



# Thinkings 8:

Collected Interventions, Evocations, and Readings

2018-19

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# Interventions



# Far-Right Identity Politics and the Task for the Left

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Identity politics is a key problem of our age, but the problem is typically misunderstood. Usually the left is vilified by the the right for encouraging divisive politics rooted in the grievances of different minority groups. These groups are denounced for pursuing selfish agendas that harm the unity of the nation. The right then portrays itself as the guardian of the nations' unity. In so doing, it identifies its agenda with the universal values and interests of all people. Those who disagree with the agenda are portrayed as enemies of the people, even in the case that all the opponents added together make up a majority of "the people" in whose interests the right-wing populists claim to speak. Hence, the deepest problem with identity politics is not that people fight against their experiences of oppression on the basis of those aspects of their identity that their oppressors demonize, but that right wing populists *falsely identify* their particular program with universal values and human interests. Too often, critics on the left who want to defend targeted groups from demonising rhetoric and oppressive political power make the mistake of rejecting universal human values and interests, rather than the false identification constructed by the right-wing populist movement.

Let us look at how these constructions work in a little more detail. Take the example of the recent Israeli election. In the midst of the campaign, [Netanyahu](#) openly asserted what had always been true in practice: that although they enjoy formally equal rights, Arab Israelis cannot be true members of Israeli society, because Israel is a Jewish state. Netanhayu was confident that this overtly racist downgrading of Arab-Israeli citizenship would survive the gasps of indignation which always accompany awful truths being spoken in polite liberal company because he has been emboldened by a wave of right-wing populism that operates on the same logic. Here is how it works.

First, you construct an identity between your party and the nation as a whole. Then, you solidify this logical construction with racial or ethnic cement. Next, you build feelings of power amongst the powerless elements of your supporters by telling them that after years of neglect by "the elite," their interests are going to be recognized. Finally, you turn these new-found feelings of power amongst the powerless to win office. Once installed, the party continues to serve the political and economic power of the existing ruling class. Both overtly violent and coded, para-violent tactics against opponents supplement parliamentary power.

Understandably, critics focus on the content of the identity (white Americans, Jewish Israelis, and so on) in order to emphasize the racist essence of the right-wing populist wave. There is no doubt that it is racist, but we also have to pay attention to the political logic at work in the building of the movement. Ernesto Laclau's work on populism is an exception to the tendency to focus only on the content of populist movements and ignore their form. But the form is important, because it reveals the political power of universal appeals. While it is true that there is a hard racist core to contemporary right-wing populist movements, they have won because they

appeal beyond the ruling-class interests that they serve to marginalized and dis-empowered elements of the working class. De-coding the “dog-whistle” appeals to racism are important, but so too is understanding the way in which genuinely universal values are perverted in the political identification between the populist movement and the good of the whole nation.

There is a dialectic of inclusion-exclusion at the heart of right-wing identity politics that defines a shared interest against contrived threats posed to the nation by outside and inside forces. The problems with the exclusionary moment are obvious: the outsiders and the “elite” insiders become targets of abuse and physical violence. However, those problems must be condemned while at the same time the political power of the universal appeal is appreciated. The populist movement mobilizes people around positive values as well: self-determination, democratic self-governance, equal respect, and material well-being. The left makes a serious error if it cedes the ground of universal values to the right-wing in favour of a politics of difference that treats universal values as nothing but ideological cover for various forms of domination.

People will always mobilize around their concrete identities if they are attacked on that basis. If people are attacked for their sexuality, they will have to organize to protect themselves. Members of oppressed racialized communities will have to band together to affirm the value of the differences for which they are threatened. These are natural political responses to the experience of oppression and they will exist as long as oppression exists. Long histories of failure to build effective solidarity increases the suspicion amongst many members of different social movements that the Left cannot be trusted to help secure the satisfaction of their goals. But what I am urging here is deeper than then traditional problem of working class versus identity-based social movements.

Let us look at the cuts announced in the first [Ford budget](#) to help us get at the underlying problem. They targeted the environment, health care, and education, each of which affects a central concern of *human* life. Everyone depends upon a life-sustaining natural world. All of us are liable to disease and bodily damage, and the full development of our creative abilities depends upon education. Thus, a healthy environment, public health care distributed on the basis of need and not ability to pay, and an adequately funded public education system are all universal life-goods without which we cannot live and live fully. It is true that different groups might experience the cuts in different ways, but what makes the cuts problematic is that they attack the public provision of universal life-goods, damaging people to the extent that they are deprived of the resources and institutions that they require.

