workers struggling together for a different world.

Must Everything Be Professionalised?

Originally posted, 4 August, 2021

I went up North to visit my mom, uncles, and old friends on the weekend. As we drove along the road that links the highway to my hometown a dozen or more cars, many from down south, were parked on the shoulder. Blueberry pickers!

When I was young, everyone picked blueberries for personal consumption and baking. Teenagers would sometimes sell a few quarts for beer and pot money, but for the most part berries were treated as a common good subject to the law of nature as Locke expressed it: take what you can use, but leave as much and as good for others.

No more. eco-preneurs, fuelled by the explosive growth of increasingly too-precious farmers' markets, are proving their love of nature by driving 350 kilometers to the outskirts of Sudbury, tromping around the bush in their stupid fucking Tilly hats and 400 dollar hiking boots from Mountain Equipment Coop, denuding the bush of berries. Many use rakes that speed the picking process but also indiscriminately remove the immature berries. Bears and locals alike are deprived of this most delicious free gift of nature (sooo much better than overstuffed, cultivated berries which lack the slightly bitter finish of the wild variety). Having stripped the bush clean, they load basket after basket into the family Subaru and crate them off to Toronto to be sold at outrageous prices to people who think they are getting an authentic taste of the North but are really getting sucked into destructive eco-capitalism.

All over, practices that used to be fun and informal are being professionalised and commodified. One of my favorite pass times when I am in Cape Breton where my partner grew up is to take long, aimless ambles along the beach, just walking and walking as far as I can go. The best days are overcast and blustery with just me on the beach and the crashing surf of the Gulf of St. Lawrence or the open Atlantic. I learned to let my eyes be open to the sands, to look without focusing. By being receptive, I started to discover beach glass everywhere. Finding it has since become a bit of a hobby when I am on the island.

(I got hooked when I brought a piece to a beach glass museum near Richibucto, New Brunswick, which proved to be quite rare: a fragment of dinner ware from an early 20th century passenger ship that was pink from the Selenium in the glass. The owner of the museum offered me 75\$, but I preferred to keep it and the great story it turned out to bring with it).

As with the berries, so too with the beach glass. The last two times that we have gone to Cape Breton, I noticed overly intrepid groups of people with shovels and claws and buckets scouring the beach. I was wondering what they were doing until it dawned on me suddenly: beach glass hunters! Someday soon they will be driving backhoes onto the beach and there will be a reality show on TLC: Inverness Beach Glass Wars.

I am not a particularly virtuous person but I have a feel for long evolved local codes. As with blueberries, so too with beach glass: take a few pieces, but leave as much and as good for others. But these prospectors of the shore scoop up everything and — you guessed it— truck it to the farmers’ market to sell to tourists. But the fun is not in the possessing, it is in the walking on the beach and accidentally finding. If you go looking for it, you kill the solitude of the walk and the spontaneity of the find that makes the time on the beach meaningful, peaceful, and *fun*. If you scoop every little shard up you will rob children the excitement of their first discovery. But you will be able to sell bags full to tourists who could have found it themselves had the pros not vacuumed the beach clean.

(In a further parallel with wild blueberries, the professional hunters take everything indiscriminately. That which makes beach glass beautiful is the polish, acquired after decades of being dragged to and fro over the sands by the waves. But the stuff for sale is mostly just broken chunks of glass too new to have been turned into the gentle, translucent drops of glass that make it so pleasing to the touch and eye).

There is far worse being perpetrated against young people. The athletically talented no longer just play for fun or go off to sport camp for a week with their friends to get away from their parents. Now, the most promising are objectified like high performance vehicles, subjected to testing and monitoring and mechanical programming for optimal achievement. Twelve year olds are subjected to the oppressive rule of nutritionists, personal trainers, and coaches for every gesture and move of whatever sport they play. The pure enjoyment of bodily movement is destroyed by the (generally quixotic) search for a professional contract.

Schools too are being ruined by precocious professionalization. Grade eight students are expected to have portfolios by the time they graduate and undergraduate university students are busy building CV’s before they have read a book cover to cover. The only things that undergraduate students should be doing are reading, drinking red wine while talking all night in someone’s stuffy apartment about the ideas that excite them, and then going home, reading some more, and doing it again the next night.

Like my eyes and the beach glass, in order to arrive at a destination one mustn’t zero in but be open to all possibilities. Insight and understanding arise slowly and unexpectedly. “To increase your hold, relax your grip” (Lawrence Durrell, “Keepsake”). Anyway, destinations soon prove boring. Life is movement.

Crimes Against Humanity, Crimes Against Education

Originally posted, 28 June, 2021

The discovery of a [second set of unmarked graves](#) outside a former residential school, this time in Saskatchewan, is yet another reminder of the history of crimes against the humanity of First Nations people. These crimes were perpetrated by successive Canadian governments and various Christian Churches, but they were abetted by the indifference of too many ordinary Canadians. There are sure to be more gruesome discoveries as First Nations communities continue to expose the history of abuse to which they were subjected in the residential schools.

To call these institutions “schools” is as absurd as calling the way Christian Churches treated Indigenous peoples “love.” Indeed, the residential schools expose the contradiction at the heart of Christianity. Ethically, Christianity purports to be an institution and practice of universal love. Yet, it also claims that eternal life is reserved for those who accept Christ as their saviour. The later belief invested it with a proselytising zeal that made it a willing accomplice of colonialism. (One finds an analogous contradiction in the history of Islam during the period of Arab expansion beyond the Arabian peninsula into North Africa). The two sides cannot be easily reconciled.

Love is a social value that conduces us towards concern for the well-being of the beloved. To destroy someone that you claim to love proves that you did not really love them. Love demands respect for the integrity and uniqueness of the beloved. To love someone is thus to value them *as they are*. Out of love we might struggle to protect the beloved from forces that would harm or kill them, but the lover never harms or kills the beloved. Where Christians have been motivated by love they have allied with progressive forces, as, for example, in mid-1960’s Latin America, where Liberation Theologists joined with anti-imperialist revolutionary movements to oust US-sponsored dictatorships. This unity was possible because love intends the well-being of its object here and now.

The problem is quite otherwise when one claims to know what one must do to ensure the good of the soul for all eternity. Anyone who believes that they possess this sort of knowledge is going to feel that they are invested with a holy mission *to save others from their ignorance*. If love can motivate people to fight for a better life here and now on earth, the belief that one possesses knowledge of what a divinity intends for us throughout eternity can motivate them to impose the good news (gospel) on non-conforming others. If what is at stake in belief or non-belief is eternal life or death, then believer can convince themselves that forced conversion is an act of love. But the reality here and now (the only reality that matters to actually existing, living human beings), of forced conversion is destruction of the existing way of life. The destruction of known ways of life by foreign powers is always harmful on every level to the peoples whose languages and cultures are destroyed.

Therefore, love is not compatible with forced conversion. The lover must accept the wisdom of Peter Tosh: “If you know what life is worth/You will look for yours on earth/and now we see the light/we gonna stand up for our rights.” (“[Get up, Stand Up](#)”). All we *know* is life on earth. In order to live well, to live peacefully, to care for one another, we must live with and accept the differences through which our humanity is expressed. No one needs to be converted to anything: people themselves will ultimately change forms of life that no longer work or prove unsatisfying. As a social virtue love means respect for the capacity of people to determine their own lives and lifeways.

Residential schools were as far from a loving relationship as one can imagine. The most poignant critique from a survivor that I have heard stated simply: “How can you send children to a place where there is no love.” ([130 Year Road Trip](#))

Where there is no love there cannot be education either. Residential schools were schools in the bureaucratic-authoritarian sense of the term. That is, they employed the power of confinement to subject their inmates to a curriculum conceived in abstraction from their actual intellectual needs. Schooling in this bureaucratic-authoritarian sense is, as Ivan Illich pointed out 5 decades ago, the very opposite of education. (*De-Schooling Society*) All human beings require education because our intellectual capacities do not automatically unfold. Education, in contrast to schooling, does not and cannot force anything on the learner. Education begins from where the learner is and builds up, adds to, deepens and enriches the already existing soil of the learner’s capacity for understanding, interpretation, criticism, and creative activity. Education does not leave the learner as they were: it is not mere replication of existing external social and cultural forms in the mind of the learner. Education always frees the individual mind to critically appropriate the past and contribute to the creation of new, life-affirmative practices in the future.

The crucial difference between loving education and hateful indoctrination is that the former does not require violence because it always works with the learner. As Paulo Freire famously argued, education links learner and teacher in a dialectical relationship of reciprocity: teachers learn and learners teach where the subject matter leads (*The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) The only authority in a genuine learning space is the truth of the subject matter in question. Indoctrination— the forced imposition of *falsity or one-sided truths as if they were true or whole*— is violent and requires violence because the student subjected to it knows and feels the falsity or one-sidedness, and rebels. The victims of indoctrination, whether indigenous children forced into residential schools or political dissidents marched off to re-education camps (as in Cultural Revolution China) must always be separated off, isolated, and coerced into accepting dogma as truth. But truth— as Plato argued— is freely available and freely shared. Dogmas, by contrast, must literally be “beaten into” the victim being forced to repeat them.

Humanity is the capacity in each and every human being to shape their own future. This capacity is rooted in our intellectual ability to understand our real conditions of life and what to do when those conditions are oppressive, need-depriving, or otherwise unsatisfying and stagnant. Education is therefore always political, not because it transmits slogans to passive cadres, but because it cultivates and deepens the human capacity to understand the difference between free and unfree social circumstances. Hence educated people are always the enemy of oppressive powers, because oppression presents itself as good for its victims. But when victims know what

is really good for them the lies the oppressors tell are exposed, and the structures of oppression eventually collapse.

The truths of the colonial history of Canada are still in the process of being exposed. Overcoming their impacts on First Nations people remains a work in progress. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was supposed to be the start of fundamental legal and social transformation of the relationship between the Canadian State and First Nations' peoples, but as with so much of Canadian history, official pieties have substituted (thus far) for the promised meaningful changes.

I do not want to add to the pile of such pieties here. As I wrote years ago in "The Wish to be a Red Indian," I worry that well-intentioned Canadians proclaiming their solidarity with Indigenous peoples often inadvertently drown out Indigenous voices. Solidarity sometimes requires silence so that long-suppressed voices can speak. One must always be careful (as I argue more formally in an essay in honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu to be published soon), to avoid conflating solidarity with speaking for oppressed people. The most important thing that we can do, I would argue, is to start electing governments that actually put theory into practice: honour the treaties that were supposed to define the relationship between the state and First Nations, resolve outstanding land claims, and ensure that First Nations have access to the resources that their societies require to shape themselves in accordance with their citizens needs and goals.

II: Evocations



Into the Mystic: John McMurtry, 1939-2021

Originally posted, 2 January, 2022

New Year's Day dawned dreary. Covid cases continued to spike. I knew that the winter term would begin once again on-line. I worried that I would not be able to hide my absolute lack of enthusiasm for another 12 weeks of sitting in front of my computer pretending to teach from my students.

And then things got worse.

At about one o'clock, as I was working on a lecture, an email notification popped up. John McMurtry, path-breaking Canadian philosopher, my doctoral dissertation supervisor, and critical interlocutor and friend for 25 years had died.