What is the rationale behind these cuts? Public goods, services, and institutions reduce people’s dependence on the capitalist market. Capitalism depends upon exploiting labour and commodifying life-goods. Hence, when social struggles succeed in de-commodifying some resources by making them available through public institutions (or protecting nature as a common, life-sustaining environment), the rule of market forces over everyone’s life is reduced. That is a threat to private profits, and– if you extend the logic of public provision– to capitalism as a whole. Hence, cuts to public services re-assert the power of market forces over everyone’s life by increase the opportunities for profitable exploitation of people’s needs. The problem, at the deepest level, therefore, is that those without money cannot afford to satisfy their needs, but

the needs themselves do not disappear. Again, different groups might be differently impacted, but the harm is a function of the human needs that they can no longer satisfy.

Explaining the problem in terms of universal human needs and interests helps us to understand the problem of solidarity in a new way. Historically, Marxism has argued in favour of socialism on the basis of the claim that workers' interests and human interests coincide. However cogent the arguments that supported that identification, in practice the workers' movement in its various expressions failed to concretise that universality in ways adequate to the real diversity of interests in society. That is, it took "workers'" interests as a set apart from "women's interests" and "Black interest," and so on. Not seeing their concerns adequately addressed, being subject to the same sexist and racist attitudes in union meetings as they were in the wider society, women and Black citizens of course chose to create their own organizations and fight on the basis of their unique experiences.

It remains the case, nonetheless, that the deep social causes of oppression are common, and a solution cannot be achieved unless those depth causes are addressed. The deepest cause of any form of oppression is control over basic life-resources (natural and social) by a minority class. The issues here is not that control over resources translates mechanically into predictable forms of oppression, but that control over resources confers ultimate control over the lives of everyone who remains dependent on those resources. Different types of social struggles can ameliorate the lives of different oppressed groups in all sorts of important ways, but until the structure of dependence is overcome, then the material conditions of freedom have not been satisfied, and everyone remains vulnerable to the decisions of the ruling class. Under capitalism, this danger is exacerbated by the social forces generated by economic competition. These forces ultimately drive environmental and economic crises, as firms and nations are forced to compete over scarce resources and markets, driven to grow even when it becomes apparent that such growth has become a threat to planetary and human life.

The old way of understanding the problem on the Left was to try to find ways to wake workers up to their "historic mission." But socialism (which we should understand as nothing more or less than a democratic solution to the structural causes of environmental and economic crisis) is not the responsibility of any one class, no matter how diverse its membership ultimately is. Socialism is in the universal interest of human beings as bio-social agents who depend on the natural world and each other in order to satisfy their needs and develop their creative capacities. Of course, those who benefit in the short term from present arrangements cannot be expected to give up their power in response to abstract political-philosophical arguments. Changing the world will require political argument that builds solidarity in social struggles powerful enough to create new institutions. In order to effectively address the deep causes of these crises, those struggles have to bring people together around a common set of demands, and they have to focus—ultimately—on structural issues, and not the identity of the people who rule. Obama was not white, but he did not address the structural causes of social and environmental crisis. He was not a racist, but his policies did not address the root causes of racism. Kathleen Wynne was not a sexist homophobe, but the commission on public spending that she created justified austerity and the "accountability culture" that Ford is now drawing upon to justify his cuts.



## Excursus on Post-Secondary Education

This last claim is especially apparent in relation to the changes to the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMA) between the government and post-secondary institutions announced by Ford. Ford cannot be blamed for the agreements. They were introduced by Wynne, but they are just a particular instance of a generalised attack on the autonomy of universities that have become a hallmark of neo-liberal social policy. Ford has narrowed the criteria on which universities will be assessed, almost all of which focus on employment related issues and none on anything specifically related to becoming an educated human being (the ability to interpret, reason, argue, communicate, systematically investigate, criticise, or imagine). However, he has also promised to tie 60% of funding to compliance with these metrics by 2024-25. This move gives direct coercive power to the government to shape the curriculum and the research agenda of Ontario's universities. Since most of the criteria focus on employment rates of graduates, the universities will be forced to shape curriculum to labour market demand. Since such conformity to external pressures is directly contrary to the institutional and cognitive freedom a real university system requires, Ford has in effect threatened to destroy the educational mission of the university system.

The response from the universities? An abysmal expression of subservience.

The [Council of Ontario Universities](#) official response was to assure Ford that they “looked forward” to working with his government. You can be assured that the prospectuses of the institutions that the COU represents are full of promises to make students “critical thinkers.” Yet they can muster none of their own critical thinking in response to an overt attack on the autonomy and educational and research mandates of their institutions. Perhaps it is a good thing they have all left the academic ranks for administrative positions. A good teacher has to have the courage of their convictions and live the principles they claim to value.