The news was deflating but not unexpected. In one of those strange coincidences that seem to surround death I had reached out to him on the day of the solstice to wish him season's greetings and to send him a paper I had just finished. The strange thing is that I did not want to write the paper, but felt some push to do so. I wrote it very quickly, at the behest of Chinese organizers who invited me to submit a proposal for a conference on political economy. The time frame was very short and I initially thought about ignoring the invitation. But something gnawed at me. I wrote the proposal and then the full paper in only 2 weeks. The paper put McMurtry's idea of "life-capital" to work in a re-reading of the core principles of Marxist political economy. I sent him the paper on the solstice. In his response, he told me that the bladder cancer from which he had been suffering off and on for a few years had returned, and that he knew that his time on the planet was drawing to a close. Philosophical to the end, he did not lament his fate but told me that he was at peace with death, knowing that he had given everything he had to life.

There could be no clearer illustration of what Socrates meant when he said that philosophy is a preparation for death. He did not mean that adopting this or that set of principles dispels the fear of death; he meant that a properly cultivated philosophical disposition enables one to live the right way, so that when the end comes, one can face it knowing that one has lived every moment as fully as possible and struggled to do the right thing as much as beings of limited intellect and contradictory passions can do.

John instilled that philosophical disposition in me. It was his greatest strength as a supervisor. Never be lazy, he would urge, spell out the argument, don't skip steps, be rigorous, and above all, don't simply repeat things that have already been said. "Say it fresh or don't say it," he once told me. I have tried to follow that advice in every sentence I have written since.

John was, as the name of the column he used to write for the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives newsletter *The Monitor* stated), an iconoclast. He was not always easy to work with and he could be a trenchant (but not dogmatic) critic of others' work (including my own). But he did not cultivate disagreement for its own sake: if someone thought that his arguments were inadequate or failed, he wanted to know what, in particular, the problems were. He also wanted to see a more comprehensive alternative articulated. His commitment to the "unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas) led to many broken chains of communication with other philosophers. Ideally, one would hope that all philosophers would be committed to debate until an agreement acceptable to both sides was reached. That was often not the case. I was included on many an email chain where the opposite would happen: under persistent questioning from John people would, like Socrates' dialogue partners, just walk away rather than continue the discussion.

For the past 25 years the cause of the aporia was always the same: the inability or unwillingness of philosophers from other traditions to demonstrate how their positions answered the key problems of philosophy in ways that were as comprehensive and practically efficacious as the "life-value-onto-axiology" John spent the last quarter of his career developing. From my sometimes observer and sometimes participant perspective, I felt that sometimes John might have interpreted acceptable conditions of agreement in too-fine-grained terms. Consequently, opportunities for overlapping consensus, to borrow a term from Rawls, were missed. However, in the main I would see people hunker down in their traditional position rather than open themselves to the possibility that McMurtry had found a genuinely new set of concepts— implicit in, but not systematically developed by, Eastern and Western philosophical traditions.

John often attributed this reticence to careerism and gate-keeping, but I think the answer lies deeper, in the path-dependencies that emerge after years and decades of work. Few and far between are Saul on the road to Damascus epiphanies: people tend to stick with the ideas they have worked on over the course of their career, not because it provides a pay cheque, but because their whole self has been invested in them. Philosophers thus regularly miss opportunities for real philosophical growth, but perhaps that tells us that philosophers are human beings too and cannot always follow the ideas where they lead.

McMurtry's ideas led from analytic Marxism towards what G.A. Cohen, his supervisor at the University of London (before Cohen moved to Oxford) "some of the most exhilarating philosophy I have ever read." Though exhilarating, the orienting idea of his new departure is in fact as old as recorded human thought and as easy as breathing to understand: all value in the universe depends upon the existence of sentient life. All coherent scientific, philosophical and political thought must begin from the principle that life-support is the foundation of every other good. Every other good, in turn, is an instrumental condition of healthy living or an expressed and enjoyed capacity of living things. Unlike the dominant trends in analytic and continental philosophy at the time he began to chart this course, McMurtry maintained that values were not subjective dispositions or cultural constructs but fundamental elements of the lived world (hence the ten cent term "onto-axiology"— values grounded in being). Subjective dispositions and cultural systems had to be judged in terms of the degree to which they enable the health and development of living beings (and not just humans— life-value philosophy is resolutely anti-anthropocentric). Life-value thinking thus opened the way to a coherent synthesis of scientific,

philosophical, and political understanding, *if people would drop their one-sided commitments and re-think their arguments in life-value terms.*

Few were willing to do so explicitly (although, if one looks at work from the last twenty years, it is remarkable the extent to which the problems of need-satisfaction, global health, environmentally coherent public policy, and life as a foundational value appear). McMurtry claimed no credit for this global turn, and I think that positions like Sen's or Nussbaum's were cases of reaching similar places by different roads). What McMurtry did that no one else did was to articulate a systematic, universal foundation for positions like Nussbaum's capabilities approach to social justice or Doyal's and Gough's theory of human needs. His achievement was not nearly as overtly influential as it should have been in academic philosophy.

I think this lack of explicit influence bothered John, but I also believed him when he said, repeatedly, that what matters is that the ideas circulate, not personal recognition. One has the right to the work, not to the fruits, he would say, paraphrasing Krishna's advice to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. I learned that passage from John, and I have meditated on it many nights when petty professional jealousies stir in my mind and heart.

Just do the work as well as you can do. Then do it better again the next day. Nothing else matters.

Central to John's later philosophy was the idea that each person is part of a greater whole of life. He derived this position from Indian philosophy on the one hand (the ultimate identity of consciousness and being in a boundless oneness beyond ego and its attachments) and Marx's idea that the "individual is the social being" on the other. We both emerge from and depend upon social connections to each other and to the earth. If we meditate on that fact it becomes clear that the value of our lives is not exhausted in our ego-centric attachment to our own existence, but is in truth realized in the contributions that we make to the universal social subject. This universal subject has no natural life and death and is not bounded by the finitude of individual consciousness. When we identify our good with the good of that boundless social subject we can die secure in the knowledge that our ego dissipates but we live on in the future of the life-whole that our contributions helped sustain.

Having satisfied himself that there was nothing more for him to give, he passed peacefully into the ego-less universality of earth and memory.

When I learned of John's death I did not feel so much sad as philosophically alone; the possibility of further conversation about life-value philosophy seemed over. But the dialogue can continue because the ideas still exist, and that is just how John would want it to be.

Ovid

Originally posted, 23 December, 2021

Tonight,
in the bar,
I see
a grey non-eminence
realize his place
is not here.

The thirty-somethings
keep laughing
as he shuffles,
invisible,
back to his room.

And I think:

“That is me
in five, maybe ten years.”

And I wonder:

“When did thirty-somethings
start looking so young?”

Morning now,

King Street.

I forgot

how west wind damp dreary

this city is in December.

Not a place to tarry.

But if I could

stop time slipping away

by sinking my fingers

into the low-slung clouds

I would hang on,

even if it stopped

the sun

from shining

forever.

But they are nothing

to sink a grip into:

formless vapours

carried off by the wind

that makes me tighten my scarf

and urges me on my way.

This is not a love song

or an essay in nostalgia;
it is a page
from the book of changes.

When I was young
the dark
of my small town
was deep and quiet.

Every night
I feared
that the whole world
would drown in it.

Then a train
would rumble
down the tracks
a hundred feet
from our little company house
and I would curl into the covers,
reassured
that people were still alive,
attending to things.

The next day,

the only sign of the train
was the pieces of shimmering grey ore
that had bounced from the cars.
They would cry out to me
to keep them safe
from the hell-fires of the Copper Cliff smelter.
I heard their plea
and once a week
would gather them,
—my shells, on my sea shore—
and keep them safe
in the box
where I kept my rock collection.

The mine is still there
but the tracks
have been ripped up.
And the trestle
from which we would jump
into welcoming snow
torn down too.
There are no more
10 000 ton lullabies

to sing children back to sleep.

It is night now.

I pour a gin.

In the dim light

of the backroom

Seamus Heaney comforts me

with poems of bog people,

elderberries,

Troubles,

and the pen

he dug with

all his life.

The wind that

days ago rolled down the Rockies,

traversed the corn-fed expanse

of America's Great Plains,

deked through through the cables of the bridge,

and skated over the river

now worries the limbs

of our mulberry tree.

I pause and sip.

I wonder:

“What will be

the last book

I ever read?”

Ultimate things

scare soft-minded people.

But listen to Socrates:

philosophy is preparation for death.

Add 2 to 1 and 3 to 2 and 5 to 3

and so on, to infinity.

Divide 3 by 2,

5 by 3,

8 by five

The higher you go,

the closer you get

to the secret ratio

that governs

the arrangement of everything:

nautilus shells,

sunflower seeds,

hurricanes,

spiral galaxies,
Gothic cathedrals,
and the features
of your face.

There will be a last book.
But not to fear:
There is no heaven,
no hell,
just points,
distributed along a curve,
spiralling outward
1.6 times bigger every turn
forever.

Golem

Originally posted, 26 September, 2021

Why don't poets
sign the song
of thermodynamics?

Instead of pulling heart strings
or playing with words,
they should praise
the magic of dust
accreting into world;
hymn the light
that fills the void
between
no-thing-no time
of origin
and no-thing-no time
of end.

A face is beautiful
and the sea sublime,
but they are nothing

compared to
the impossible alchemy
that turns
0+C+H+N+Ca+P+K+S+Na+Cl+Mg.
into me.

No one needs told:
flowers are pretty,
the heart mourns a lost love.
How does the table— mostly space—
resist my touch?
How do things that do not care,
make up someone who does?
And from whence
the compulsion
to ask these questions,
whose answers
are too much to bear?

Primo Levi traced the arc of
a carbon atom
from limestone, to leaf, to lobster
and back.

Erosion tears at the rock face,
a child rips the leaf from the limb,
the fishers boil the lobster,
mad-drunk on rum.

The atom feels nothing.
It bonds again
with any compound
that needs its electrons.
The indifference of the elements
to the suffering they make possible
made him call out to God.
But there was no answer.

Or rather,
the answer was silence.
(Pascal heard it too,
but bet differently,
and was wrong).

There is no salvation,
no redemption.
Truth sets us free,
but in the way of a carbon atom

on its unseeing journey
through time and space.

J: 1.9.6.1

Originally posted, 15 August, 2021

Ox:

plod

the sonorous monotony

of your duty,

clomping footfall

after clomping footfall,

plowing the field

for other people's problems.

But remember

the Chinese horoscope:

“If this works out,

it will be fun.”

Everything good,

Heraclitus says,

is born of strife.

If my love is difficult,

it is also real.

We can look back

now

and see our older selves

foreshadowed

in our laughing faces

in that picture

we both love so much.

Time scrapes away the sheen

of younger flesh,

but leaves behind

the pleasing lines

of experience.

Today, let's smile together

and remember:

the umbrella

that protected you

from Bergen's infernal rains,

and the drunken opera singer in Rome,

and the man with the Beaver nickle

tattooed on his forearm

who had been in jail in Vancouver.

Let's recall the kittens in Fez

that you wanted to protect,

even though everyone
thought you were crazy.

Let's step lively
with the cats of Recoleta,
the one's the guy called "free"
and not "stray."

Let's savour the *jamon*
from that little working class bar in Madrid
where we hid out from the rain
when we were searching
for Goya's Passion of St. Anthony.

Let's hear once more
the honking jostle of St. Mark's Place,
feel the tickle of the wild grass
of Aspy Bay,
and re-taste the vodka
under the glowing midnight sky
of St. Petersburg.

Memory is magic:

The thought of joy
is joyous
but the thought of pain

is not painful.

You stared into the abyss
and thought about going under,
but you refused to drown.

Linger with the memories,
savour even,

but don't think too much
on what has gone before.

Too much thinking
and you think yourself gone.

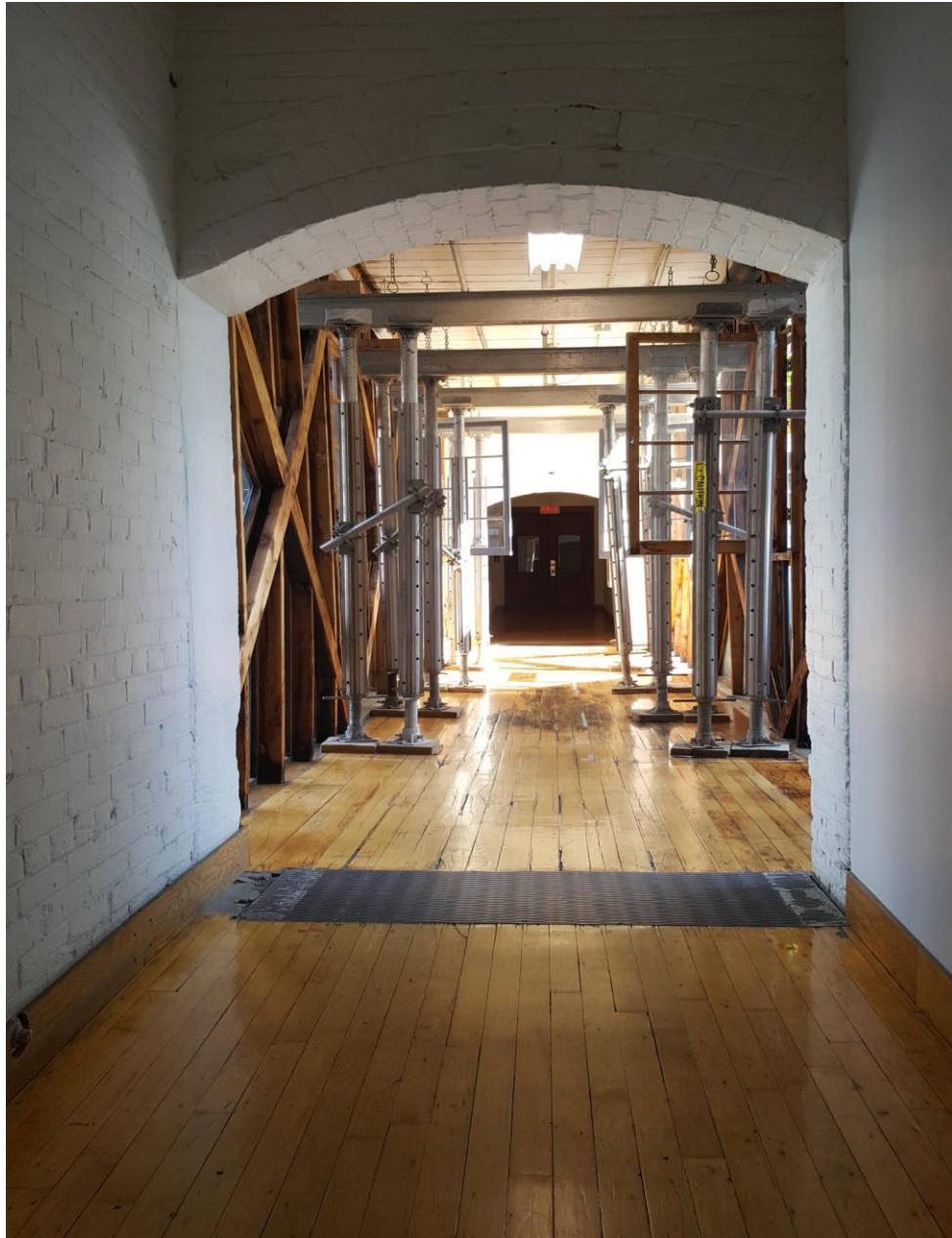
Have another drink.

Tarry with me here
a while longer.

Be glad
we can not see
too far forward.

We are not so old
that the world
might yet surprise us.

III: Readings



Readings: Kathleen Stock: *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters to Feminism*

Originally posted, 27 July, 2021

The history of liberalism is, from one perspective, the history of struggles to extend the scope of human and citizenship rights. From the generic demands of the “rights of man and citizen” declared on behalf of the whole world by the French Third Estate, different groups that make up the whole world and have consistently mobilized in their own name to demand that rights be concretized to meet their unmet needs. Women, workers, and enslaved people in the French colonies were the first to argue that the Declaration was too abstract. Since it failed to include their perspectives, its abstract rights could not satisfy their needs. In the twentieth century, African Americans were forced to struggle again for their civil rights; radical feminists deepened the fight against new forms of patriarchy, and gays and lesbians began a struggle for their own liberation. Disabled people have organized in pursuit of their rights; environmentalists have argued in favour of animal rights and the extension of rights-protections to natural spaces. Indigenous people have articulated specific sets of rights and struggled to have them recognized by settler-colonialist societies. All these movements continue in one form or another and still novel avenues open. In the last twenty years trans persons have become more organized and vocal in defence of their rights.

Like the struggles that preceded them, trans activists have highlighted the ways in which existing interpretations of equal rights have failed to address their particular concerns. Like other groups that have stood up for their interests, trans activists too have faced strong opposition, and not always from right wing defenders of a conservative sexual morality. Indeed, some of the most heated arguments have erupted between some groups of feminists and lesbians and trans activists.

Kathleen Stock’s *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters to Feminism*, attempts to lower the political and rhetorical temperature between the two camps through calm and careful argument. The positions that she adopts on the underlying scientific and philosophical issues will not produce universal assent, but they ought to encourage reasoned argument oriented by the goal of building solidarity between feminism and trans activists. Even though she has been a target of vituperative condemnation by some trans activists, Stock makes it clear throughout her book that she fully supports their general demands for legal protection against discrimination. “Trans people are trans people. We should get over it. They deserve to be safe, to be visible throughout society without shame or stigma, and to have exactly the same life opportunities non-trans people do.” (p. 241) She does not believe that the law can be a vehicle that compels others to believe what she regards as scientific untruths about the non-reality of biological sex, but on the more important issue of building a world in which trans people can live secure, full, and free lives her agreement is unequivocal.

Where Stock differs most sharply from some trans activists is on the complex question of the relationship between biological sex and gender identity. Stock maintains that biological sex is real, defined by the male-female dichotomy, and unchangeable. She recognizes the difficulty of providing a universal definition of biological sex that covers the array of morphologies and chromosomal arrangements that are found in human beings. These complexities notwithstanding, she does arrive at a complex definition of sex that adequately covers the actual range of male and female bodies that we find in nature. While she insists that evolutionary dynamics and human social life both prove the reality and importance of biological sex, she does not deny that trans people's gender identities do not align with their biological sex. She does deny that feelings about gender identity should always override the material reality of biological sex. That is the claim that so angers many trans activists, especially in the UK.

The debate between so-called TERFs (trans exclusionary radical feminists) and trans activists in the UK has tended to degenerate into name calling, de-platforming, and threats of violence. Stock herself has been on the receiving end of accusations of transphobia and has been subjected to de-platforming. However, any charitable reading of her book reveals her to be a sober minded, witty, calm, careful thinker. She is sharply critical about some claims that some trans activists make, but when people make claims which other people can reasonably question, the appropriate response is counter-argument, not shouting at them to shut up. Matters that involve the public invite public debate, and trans issues, since they involve changes to laws and traditions, involve the public, making them matters of general concern around which open, non-dogmatic, debate is important.

Stock never claims to have every answer and is honest where she thinks her arguments need further work. All she demands is that argument be met with argument, not vituperative *ad hominem*. (pp.40-43) She is a philosopher by profession, but also in the best normative sense of the word: she has the courage to expose some absurd implications of incautious claims, but is also open to being proven wrong. Her book is analytic philosophy at its best, marshalling a close attention to the implications of her opponents' principles for the sake of creating shared understandings and better policy.

The book flows smoothly over some very difficult philosophical, political, and scientific issues. I want to concentrate on the three that I found most important. 1) the complex relationships between the biological and socio-cultural dimensions of human being; 2) the reality of sex and the demands of trans activists; and 3) the problem of solidarity and separatism in the construction of political movements.

The relationship between the biological and socio-cultural dimensions of human being is a long standing and very difficult philosophical and scientific problem. Trans persons' struggles have—like feminists before them—revealed the sharp political stakes behind what, on first blush, seems a rather simple matter. Human beings are, after all, animals. We are undoubtedly shaped by bio-physical forces. Our lives and health depend upon a few key physical parameters: hydration and nutrition levels, the ability of our immune system to recognize pathogenic threats, the structural integrity of our skin and skeletal structure. At the biological level, human beings are a complex organic system defined by intricately evolved relationships between organs. Organs are functional arrangements of tissues which must operate within fairly narrowly defined parameters.

We cannot live if our hearts are removed, or our lungs, or both kidneys. If we flood our bodies with toxins we will die; if pathogens like Covid for which we lack antibodies invade, we can become seriously ill or die.

No matter how committed one might be rhetorically to the position that scientific facts are “socially constructed,” no one is going to eat plutonium for lunch, because they know that whatever word we use to refer to atomic element 94, the element itself is highly radioactive and will kill anyone near it. Even if a language lacks a word for the element, the element itself exists, and will kill everyone exposed to it, whether they know of it or believe in it. Stock rejects the arguments of social constructivists like Judith Butler along analogous lines: “It follows from the logic of Butler’s worldview not only that there are not two pre-given, stable biological sexes, but also that there are no pre-given facts about natural selection. There is no sexual reproduction. There are no pre-given chemical elements or biological species.”(63) In its hard form, social constructivism carries on a lamentable confusion on the left between the mind-and-language-independent elements and dynamics of the physical universe and the changing, fallible, susceptible to ideological and life-destructive use of human science. The hypothetical deductive method has unarguably produced (fallible and corrigible) insights in to physical nature. The computer on which I am typing does not work by magic. A *fricassee* of plutonium will kill you.

There can be no room for reasonable debate (a debate between two positions each of which is plausibly true) on matters of the basic biological foundations of human life. However, most social constructivists are not concerned with scientific facts about biological life. They are rightly concerned with the way in which *claims* about *purported* biological facts have been *used* to justify oppressive systems. For example, the exclusion of women from public life from ancient Athens to the French Revolution was justified by appeal to spurious claims about women’s nature. But the problem here is not “biological determinism,” but a bad, sexist argument rooted in scientific ignorance on one hand (women are not less intelligent than men) and ideological use of that misinformation facts on the other. Stock urges critics not to throw the baby of objective investigation of natural processes out with the bath water of ideological misuse of scientific findings. (pp.70-71)

Once we shift focus, from physical dynamics to human interpretations, we arrive at the live centre of the debate that most concerns Stock. If it is obvious that human beings have a biological nature, and no one can coherently deny this nature when it comes to objective facts like “humans will die if they eat plutonium,” why have the facts about our sexual nature become so politicized? After all, a penis or vagina is an organ just like a heart or kidney, and no one says that their functions are socially constructed. The answer is that facts about our circulatory system do not determine our identity but function as frames within which we live our lives. But having a penis or vagina, or XX or XY chromosomes does not always determine how we feel about ourselves, how we express ourselves in private, or present ourselves in public (or how we would do so if it were safe), or how we feel about other people of the same or opposite sex. One fundamental dimension of feminist and later gay and lesbian struggle was to free people’s self-understanding of their life-horizons and sexuality from their biological sex characteristics. Trans activism radicalizes this struggle further.