Back to the central question: What is to be done? Every particular group facing the implications of these cuts needs to think about how the cut that effects them is one part of an attack on public goods and public services and therefore an attack on democratic public life. Intensified cut backs do not always generate solidarity. They can also generate inwardizing pressures to hold what you have and wish everyone else the best in their particular fight. That road leads to defeat. What we need now is conversation and political argument that uncovers the common ground upon which all of our lives depend.

In that light, what was first billed on-line as a “general strike” but has now (wisely) morphed into a noon time walk out on May 1st is a very good step in the right direction. Youthful energy and new leadership is certainly required, but they need to be tempered and informed by historical experience. General strikes are end points, not starting points, and they cannot simply be “called,” they must be built. The Left and the labour movement have been dormant in Ontario since the Harris days. Re-activating them is not going to be an easy or quick process. The patience of argument will be required. Those arguments have to focus on building solidarity around a concrete and positive program for change. Resistance, demonstrations, and the fetishism of leaderless “horizontal” movements is not enough. The Left needs an agenda around which it can unify its diverse voices.

# The Intelligence of Weeds

Originally posted, 28 May 2019

The same soil conditions that encourage the growth of crops or flowers will also encourage the growth of weeds. What amazes me about weeds is that they seem to know what has been planted where. Their shoots and leaves resemble the shoots and leaves of the plants whose nutrients they appropriate, so much so that, if the gardener is not careful, they can uproot the plant they are trying to protect instead of the weed. In my garden there are broad-leaf weeds that look almost like Echinacea, a voracious weed-grass that looks like Crocosmia shoots, and another leafy one that looks like early strawberry leaves. They seem to have distributed themselves so as to always be closest to the plant they mimic, using their appearance as camouflage to protect themselves from my trowel.

Right wing populists are like weeds. They appropriate the energy that could be used to build a new left movement by mimicking the language of the left. They use this energy to build just enough support amongst a section of the the historical constituency of the left to put themselves in power, where they proceed to attack the social gains that were the fruit of past struggles. But because they use the language of democracy, self-determination, and recovering the nation from control of elites, the political gardener needs to be careful not to uproot the plant they are trying to protect when they mean to pull out the right wing weed.

Take for example the Liga government in Italy. It has employed atrocious tactics against desperate African migrants, but has also criticised austerity and threatened to ignore European central bank regulations concerning deficit spending levels. Their support– and support for right wing populist movements generally, grouped together under the banner of “European Peoples’ Party” in the [recent European elections](#), suggest to me not a permanent right-ward shift of political opinion, but demand for bold action. Consider some further aspects of those elections results. Both traditional social democratic parties and those same populists lost seats. But there is a profound contradiction in the parties to whom they lost those seats. Both the [Greens and far right forces made gains](#). What does this fact tell us?

First, it tells us that the traditional European social democratic parties (with the possible exception of Corbyn’s Labour party), have become perhaps fatally compromised because they have been the parties of austerity. The Green’s have not been similarly compromised, and nor, for that matter, has the far right. The Green’s have benefited from growing alarm over climate change and environmental crisis, while the far right gains because in periods of uncertainty one natural response is for people to re-trench around national traditions that seem to provide security. The Enlightened establishment in the media and academia might fret about it, but we need to stop fretting and develop more understanding of what drives otherwise ordinary people into the arms of fascists. One thing that we know from history is that the far right is always the beneficiary but not the cause of the weakness of the left. In the 1930’s the disastrous policy of the Comintern that instructed Communist parties to treat Social Democrats on a par with fascists split the left and allowed the fascists to win. Today there is no Comintern, but there was a global consensus on the need for all ruling parties to impose austerity. Working class living standards

were crushed, and without any alternative on the left to vote for, a significant minority of workers have turned in desperation to right wing populists or worse. The situation will turn around when the left renews its commitment to taking from the rich and give to the poor, as an eloquent old slogan put it.

Taking from the rich and giving to the poor is not charity or theft, because— and this point needs to be emphasised—social wealth is not the product of the entrepreneurial magic of the “job creators,” but nature and collective labour (and the technological systems that have also been created by human labour). The advances the Green’s have made shows that the left must put serious environmental action (The Green New Deal is an encouraging example of what is needed) at the forefront of any transformational program. Fortunately, the fit between Green and socialist politics is perfect (although greens will rightly be suspicious of the left, given its generally terrible environmental record almost everywhere it has been in power). That history of practical failure notwithstanding, there simply cannot be a solution to environmental crisis that does not reduce the scale of global impact of economic activity on the earth’s life-support systems. But capitalists do not destroy nature because they hate wild spaces or have a conscious death wish, but because each firm is driven by competitive pressures to grow. All other considerations: what energy source to sue, where to dump wastes, how to externalise as many costs as possible, will all be made in light of the need to remain profitable.