So why would a feminist and lesbian activist like Stock oppose their argument that what matters to people's well-being is not sex characteristics but gender identity? If she insists that biological sexes are real, but admits that trans people do not feel aligned with their biological sex, must she argue that being trans is "unnatural," in the pernicious way that sexists thought that women politicians were "unnatural" or homophobes that that gay and lesbian desires were "unnatural?" One can see why critics would draw this conclusion, but it is not in fact the argument that Stock makes.

Stock provides an excellent overview of the history of the development of different meanings of gender, from its early use to indicate socially constructed dispositions that arose from social pressures imposed on members of the biological sexes to its current use, "gender identity" which links gender with inner feelings unconnected to one's biological sex. (pp.109-141). She rejects that interpretation of gender identity because she thinks it implies that how one feels can literally change what one (biologically) is (p.148). Some trans activists may disagree, in which case they need to respond to the substance of her argument. The substance of her argument is not that trans people do not exist; she is not— as she is sometimes accused of doing, trying to "erase" trans people. Instead, she is arguing that trans people should be understood to be trans people: trans men, trans women, or non-binary, but not identical to men or women just because they claim to feel "like" a woman or a man. Stock therefore does not believe that a (biologically born) male who identifies as a woman (a trans woman) is a woman. She rejects the slogan "trans women are women," but she does not reject the (to my mind, more politically important claim) that trans women, trans men, and non-binary people have every right to social and legal protection where and as appropriate.

That last point leads to the second major point of contention between Stock and some trans activists and the second part of the book upon which I want to focus— whether or not trans women should have full, free, and unfettered access to those spaces that have normally been sex-segregated: change rooms, high-level sporting competitions, and, especially, women's shelters and rape crisis centres. Since Stock argues that one cannot literally change one's sex, she believes that sex still matters in a number of domains. It matters in medicine, both in terms of treatment and the allocation of research dollars to diseases that typically affect females, and statistics (if biologically male trans women are counted as females, statistical incidence of female-typical diseases will be distorted). It matters for similar reasons in crime statistics: if rapes committed by biological males identifying as women are counted as female crimes, important statistical distortions could be introduced. It matters in sport, where recently transitioned trans women could have an unfair advantage over biological women. It matters for the personal and sexual integrity and autonomy of lesbians, who are sometimes told that they need to "get over" their lack of attraction to trans women (i.e., biological males). And it matters to women who, for a number of sound reasons, want some spaces preserved as female only (pp.76-108).

On all of these issues Stock presents cogent arguments. They all follow from her principle that since biological sex is a reality, wherever recognition of biological sex makes a political, economic, or emotional difference to women's and girl's lives, the gains they have made by forcing society to recognize and valorize their concerns must be preserved and female exclusivity maintained. Where such differences do not matter, then trans women should be

welcomed fully and freely. A spirit of mutual recognition of distinct interests should prevail, and where possible, practical compromises worked out (Men's, Women's, and Unisex bathrooms, for example).

The third aspect of her book that I want to discuss is the issue of the continued salience of feminism as a *women's* movement. Why, Stock asks, should the emergence of new and legitimate trans demands be accepted at the expense of the historic gains of women to build some spaces free of males?(pp. 252-261) Stock's arguments here are once again reasonable and recognize the legitimacy of trans struggles. She also insists that political struggles, in order to be coherent, have to have a specific focus determined by the well-defined interests of the people in whose name the movement was built. The women's movement was built to address patriarchal domination (rooted historically in the sexual division of labour) of girls and adult women. Introducing trans demands into feminism as a women's movement simply muddies the waters, according to Stock, sidetracks the struggle into abstract debates about whether trans women are women, and thus weakens the political power of feminism and trans activism.

My own work has long argued in favour of the need for unified mass movements that connect human beings across differences. The fundamental problem, in my view, is the way in which the resources that all need are controlled by a minority and exploited for their own enrichment. However, I have also acknowledged the need for distinct groups to voice their distinct demands in separate political organizations. Stock adopts a separatist position when it comes to trans demands. She does not believe that either the women's or the gay and lesbian movement can do an adequate job defending trans people's interests, because the interests of women, gays, and lesbians are different from the interests of trans people. The attempt to incorporate trans demands into the heart of feminism and gay and lesbian movements has dulled their ability to fight specifically for women and gays and lesbians. The language of women's and gay and lesbian liberation has been replaced by a vacuous ideal of inclusivity.(p.244) Again, her argument is not with the legitimacy of trans demands but with the fit between their content and the interests of women, gays and lesbians. If every movement tries to be everything, it must empty itself of coherent demands. The practical result will be infighting on the one hand (as the reality of different interests makes itself felt) and failure to solve the substantive problems on the other.

I agree that different problems sometimes require different movements, but on almost all the problems so cogently discussed in the book I also think that the general way forward requires everyone receiving a healthy dose of an older feminist ideal: androgyny. Stock herself makes this recommendation (p.249) If neither sex nor gender identity mattered as much as they still do, many, many problems of women, gays, lesbians, trans and non-binary people, and heterosexual males too would be on the way to being solved. That is not the world we inhabit, but it is the world I think we should build towards.

Lessons From History XIV: Georg Lukacs: The Destruction of Reason

Originally posted, 15 February, 2022

The Destruction of Reason by Georg Lukacs was written in the wake of the Second World War. Lukacs set out to trace the arc of what he called “irrationalism,” from its origins in post-Hegelian German philosophy, through Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, to Heidegger, racist theorists like Chamberlain, to its conclusion in Hitler and the Nazis. Little read today (on account both of its length and reputation for a mechanical and reductionist approach to the history of philosophy) the resurgence of right-wing populism and its anti-scientific ideology make the book relevant once again.

As I write this morning, a small group of anti-vaccine protesters continues to blockade the Ambassador Bridge whose spans I can see through the window of my study. (Note: they have now been dispersed and arrested). While there were only about 100 (raising questions about the sympathies of the police, who, as Indigenous activists across the country have pointed out, would certainly have broken the blockade by force if the protesters had been Indigenous) they are the [Canadian vanguard](#) of a global anti-vax, anti-science movement. There is a difference between criticizing the policy implications of scientific reasoning (readers of the blog will know that I have been critical of lockdowns and travel restrictions), and outright rejecting clear statistical and empirical evidence. The irrationality of the anti-vax crowd is double: on the one hand, they cannot evaluate even the simplest statistical evidence of correlation between vaccine refusal and disease severity and risk of death, and on the other cannot properly judge the relationship between means and ends. If their goal is an end to lockdowns (and I share that goal in the abstract), then the appropriate means is to get vaccinated. The higher the rate of vaccination, the lower the rate of hospitalization, the less reason there will be for restrictions and lockdowns.

But arguing with these protesters (as I have done) soon reveals that they are not there to debate probabilities. The movement has a strong right-wing populist flavour that should be a source of political concern. Thus far, Canadian politics remains free of a mass right-wing movement akin to Trumpism in the US, but it is emerging around former Conservative MP Maxime Bernier and his People’s Party of Canada (whose role behind these protests has yet to be exposed but I am sure they have had some hand in them). Argue and confront we must, because these groups have an acidic effect everywhere on coherent policy and practice. The protesters at the bridge are motivated by grab bag of right-wing skepticism and pseudo-science (anti-vaccination, climate change denial, etc), but they are united in an undemocratic conflation of their own firmly held, if nonsensical, positions, with generalizable social interests. And: they seem ready to use [violence](#) to advance their goals.

I do not think Canada is on the verge of a Nazi take over. However, the coalescence of the far right and anti-science should sound alarm bells because even small groups of determined activists can have disastrous effects for others. Tens of thousands of workers are off the job in Windsor and across the river in Michigan (which should serve to correct any naive beliefs that this movement has anything to do with working class interests, short or long term). In the US, the results have been far worse: world-leading mortality figures as a result of mass refusal to get vaccinated and wear masks. Lukacs' reminder to philosophers (and scientists) that they have a special duty in the face of mass irrationality is thus newly poignant:

“From the lesson that Hitler taught the world each individual and each nation should try and learn something for their own good. And this responsibility exists in a particularly acute form for philosophers, whose duty it should be to supervise the existence and evolution of reason in proportion to their concrete share in social developments.” (91)

Again, the point is not that every anti-vaxer or climate change denier is a Nazi. Rather, the point is that the solution to social problems must be rooted in reason, evidence, and rational argument—a point the academic and post-modern left tended to forget, but best remember or suffer the consequences of adding anti-science fuel to the right-wing populist fire.

I share the principle that Lukacs defends with such vigour over 850 pages. However, I cannot say that I agree completely with the arc of philosophical history that he traces. The book is thus something of a fallacy of division: true overall, but false in the inferences it makes to some of its parts (particular philosophers). However, with regard to those targets that have retained their philosophical importance into the twenty-first century—Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt—Lukacs' criticisms are spot on and deserving of contemporary re-appraisal.

The foundation of Lukacs' critique is the principle that the social implications of a philosophical system express its concrete truth. No matter how high thinking appears to ascend above the day to day, it must ultimately be judged in terms of the social forces that it enables or impedes. While this principle is true, one must also be careful to not interpret it in too mechanical a fashion. The social foundations and implications of philosophical systems cannot straightforwardly be read off the class position of the authors (if that were so, Engels, the communist factory owner, would have been impossible). Most philosophical systems that have any degree of social impact tend also to be internally complex. Internal complexity can lead to contradictory social implications: one side can be seized upon by one group and a second side by another and both used in distinctive ways. Descartes' was appropriated by orthodox Catholics like Malbranche, but also by the Enlightenment *philosophes* a century later.

Lukacs regularly acknowledges this internal complexity in theory, but in practice falls back into a mechanical materialist reading that he once (in *History and Class Consciousness*) and later (in *The Ontology of Social Being*) rejected. “What ultimately determines an ideologist's philosophical level is the depths to which he fathoms the questions of the day his ability to raise these questions to the peak of philosophical abstraction, and the extent to which the standpoint derived from his class position allows him to explore these questions in their full breadth and depth.”(9) There are enough denunciations of “petit bourgeois” complicity to make even the most dogmatic Stalinist of old wish the book had been more rigorously edited. More seriously, in

my view at least, his mechanical materialism also causes him to regularly overlook points of important connection between Marxism and some non-Marxist traditions. This problem is particularly acute when it comes to pragmatism, which Lukacs lumps in with “irrationalism,” but which actually derives from (among other sources) Hegel’s historical social philosophy. (See for example Josiah Royce’s excellent lectures on Hegel and German Idealism). Lukacs thus charts an inconsistent path between revealing the truth of philosophy as response to broader social problems that opens up and closes off certain forms of action and reducing philosophy to a mechanical reflex of the changing needs of the ruling class.

This problem notwithstanding, Lukacs’ understanding of “irrationalism” must be taken seriously. While he dates its origins from the work of the later Schelling (who retreated from his early and influential understanding of the dialectical development of nature from mechanical material relationships to self-organizing living organisms), the real turning point is Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. The problems with which irrationalism wrestled were real: the non-reducibility of all natural and social forces and processes and purposive systems to the terms of mechanical materialism, but its solutions were nothing more than re-statements of the problem. The history of irrationalism “hinges on the development of science and philosophy, and it reacts to the new questions they pose by designating the mere problem as the answer and declaring the allegedly fundamental insolubility of the problem to be a higher form of comprehension.”(104) The key to understanding irrationalism is that it follows from the denial of the dialectical (historical) development of science and rationality. Both advance by degrees, but at any given moment contain contradictions. Irrationalism abstracts the problem from its history and declares it insoluble by scientific means. It then then leaps over the concrete historical solution into ‘intuitions’ of meaningful wholes whose existence cannot be demonstrated but must be taken on faith.

The concrete historical solution requires social changes and further scientific research using better, more comprehensive methods. But irrationalism rejected both in favour of reactionary politics on the one hand and the elevation of subjective feeling over objective truth on the other. “After Schopenhauer and especially Nietzsche, irrationalist pessimism broke down the convention that there existed an objective external world and that an unrestricted and thorough perception of it would indicate a way out of the problems arousing despair. *Knowledge* of the world was now increasingly converted into (more and more arbitrary) *interpretations*.” (87)

The academic left has still not assimilated the disastrous consequences of the idealist reduction of objective natural and social reality to interpretation. Doing so ultimately reduces truth to force and power, and the right— as the on-going protests across Canada show— can regularly mobilize more determined forces in support of even the most non-sensical empirical positions. Cultivating a respect for scientific truth as (corrigible, fallible, and historically revisable) explanation of objective processes cannot on its own combat right wing forces, but to the extent that respect for historically developing science becomes socially pervasive, the right’s mobilizing ideologies can be isolated and mocked.

Thus, while Lukacs explains in his long historical introduction the unique features of German history that made it susceptible to irrationalist subjectivism, the danger is general. Germany was particularly vulnerable because of the failure of the liberal revolution that gave birth to

republican liberal capitalism (as in France) or modern liberal-capitalist institutions despite symbolic feudal holdovers (as in the United Kingdom). This German “backwardness,” also decried by Marx and Engels, led to a nationalist glorification of archaic institutions and gave philosophy an outsized role in the national psyche as a mark of German superiority. At critical turning points Germany turned to an alliance between archaic social classes (the Junker nobility) and a strong, authoritarian state (Frederick II, Bismarck) to advance capitalist development while impeding corresponding political changes towards republicanism and democracy. Lingered feudal elements were then celebrated as triumphs over the mechanical and bureaucratic structures of capitalist life (think of Weber’s critique of bureaucracy) when in reality they were signs that Germany was playing catch up with the rest of Europe. When competitive pressures forced it to embark late on the imperialist adventurism, it brought Germany into conflict with the major Western European powers (WW1). Its decisive defeat and subsequent humiliation set the stage for Hitler.

Lukacs does not maintain that late-nineteenth century German philosophy consciously advocated for fascist dictatorship. Fascism was a unique response to the crisis of German (and global) capitalism of the 1920’s. He does maintain that the victory of the Nazi’s in 1933 casts a new and sinister light on the previous century’s major philosophers, and in particular, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Schopenhauer presented himself as an apolitical pessimist who boldly and honestly exposed the meaninglessness and futility of human existence. Individual human beings were nothing more than instances of a universal will shaping itself through projects that were, as individual life-activities, meaningless because finite and doomed to go under. The philosopher who gleams this insight from his reflections is thus entitled to withdraw to his study to chuckle over the misguided concerns of the peons about how they will pay the rent secure in their belief that they have seen through the futility of such mundane worries. “This elevation above ordinary egotism entails no obligations on account of its ‘sublime’ mystico-cosmic generality: it discredits social obligations and replaces them with empty emotional promptings, sentimentalities which may on occasion be reconciled with the greatest crimes against society.” (209) Since life as such is meaningless, Schopenhauer concludes, problems of social life are meaningless too.

If one assumes that social problems are insoluble, then it follows that political organization is a waste of time. The wise person— Schopenhauer— cultivates a detached aestheticist attitude to the meaningless goings on of the lives of the *hoi poloi* and looks forward to death: the return to the quiescence of de-individuated being. “For the futility of life means above all the individual’s release from all social obligations and all responsibility towards men’s forward development... the strongly accented aristocratism of Schopenhauer’s philosophy lifts its adherents far above (in imagination) the wretched mob that is short-sighted enough to fight and to suffer for a betterment of social conditions. So Schopenhauer’s system, well-laid out and architecturally ingenious in form, rises up like a modern luxury hotel on the brink of the abyss ... And the daily sight of the abyss, between the leisurely enjoyment of meals or works of art, can only enhance one’s pleasure in this elegant comfort.” (243) However, should anything threaten to disturb that comfort, Schopenhauer was willing to exit the attitude of detached repose and embrace reaction. When revolutionary workers were in the streets of Berlin in 1848 demanding a republican government,

Schopenhauer gave a Prussian officer his opera glasses so he could better target the workers. (343)

Nietzsche's principle of the will to power was derived from Schopenhauer, but whereas his predecessor preached aloof withdrawal, Nietzsche demanded active engagement with the emerging democratic and socialist forces of the day. Lukacs excoriates liberal interpreters of Nietzsche like Walter Kaufmann who tried to salvage his reputation from the reactionary implications of his constant attacks on workers and democrats and his overt celebration of domination, exploitation, and the reduction of the mass of human beings to the status of tools for use— slaves— of a new master aristocratic class. Lukacs is unsparing- and, I believe— correct in his contention that Nietzsche is the philosopher of German imperialist reaction *par excellence*. "What Nietzsche provided," Lukacs demonstrates, "was a morality for the socially militant bourgeoisie and middle class intelligentsia of imperialism." (353) How can anyone who has read Nietzsche deny that "he levelled against his age the criticism that democracy was blunting the struggle between masters and mob and that the master-race morality was making too many concessions to slave morality?" (355) While his sister and the Nazi's might have edited the work to draw out its most extreme reactionary elements, they did not put those elements in the works. They were there all along. "Nietzsche, from first to last, was trying to make the idea of human equality intellectually contemptible and to wipe it out: that was his basic aim throughout his career." (366)

Lukacs is capable of acknowledging the genius and wit of Nietzsche, but what he refuses to do- and he is right to so refuse, (as too many philosophers, including many on the left will not do) is to abstract the witty culture critique from the menacing political demands for re-establishing novel conditions of servitude. He thus concludes that "Nietzsche's brightly variegated, mutually irreconcilable myths yield up their ideational unity, their objective coherence: they are all imperialist bourgeois myths serving to mobilize all imperialist forces against their chief adversary [the working class]." (394)

Less convincing than his expose of Nietzsche is his critique of *lebensphilosophie* (life-philosophy) and in particular the contributions of Dilthey. While later versions of vitalism (as Lukacs calls it) did contribute to the fascist glorification of war as the highest expression of an active human spirit, Dilthey's work in no way created the "philosophical mood" that opened the door to fascism. (416) (The seeds of the fascist perversion of life philosophy should be traced back to Nietzsche's one-sided affirmation of predation as the highest expression of life). Lukacs does note that Dilthey's attempt to develop a method that could explain "the spiritual world's relationship to the physical" was a response to a genuine philosophical-scientific problem. (424) In fact, Lukacs himself would turn to the very issue in, to my mind, his most important work, *The Ontology of Social Being*. Dilthey's only fault seems to have been that he did not turn to Marxism for the method he was looking for, even though the Marxism of that time would not have been able to supply the tools he needed to understand symbolic life in its own terms, i.e., non-reductively.

More successful is his critique of Heidegger. As with Nietzsche, Lukacs does not deny that Heidegger was a philosopher of remarkable insights. "Thus, what Heidegger termed phenomenology and ontology was in reality no more than an abstractly mythicizing,

anthropological description of human existence; in his concrete phenomenological descriptions, however, it unexpectedly turned into an-often grippingly interesting– description of intellectual philistinism during the crisis of the imperialist period.” (498) He is quick to add that his sympathetic readers (especially those who rehabilitated his reputation after the war) ignore the objective realities of his work and career. First, as most people know by now, Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party who helped implement Nazi policy in German Universities (including firing Jewish faculty) when was rector at Freiburg. Despite what he later said– that these moves were a necessary accommodation to overwhelming Nazi power– Lukacs is able to demonstrate (probably for the first time) the underlying connection between Heidegger’s phenomenology and an acquiescent attitude to political power.

Like Schopenhauer, Heidegger’s existential phenomenology converts concrete social problems (the reduction of people to mere things in industrial capitalism), into a permanent existential state (they-ness, or ‘*das Mann*’). “Bourgeois man’s sense of becoming inessential, indeed, a non-entity, was a universal experience among the intelligentsia in this period.” (503) Heidegger captures a real social truth, but then converts it into a permanent existential problem of human being. A quiescent attitude to social life thus follows naturally from such premises: “the threat to personal ‘existence’ is so deflected as to prevent its giving rise to any obligation to alter one’s external living conditions or indeed to collaborate in transforming objective social reality.” (507) Tragically, when the power to which one acquiesces is bent on genocide and global imperial domination, the consequences of inaction are unspeakable. In one of the most poignant passages in the book, Lukacs makes clear the real world implications of Heidegger’s rhapsodizing about the call of Being. Calling out the allies who accepted Heidegger’s post-war argument that he should be allowed to resume his career because no one could know what they would have done in the same circumstances (but we do know: some, like Walter Benjamin paid the ultimate price and were murdered by the Nazis, while others went into exile) Lukacs reminds everyone the type of person many of his students became: “Heidegger discretely refrains from saying ... that those young men were not only in a ‘situation confronting death’ under Hitler, but also took a highly active part in murder and torture, pillage and rape. Evidently, he considers it superfluous to mention this, ... who can tell what a pupil of Heidegger intoxicated by Holderlin ‘thought and lived’ when he was pushing women and children into the gas chamber at Auschwitz?”(833)

We do know what Carl Schmitt, Nazi legal theorist and a key architect of Nazi policy and political practice thought, because he published widely at the time. Shamefully, contemporary thinkers who consider themselves leftists like Chantal Mouffe have revived this arch-Nazi’s work. This revivalism is even worse than in the case of Heidegger. Schmitt lacks all of Heidegger’s genuine insights into basic existential structures of experience. His political theory amounts to little more than fancy-talk justification of arbitrary power. Mouffe and others in her train turn to Schmitt for his critique of liberalism, but fail utterly to distinguish between immanent critiques of liberalism from the left (for example, Marx), and fascist critiques from the right. Schmitt did make abstractly cogent arguments against liberalism, but their proper evaluation must take into account the ends that those criticisms served: the justification of Nazi totalitarianism and imperialist violence. Fortunately, Lukacs was already on the case in 1951.”Schmitt absorbed all the nineteenth century anti-democratic polemics in his system in order to prove the irreconcilable antithesis of liberalism and democracy and to show the inevitable growth of mass democracy into dictatorship.” (655) The political logic of the

exception that intrigues Mouffe and Giorgio Agamben was really the power of the dictator to do anything he wanted. "Schmitt revived for the age of Hitler the old theme of pre-war anti-democratic propaganda, namely, Germany's ideological superiority over the democratic states." (660) The open and mostly uncritical embrace of an unrepentant Nazi plots the distance that some wings of the academic left have drifted from theoretically and practically coherent positions.

Lukacs' tome, despite its biblical length, thus repays reading. Does he prove that the objective implications of the history of irrationalist philosophy from the late Schelling was the rise of the Nazis? That would depend upon our criterion of success.

I do not think that Lukacs uncovers a straightforward intellectual-historical logic that takes us from theological revival (in Schelling) to Hitler. In fact, Lukacs shows unequivocally in the last chapter of the book that Hitler cared not at all for philosophy of any sort. He was not even committed to the racist pseudo-science of a Chamberlain. Chamberlain provided the Nazis with a theory that "those belonging to the other races ... were not human beings in the proper sense of the word." (710) Hitler and other Nazis would use his ravings, but at the end of the day Nazi ideology was "a hotch potch, concocted with unscrupulous demagoguery, of the most diverse reactionary theories for which the only criterion was whether they would enable Hitler to hoodwink the masses." (723) Hitler was a pure cynic, uniquely willing to use any means at his disposal to advance his ends, but he was not the logical outcome of a dialectic of reaction.

Nevertheless, his opportunism and ability to exploit a social crisis that could also have benefited the left was made possible by the gradual relinquishing of concern for objectivity and evidence and the waning of the ability to distinguish universal values from forcefully asserted mythical destinies. The affirmation of subjective feeling, intuition, and myth do not sound dangerous until demagogues like Hitler put them to work smashing all opposition. By the time a Hitler can win, the forces that could have opposed a Nazi-like movement have lost their internal strength and coherence because the universal principles upon which they once stood and for which they fought have been discredited. Once there is no longer any recognized difference between universal truth and fervently held belief, the most dogmatic upholders of the most dangerous myths prevail.

From that perspective, *The Destruction of Reason* teaches a truth that today's leftists sorely need to re-learn.

Readings: Nothing Less Than Great: Reforming Canada's Universities, Harvey P. Weingarten

Originally posted, 26 November, 2021

The arguments that Harvey Weingarten makes in *Nothing Less Than Great* will be familiar to anyone who has paid attention to the various position papers issued by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council of Ontario (HEQCO) over the past decade. Before leading HEQCO, Weingarten was the President of the University of Calgary, and before that, Provost of McMaster University. I have been critical of [HEQCO's](#) approach to [quantitative evaluation](#) and institutional differentiation. (Follow the first link and see "What is Called Critical Thinking" and "Universities and the Importance of Disciplinary Traditions and the second and see "Teaching Loads and Research Outputs of Ontario University Faculty Members: A Critique," and Ontario's Differentiation Policy for Post-Secondary Education, a Critique"). Nothing Weingarten argues in this book changed my mind. However, I do not want to reiterate past differences but read the book with fresh eyes. I have come to share some of Weingarten's concerns, especially about the future of the Humanities. I do not think he lights on solutions in his book, but I do think that restoring them to health will require new thinking about the organization of undergraduate classes, not only in the Humanities, but across the University.

The book is concise and focused, intended for the tax paying public more than academics. However, I hope academics read and engage with its arguments. Academics as a group tend to avoid playing an active role in the governance of their institutions. Relatively few are willing to serve on University Senates and fewer still are active in their Faculty Associations. The degree of ignorance about government policy is both concerning and surprising. While we regard ourselves as indispensable experts, Canadian governments regard us public sector workers. When the broader public sector is targeted (as has happened with regard to wages in both Manitoba and Ontario), academics are included. As Weingarten makes clear, the days of relative government neglect of the inner organization of universities are coming to an end. The disaster at [Laurentian](#) (which Weingarten does not discuss) was a shocking example of collusion between the courts, the Ontario government, and the Laurentian administration. As the problems caused by COVID hopefully continue to fade and the new Strategic Mandate Agreements between the Ontario government and Ontario's Universities kick back in, we would be fools to think something like Laurentian could not happen again. Weingarten is making his own arguments, but those arguments also provide insight into what government's might be thinking. Academics should pay attention.

The book is organized into 11 short chapters dealing with 9 substantive challenges: the economic benefits of university education, accessibility, curriculum reform, the proper fit between university education and labour markets, the proper relationship between governments and universities, impediments to institutional innovation, the sustainability of universities in their current form, their overall quality, and the impact of Covid-19 on their future. I have argued at

length elsewhere against the [learning outcomes](#) approach championed by Weingarten. I have no disagreements with his position as far as accessibility is concerned. I will concentrate on the question of the social purpose of university education, curriculum reform, the future relationship between governments and universities (using Ontario as my example), and the sustainability of the system.

Weingarten is a social scientist and he writes like one: the book is short on poetry and long on statistics. His directness is a good thing. He does not hide his interest in systematic change and he provides statistical evidence to support his criticisms and recommendations. However, as is often the case with statistical evidence, the background problems that it does not measure is often as important as the phenomena that it does measure.

Weingarten is the sort of administrator that I liked to deal with when I was president of the Windsor University Faculty Association: he does not mince words and is clear about his practical agenda. Honesty is important: if there are competing agendas regarding the future of universities, then it is important that the opposed sides understand the other's position. Obfuscation and circumlocution mitigate conflict in the short term but ensure that changes happen by stealth and force in the long term. If changes are going to be made, academics should be out in front leading them rather than reacting, surprised at an agenda that was hidden from them (and to which they did not pay enough attention to suss out). In Ontario, the looming introduction of performance based funding is a sign that changes are already underway. It behooves those of us who care about the university as a public educational institutions (let alone our workplaces) to pay attention to the implications of those policy changes already underway and those that will follow.

Weingarten begins from the principle that the main purpose of the university is economic: the sort of education that students receive should prepare them for future careers, and those future careers should contribute to the international competitiveness of the Canadian economy. “Virtually every survey asking students why they have chosen to pursue post-secondary education indicates that the dominant, although not exclusive, reason students go to university is to get the knowledge and credentials necessary to get a good job. Equally, the dominant reason that Canadian governments now and in the past have invested in a public higher education system is to educate a workforce that has the knowledge and skills to drive the economy.”(15) Weingarten acknowledges the complexity of the demands different constituents (faculty, students, the government, the tax paying public) place on universities. He acknowledges the importance of interest-led research and discipline-focussed teaching. But he is clear and keeps coming back to the point that research and teaching must ultimately prepare students for future careers and the national economy for the rigours of intensified international competition.

No reasonable person involved with academia can deny the importance of future careers to students. It is easy to talk about the intrinsic value of education from the comfort of one's tenured position. At the same time, Weingarten cites abundant evidence that university education still pays off for students, regardless of the discipline that they study.(17-20) Although [humanities enrolments](#) are declining, surveys show that humanities students find meaningful work at higher than average salaries (21). Moreover, studies also reveal that there is no mechanical relationship between one's major and one's future career. The evidence suggests, therefore, that regardless of what one studies one's investment in university education pays off,

often in unexpected ways. Weingarten concludes that “reams of data” confirm that “going to university is worth it.”(27) The worry about whether university education is worth it, about whether it increases one’s prospects for a bright career, is misplaced.

Misplaced, but also concealing a different agenda that Weingarten is not shy to discuss. The real concern of critics of the existing higher education system is the relative autonomy of the internal academic organization of the university from economic forces and political power. Whereas once this relative autonomy was regarded as essential to the purposes of the university, today, Weingarten notes, the “apparent reluctance of universities to move and adapt quickly and to be more responsive— their seeming inability to initiate significant curriculum or program changes or reforms— is seen as a negative.”(103) Why, if the evidence shows that university graduates do better economically on average than people who do not go to university, do politicians and reformers keep going on about jobs and the need for universities to adapt? Because jobs are a rhetorically effective way of putting deep institutional reform on the agenda.

The general public is not going to be motivated to demand changes to the university because they suddenly become incensed by the distribution of power between the Board of Governors, the Senate, and the Faculty Association. Most will not feel confident about entering into an abstract debate about whether Classics and Philosophy should still exist. Some might be more engaged (as the conservative backlash in the United States against Critical Race Theory indicates) by media-stoked culture wars, but as with most political problems, the majority of people do not really care. The sure fire way to start a public debate is to talk about tax dollars. If politicians are convinced, despite the evidence, that universities are not producing job ready graduates, then they will start to worry about whether tax money is being well-spent. If politicians start making noise about wasted tax dollars, their constituents start to take an interest in the problem. Political momentum can be built around demands for accountability, innovation, and closer alignment between the academic mission of the university and the economic forces that politicians serve.

Lurking not too deeply in the shadows of this debate are business leaders eager to tell the media and politicians that university graduates are not well-prepared for the world of work.(68-74) If that is true, then one wonders why businesses keep hiring university graduates and paying them more than non-university graduates. Moreover, one wonders why they appear to hire graduates regardless of their disciplinary background.(67) Weingarten does not explore this tension in the evidence that he presents. He does not, I suggest, because his real goal is structural transformation of the university sphere, and the criticisms made by business leaders are a way to get the attention of the politicians who can force institutional change on universities.

So what sorts of changes does Weingarten want to see? First, he wants to see curriculum reform that prioritizes skills over content. Second, he wants to see more institutional differentiation. Third, he wants to see more quantitative evidence that universities are doing the educational job that they claim to be doing. Weingarten believes that the sustainability of the university system depends upon making these deep structural changes. I will discuss each in turn.

Weingarten’s concerns around curriculum concern both the existing disciplinary structure of universities and the content of particular courses. The disciplinary shape of the contemporary university was formed in the nineteenth century and has barely changed. New departments have

been added as science developed and political forces created new disciplines, but the university is still composed of departments, organized in the faculties and schools, each of which defends their interest in their own perpetuation. Perhaps of more salience today, the nineteenth century university was centred on the humanities, and the distribution of faculty positions continues to reflect that historical role, even as enrolments decline. When Weingarten worries about sustainability, it is hard to not think that he has the Humanities most in mind. (121) That is not to say that he thinks that the traditional humanist disciplines should be eliminated, but he insists that the disciplinary structure of the university be rethought.

He argues forcefully that undergraduate students are not being well-served by a structure that treats learning as the transmission of disciplinary knowledge. "Content is largely what professors teach, what they evaluate, and what universities credential. There is considerable controversy, however, over whether students, in the right numbers and to the right extent, are learning the cognitive and behavioural skills we expect graduates to possess." (54) In order to remain relevant, Weingarten argues, teaching should be re-organized around problem-solving, inter-disciplinary courses. This transformation, he believes, will ensure that students learn the generic skills they will need for success in the future: literacy, numeracy, analytic and critical thinking, communication, and creativity.

Weingarten cites alarming evidence that these skills are not being effectively taught. One survey that he references claims that fully 25% of Canadian university graduates lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. (58) When I say basic, I mean basic: inability to write a coherent paragraph or solve the problem: 1 is to 5 as 5 is to x. If true— and I am not doubting the studies— then there is a serious problem. No one should have an advanced degree that cannot communicate their thoughts in written language or understand basic arithmetic. But is the problem the prioritization of content over skills?

It might be. I will return to the relationship between skill and content in a moment. First, I want to add a consideration that Weingarten does not explore: the learner side of the teacher-student relationship. I say this not to bemoan the stereotypical "younger generation." They are no dumber or lazier than any other generation, but they do face heightened social and economic pressures. These heightened pressures must factor in to a complete account of the failures of universities to teach basic skills. The study that Weingarten cites does not disaggregate the data into relative performance of different universities, but I would be willing to wager that schools such as Windsor, where I teach, mid-sized comprehensive institutions with a high proportion of first generation university students, many working class and many working, some as much as 40 hours a week, perform the worst. I do not think that the relatively poor performance is due to incompetence on the part of professors or a too narrow focus on transmission of disciplinary content, but owes to the fact that students do not have the time to devote to their studies. How can a student be expected to excel academically if they are not only working 40 hours week, but must also listen to the incessant drum beat of parents and politicians fussing about whether they will find a job in the future? No amount of curriculum reform will solve that problem. (Curriculum reform will also not solve the problem of the anxieties that prevent so many students today from finding the courage to think, but that is a discussion for another day). Solving the time problem requires social changes and a different understanding of the purpose of university education. I will return to this issues in conclusion.

That said, I do not disagree with Weingarten that a too narrow focus on content can impede the development of essential intellectual capacities. However, the solution is not to impose generic skills development strategies and learning outcomes on departments, but to encourage professors to think about how to articulate the development of these capacities *through* the teaching of disciplinary traditions. To use philosophy as an example, professors need to ask what they are doing when they teach a historical philosophical text. The wrong ways to deliver the content is, on the one hand, to take the students through the arguments and focus on the historical problem or, on the other, to try to mechanically map the old content onto a contemporary problem. It is highly unlikely that a 500 year old philosophical problem is going to match up directly to a contemporary problem. What they can do is serve as a foil that enables students to think differently about a contemporary problem. Learning to think critically— which is what philosophy should help people do if it does anything— is not first of all a matter of learning to apply abstract rules or even detect errors of reasoning. Learning to think critically is first of all a matter of learning to think differently about problems, learning how to see problems become problems, and about how to change our frame of reference so that new solutions open up which would not come into view unless the initial framing presuppositions were exposed.

This approach does not abandon disciplinary traditions but puts them to work developing different facets of different skills. Studying philosophy, to stick with that example, is not about memorizing what an old philosopher said, it is about learning to think about fundamental problems of experience and knowledge in new ways, ways that are vitally important to the intelligent conduct of any practice or occupation. One cannot abstract the skill component from the content and establish it as a generic learning module. Just as learning to throw a curve ball requires the pitcher to learn to grip and throw a real ball, repeatedly, so philosophy demands reading and writing about real philosophers, also repeatedly. Weingarten is right to expose a lazy pedagogy that does little more than report on the contents of great books. The solution is a demanding pedagogy that puts the books to work exposing the unargued presuppositions of established ways of organizing life.

For Weingarten, a renewed focus of skills is connected to the need for institutional differentiation. Institutional differentiation was a key recommendation of an [Ontario government report](#) published in 2013 on the future of post-secondary education. In that report, “differentiation” meant that every school should identify core strengths upon which to concentrate and to build. The underlying idea is economic: universities should identify their comparative advantage and market themselves accordingly. This recommendation is a significant departure from what I would argue is the main justification for a geographically dispersed public university system: accessible intellectual comprehensiveness. Local students should be able to access a local university which both covers the major traditional disciplines and is responsive to new developments and tendencies. The idea of differentiation will hurt comprehensive universities outside of major cities the hardest. The Laurentian administration appealed in part to the differentiation strategy to justify its cuts. As the dystopic outcome of that debacle shows, Northern, Francophone, and Indigenous students will suffer the most under this approach to institutional restructuring. Weingarten champions accessibility, but accessibility has two sides: whether students can afford university, and the type of university they are able to access.(43) If students outside of Southern Ontario do not have access to schools offering a full range of programs, they will have no choice but to leave their regions, exacerbating the brain drain for the

North to the South and increasing the economic and social inequalities that have always divided the province.

Weingarten also champions a second type of differentiation: market driven creation of new institutions with a narrow, vocational focus and emphasis on rapid credentialing. The two examples of new institutions that he discusses at length are from the US: the Western Governor's University and the University of Minnesota-Rochester.(78, 110-11) Both are geared to students looking for quick, career-specific training. I have no issue with new institutions responding to unmet social needs, but I do not think that these institutions should be called universities or allowed to compete with them. Universities are, as their name implies, concerned with the totality of human intellectual endeavour, from the study of our spiritual traditions to the hardest of the hard sciences. The purpose of the university is to combine broad appreciation of the different dimensions of human knowledge (and the historical tensions knowledge-production has produced) with deep understanding of a discipline of most interest to the student. Not everyone needs to go to university when they are 18; not everyone who finds themselves in need of re-training needs to go to a university to re-train. People can come to university later in life; other institutions can provide job-specific re-training better than universities and they should be allowed to operate. But they should not be put in direct competition with universities.

A proper university education takes time. If short term employment rates become a deciding issue in the allocation of funding, and universities and educational start-ups are funded from the same envelope, universities will lose public funding to institutions that prioritize timely re-training. If market forces are going to be the decider, then more universities will face bankruptcy and close. Weingarten does not explicitly argue that competition should be allowed to drive existing universities under, but he does explicitly endorse allowing market forces to operate in the public education in the hope that it will spur innovation. "If today's universities do not move expeditiously, others will step into this space, whether from the public to the private sphere, leading to greater diversity of higher education institution in Canada than currently exists. This would not be a bad thing. In fact, it should be encouraged."(168) I fear that this sort of "innovation" will produce more Laurentian's than progressive pedagogical experiments.

Both curriculum reform and innovation are tied to Weingarten's overriding concern: the development of new metrics that allow universities to prove that they are doing what they claim to be doing and can be used by governments to hold universities accountable. Weingarten does not believe that everything relevant in education is measurable, but he does believe that those aspects of it that can be measured ought to be and the results used to establish baselines for institutional quality.(57) He is concerned (as I noted above) that institutions are failing a large percentage of students who are graduating without basic literacy and numeracy skills. He is also concerned about the broader issue of public funding: democratic societies earmark a certain percentage of the total social product for investment in public services. The political institutions responsible for those allocative decisions have a duty to ensure that those funds are well-spent.(83) Weingarten argues that if it turns out that universities are in effect wasting money by not educating students, or not educating them in a way that prepares them for contemporary life, forcing changes upon them by reducing funding is entirely appropriate.(95)

There are two problems with this argument, one economic and the other philosophical. The economic problem is that the attempt to correct qualitative institutional failings through quantitatively reduced funding does not address the problem but could send universities into a death spiral. I agree that increased funding is not the guaranteed solution to every problem. Contemporary societies must fund a wide array of public goods; if a dollar goes to one institution it cannot go to another, so eventually, zero sum choices must be made. However, reducing operating budgets cannot improve the quality of instruction, because the qualitative problem has to do with the practices through which students are taught. If students are failing, then new and better practices must be developed. Reducing funding just means—as Laurentian shows—that institutions will lose departments and people. But the decision to close departments will not be made on the basis of how well or poorly they are teaching their students, but on the basis of their relative costs.

The relative cost of a department can be worked out by dividing the cost of the faculty by the number of students. The higher the ratio of faculty to students, the more cost effective (other things being equal) that department is. For example, if the average engineering professor teaches 500 students per term and the average philosophy professor teaches 50, then engineering is 10 times more cost effective than philosophy (ignoring for the sake of argument equipment costs and other expenses). Guess who will get chopped when budgetary push comes to shove?

The second problem is philosophical and returns us to the problem of the purpose of the university and the time it takes to fulfill that purpose. Many years ago, I argued that the university should be valued as an institution that provides space and time for the development of practices of cognitive freedom. I meant that thinking is always free in relation to its object. When we think about a problem we turn a fixed material reality into an idea that our minds can freely examine. The intellectual examination of material problems opens up new pathways for creative and transformative social interventions (problem-solving, if you prefer) which produce new and hopefully better realities. Everyone thinks all the time, but not everyone is aware of what they are doing when they think (although everyone can become aware). Developing that awareness can be achieved by disciplined self-reflection, experience, and popular education, but I would argue that university education is the most comprehensive and systematic way of cultivating practices of cognitive freedom.

These practices have objective value and make observable contributions to the social world, but I do not think that they are measurable in the sense in which Weingarten would use the term. They are not measurable because their primary effect is internal: people who become aware of their cognitive freedom experience a changed relationship to the world. Instead of treating it as a hard and fast reality that compels them to behave one way rather than another, they learn to see it as a series of problems and challenges. One can confront those challenges *either* by conforming *or* by working to change reality. More than that, however, university helps people realize that human experience is multifaceted: different objects of experience and different domains of life require different criteria of excellence. We do not judge beauty by the same standards as we judge fuel efficiency. Cultivating cognitive freedom enables us to understand that there are different criteria of excellence and when we need to switch between one set and another. Even more than that, cognitive freedom allows us to understand that those criteria of excellence are historical: they change and (hopefully) improve as historically suppressed voices start to speak, new

perspectives are brought to bear on old problems , and the social interests behind principles assumed to be natural exposed.

Cultivating the critical and evaluative capacities through which our cognitive freedom is expressed takes a lifetime. No one should be paying tuition forever, obviously, but society has to ask itself whether it is willing to fund four years of relative autonomy from the mundane demands of economic life so that students (of any age) can cultivate these capacities. The pay off will not be measured primarily in terms of new inventions, money-value growth, or novel philosophical insights, but in terms of the richness of the lives of the people who have devoted themselves to their studies. Quality must indeed be assured, but the quality assessed has to be the quality of the educational experience in all of its dimensions, not just whether students are acquiring skills in the sense that employers use the term. The only persons who can really evaluate whether their lives have been enriched by education are students themselves. I have been an educator long enough to have received many emails from former students years after they graduated. They wanted to reach out and share with me how much their philosophical studies turned out to mean, in ways they could not have imagined. Those realizations are the most important metric of institutional quality. When students recognize, sometimes many years later, that their studies have made them more perceptive, more open to the nuances of experience, more able to speak their minds and stand up for their positions, as well as better able to listen, more patient, more able to take the time to think things through, I think universities have done their job. However, these goods are expressed in terms of enriched life-experience; their value cannot be captured in surveys and questionnaires.

Democratic societies can decide for themselves how to allocate scarce resources. But once those allocative decisions have been made, the institutions responsible for spending the money must be left alone to organize and govern themselves. No one would accept a politician telling the surgeon how to operate. We must either accept that politicians also lack the expertise to tell professors what and how to teach, or citizens should put professors out of their misery and vote to replace universities with training institutes.

Lessons From History XII: Marx and Engels: The German Ideology, Volume II: True Socialism

Originally posted, 10 September, 2021

Even the most seasoned Marxist typically avoids the long slog through Young Hegelian German philosophy which takes up most of *The German Ideology*. Under the reasonable principle that life is too short to waste on ideas that have been rendered dead by history, students tend to focus their attention on Chapter One of Part One. There, Marx and Engels criticise Feuerbach's abstract, romantic materialism and sketch the contrasting principles of historical materialism.

I have been drawn back more and more to *The German Ideology* in recent years as part of a larger project to construct an interpretation of historical materialism that avoids the twin problems of reductive physicalism on the one hand and anthropocentric culturalism on the other. If I am correct, then Marx and Engels charted a new (but still mostly unfollowed) synthetic alternative to these one-sided poles. Against contemporary ideologues who would make all scientific knowledge a social construction historical *materialism* insists on the objective reality of the physical universe, its complete and utter independence on a universal scale from human thought and activity, and the over-riding practical imperative to make human knowledge adequate to the object. On the other hand, as *historical* materialism, its object is not nature as a physical system, but human society, which cannot be comprehended in physicalist terms but requires categories developed from the study of historical processes. The two sides are connected by the principle (which in fact goes back to Aristotle) that the structure of knowledge depends upon and follows from the nature of the object studied. Human society develops out of our work on the natural world, but that world owes its existence to physical forces unleashed long before there were any human beings. Its elements and dynamics are indifferent to the beliefs and theories of human beings, *except on earth*, where intellectual-practical activity has changed raw nature through the construction of human societies.

There is still more work to be done to fully understand the contemporary implications of that chapter, but for unrelated reasons my attention was drawn deeper into the book, to Volume Two, which focuses on a now forgotten set of thinkers known as the "True Socialists" Their appellation tells us everything we need to know about their work: pompous, self-important, moralistic. Their work was without value in the mid-nineteenth century and it has not improved with age. But Marx's and Engels' critique is worth reading because it exposes exactly what social philosophy should not be: verbose platitudes posturing as radical critique.

The chapter is not a model of charitable critique. There are no academic niceties. Marx and Engels are openly contemptuous. The professor in me grimaced at the vicious mockery of opponents, but the philosopher in me laughed out loud. Philosophy can be the stuffiest of disciplines but it does not have to be. It concerns, ultimately, the human condition in all of its dimensions, and what is more human than humour? If someone is pompous and self-important

enough to think that their pretentious abstractions are more politically real than blood and sweat political struggle, what choice does a critic have than to hoist them on the petard of their own arrogance? There is nothing more justifiably funny than the spectacle of the unjustifiably arrogant prophet brought brutally down to earth. And that is what Marx and Engels do.

Despite its name, True Socialism had nothing to do with socialism as a political movement for fundamental social transformation. It was, at best, a German literary (using “literary” in a purely descriptive sense) philanthropic movement masquerading as politics. But what draws Marx’s and Engels’ ire is that these authors had the temerity to criticise actual socialist theorists and movements as inferior to their treacle prose and poetry. One would have to read the whole chapter to really get the humour, but the following passage is typical. One true socialist, Hermann Semmig writes that “French socialists and communists ... have by no means theoretically understood the *essence* of socialism ... even the radical (French) communists have still by no means transcended the antithesis of labour and enjoyment.” Marx and Engels respond, sarcastically “That is to say, our true socialist here is reproaching the French for having a correct consciousness of their actual social conditions, whereas they ought to bring to light “Man’s consciousness of his essence.” (460) Behind the sarcasm they are making a serious philosophical point.

Sound social philosophy does not speculate about the essence of man. It does not criticise society on the basis of moralistic abstractions. It does not compare society as it is with how some theorist thinks it should be. Instead, sound social philosophy must study, empirically, how actual societies function. The “essence” of society is not an idea but a governing dynamic whose effects can be observed in the operations of major social institutions. Likewise, the “essence of man” is (as Marx puts it in the Theses on Feuerbach) “no abstraction inherent in each individual.” It is rather the capacity for constructive labour through which actual societies are produced. “As human beings express their lives,” they argue in Volume One, “so they are.”(31) Or, as Marx puts it in a later essay, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon, “People make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing.” In short, there is no “Man” to understand; there are only concrete human beings using available resources to reproduce their lives and running up against specific constraints generated by the governing dynamic of that society. Real alternatives stem from concrete problem solving efforts, not scholastic abstractions or the sentiments of the romantic heart.

The truth of True Socialism is thus that it is pure sentimentality. Another true socialist Rudolph Matthai tries to infer the guiding values of socialism from his feelings about natural beauty and harmony: “gay flowers ... tall and stately oaks ... their satisfaction, their happiness lie in their life, their growth and blossoming.” Rather like some contemporary “post-humanist” philosophers today, Matthai sees only one side of nature. His romantic souls turns away from the other side, of which Marx and Engels are only too happy to provide him with a reminder: ““Man” could observe a great many other things in nature, e.g., the bitterest competition between plants and animals.”(p.471) Matthai invites us to consider “the lilies of the field.” Marx and Engels do: “Yes, consider the lilies of the field, how they are eaten by goats.” (472) Again, the crucial philosophical point is that this sentiment gets us nowhere because it expresses only the good side of life. In order to change the world we have to understand how it actually works.

Philosophical abstractions are ill-suited to comprehend how the world works precisely because they abstract from the the problem to be explained: why society is as it is and operates the way it operates and causes the sorts of observable damage to peoples lives that it causes. However, I do not think that Marx and Engels are rejecting philosophy, but rejecting bad philosophy. Concrete, historically grounded philosophy, philosophy which understands “the needs of the time in which [i]t arose” has an important role to play in social transformation. It articulates the alternative values that will guide social transformation, but it demonstrates how these values arise from the real needs and activities of human beings, (and not the philosophical mind and poetic soul.)

I remain committed to helping produce that sort of social philosophy. I also believe that every graduate student in philosophy, regardless of their interests, should read this volume. First of all, graduate students are always in danger of taking themselves too seriously, so they should pause and have a laugh. But more seriously, graduate students, because they are in danger of taking themselves too seriously, are highly susceptible to the danger of confusing whatever philosophical theory they are working with with reality itself. The problem is not just that there is more in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in anyone’s philosophy, but that philosophy must conform to and explain the world. The world does not answer to philosophy, philosophy answers to the world. That in no way demeans philosophy but illuminates its real, on going task. The world still needs philosophers, but one’s who understand the proper contribution our discipline can make.

Lessons From History XIII: Giacomo Leopardi: Dialogue Between Fashion and Death

Originally posted, 25 October, 2021

What else could I have chosen for the lucky thirteenth iteration of this occasional series of essays on works that I have found influential or amusing than this short dialogue by the great Italian pessimist poet Giacomo Leopardi? (1798-1837) Leopardi died young but he did not live fast. His life was wracked by ill health, physical pain, and loneliness, but he proved Feuerbach correct: suffering is the mother of great poetry. His art can still move because it sings the song of human truth: the only way to avoid suffering and death is to never be born. Anxiety, pain, and annihilation are constant companions and threats: there is no human life that lasts more than a few minutes that will not be marked by them. If we are going to nonetheless make the journey, we have to very quickly shed childishly naive hopes that everything always works out for the best. Things will work themselves out, but not always for the best.

I came to Leopardi's work through the philosophy of the Italian Marxist Sebastiano Timpanaro. Timpanaro drew upon Leopardi to make a point against what he regarded as the idealist tendencies of too many Western Marxists on the question of the relationship between material nature and human society. Material nature, for Timpanaro, was that which cannot be fundamentally altered by human consciousness or action. Human beings build cultural worlds out of natural resources and we interpret our lives according to symbolic systems whose meanings are not mechanically reducible to survival imperatives. Nevertheless, socialism can never cut itself free from what Marx called the realm of necessity. All things are subject to entropy, everything built will ultimately collapse, everyone born will die. A mature political philosophy must accept the finitude of individual life and refuse technotopian fantasies. Socialism will not create new human beings and cannot supercede the existential vicissitudes of illness, failure, old age, and death.

Timpanaro pointed me towards Leopardi as an honest poetic painter of the slow but inevitable encroachment of the dark into the light of life. Ironically, however, I drew on his work to help make my case *against* pessimism in my book *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life*. I argued that in order to solve human problems we have to understand the "frames of finitude" within which our lives are led. Pessimists like Leopardi (and Schopenhauer) are important because they confront us with the reality of these frameworks. Still, I argued that they are ultimately wrong to conclude that life is at best a misfortune to be endured. If we understand the inescapability of the frameworks, we can concentrate our efforts on solving the social problems we have the power to solve. The more we solve social problems, the more we create the conditions within which we

can all live as well as possible. The limitations that we face in life become challenges to take life seriously, finding meaning and value in the struggle.

The short dialogue between Fashion and Death reveals another side to Leopardi— a sardonic wit that cuts through naive beliefs with the razor sharpness of a Diogenes the Cynic. (To be called a “Cynic” in ancient Greece was not an insult but a commendation. The word comes from the Greek for dog, *Cygnus*. Dogs were regarded as honest companions, hence a cynic was someone with the courage to tell you the no bullshit truth). The dialogue is only five and a half pages long, but it helps explain one of the most profound perplexities of human choice: although we fear death, many of us live in ways almost guaranteed to shorten our lives. The term was not available to him, but Leopardi understands Fashion as a social expression of Freud’s death instinct: a drive that insidiously undermines us from within even as it promotes what appear to be free, life-affirming choices.

How is this possible? Because the biological and social sides of our being can become alienated from each other. As biological beings, we depend upon connection to a life-sustaining natural world. Our lives are threatened by disease and catastrophic accidents. At root, social organization is our way of protecting our lives. However, social relationships also generate their own symbolic values. Social relationships might grow up from the soil of life-protection, but they soon become independent of this function in our minds: the way which one appears to others overtakes materially rational considerations of survival value. Once we begin to value the opinions of others about whether we look *au courant* more than the testimony of objective evidence, we have succumbed to Fashion’s power.

But what is so insightful about Leopardi’s presentation of the problem is that he suggests that the pervasiveness of this phenomenon suggest something deeper is going on than simple mistakes about our ultimate good. There seems to be some tendency at work that drives us into the arms of Fashion, who promptly hands us over to Death. We embrace Fashion to evade the boredom that overcomes us if we are unoccupied for even a few moments. But trying to cure the boredom by wrapping ourselves in Fashion’s comforts speeds our demise (which at least cures the problem of boredom).

In the dialogue, Fashion tries to convince Death that they are sisters in arms. At first, Death is indifferent to Fashion’s attempt to engage her in conversation. She becomes more interested when Fashion proves that she has as great a power over mortals as Death. While everyone is afraid to die, they also stampede to acquire the latest styles and gadgets: “A little at a time, but mostly in these past years, to help you out, I have caused the neglect and the elimination of the exertions and exercises which favor physical well-being, and I have introduced innumerable others that weaken the body in a thousand ways and shorten life and have caused them to be highly valued. I have put in the world such orders and such customs that life itself, both of the body and of the soul, is more dead than alive.” While the switch has flipped on exercise (it is now perhaps the dominant fad), the later point still rings true, but with an even more threatening twist today. The soul-deadening consumerism upon which capitalism relies for its reproduction and growth is a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions playing havoc with the climate.

And yet— as Fashion tells her sister Death- people refuse to get off the treadmill, even as it threatens to deposit all of us into the grave of an unlivable climate. Stalwart critics of anthropogenic climate change are once again gearing up to demand that governments take decisive action to cap and reduce greenhouse gas emissions at the upcoming climate summit, but millions and millions of people are still shopping and buying cars, all the while demanding that someone else do something to solve a problem that they have no intention of changing their lifestyle to address. Last week, as the talk of the commentariat was on the climate summit, Chevy announced the launch of its biggest V-8 engine ever.

Could it be that the persistence of social problems despite literally millennia of struggles to solve them is a function of an inner drive to self-destruction which re-appears periodically to undo solutions we once thought permanent? That is a supposition only a pessimist can love. I do not think that human history can be explained by any absolute; it neither advances steadily towards complete freedom nor are practical advances ever fully undone from within by some impulse to periodic self-destruction. But if we are going to deal in absolutes, we are better off listening to the pessimists, because they force us to confront the worst realities of life as a vulnerable being.

If we still have the strength to go on and take another breath rather than killing ourselves after we listen to their dark mass, it must be because there is something essentially good in the merest self-conscious presence before the spectacle of the world. And if there is something good simply in being sensuously open to the unfolding of the world, there is something better in being able to develop life-affirmative connections with things and creatures and people. But that betterness is not given to us, we have to work together to create the conditions in which everyone can experience it.