Workers need firms to remain profitable so long as they live in a capitalist society, because they need their wages in order to survive. Here is where the left can help the greens, (if it is careful to uproot the weed and not the plant whose growth it wants to encourage). Moralising about sea turtles and butterflies will never succeed in overcoming people’s short term need to make a living. Society-wide action against climate change, loss of biodiversity, and pollution, has to be combined with a coherent and systematic transitional program for the many millions of workers whose livelihoods are tied up with fossil fuels and other environmentally damaging industries.

The situation in Western Canada, where indigenous activists and their supporters are trying to prevent the construction of new pipelines to carry oil sands oil to port in Vancouver is a case study in what will happen unless transitional programs are formulated. The social democratic government of the NDP’s Rachel Notley was defeated in the most recent Alberta election by the hard right conservatism of Jason Kenney. He won largely on the promise of getting new pipelines built. He faces opposition across the border in BC, where a Green-NDP coalition, bolstered by indigenous opposition, is trying to prevent the pipeline. But the full weight of the Canadian state will be mobilised in support of the pipeline, and it will be able to count on support from oil sands and allied workers. The result will a conflict between oil sands workers and indigenous pipeline opponents and the victory (most likely) of the pro-pipeline forces.

But everyone involved needs the natural life support system in order to survive. The problem is not racist oil sands workers versus romantic indigenous activists, but a politics of long-term life-support versus a political economy that confuses the profitability of firms with economic health. If the capacity of the planet to sustain human life is lost, then we all lose, in the dearest possible way. Talk of “balancing” economic interests with the environment is insane, because the natural world is the basis of all life. Economic health depends completely on the health of the natural

life-support system. Talk of “balancing” two goods implies that there is a contradiction between them— as indeed there is between capitalist money-value and ecological health.

In such a conflict, there is only one sane move: to re-build economies literally from the ground up in ways which work with rather than destroy life-support systems. Kenney’s politics— popular as they may be at the moment— cannot *ultimately* win, because they are connected to older forms of environmentally destructive pillaging that will have to stop, one way or the other. Doomed over the long term, they can nevertheless gain short term support, provided that no convincing, coherent, and immediately realisable alternative is presented to people whose lives at the moment really do depend upon work in the oil and gas industry. They are not the enemies of the environment, but they will only become active parts of the solution if they can be shown that there are other ways to make a living. It is materially irrational to continue to burn natural gas to extract heavy oil from the sands of Fort McMurray. It is politically irrational to think that people will willingly sacrifice themselves for the sake of long term environmental health.

Here is where the right wing are at their weediest, because they seem to have “democracy” on their side, and no one wants to sound anti-democratic. But “democracy” has to mean more than winning a plurality of votes in an election. Democracy means “rule of the people,” and rule implies that the people’s interests are at the forefront of democratic decision making. But what are these interests? They cannot be just any momentary whim that people happen to feel, or are encouraged to feel, because life has both long and short term conditions. We are continually acting as if there is an open-ended future: people have children, build structures that will outlast them, and treat laws and institutions as guardians of a collective life with no definite expiry date. If there is going to be a future, then we must preserve the conditions that keep us alive— and alive not only as respiring bodies, but socially self-conscious agents capable of governing ourselves in accordance with our real life-needs. Hence there are objective interests that underlie any society (interests in accessing what we need to stay alive as socially self-conscious agents), which a democracy— which is committed by its nature to ensuring the participation of each and all in public life (i.e., cultivating the social self-conscious agency of everyone)— must satisfy. Democracies can thus be in contradiction with themselves when governments are elected that pursue policies that dismantle the infrastructure of public institutions and recklessly allow environmentally destructive economic practices to proliferate. Democracy is thus not the election cycle, and we need to expose the contradiction into which our societies have fallen by exposing the right wing populists as the anti-life, anti-democratic weeds that they have proven themselves to be.

As any gardener knows, unless you pull the weed out by the roots, it will proliferate. The stems of weeds tend to break easily: we think we have pulled it out, when all we have done is broken the stem. The roots will throw up a dozen more shoots to replace the one stem in our hand. The problem is not the shoot- the person of the populist— but the root- the appropriation of the language of democracy, self-determination, and objective interests by the right. They have used this language successfully to gain power; we need to re-deploy it to win it back.

# One Million More Reasons to Mobilise Against Ford

Originally posted, 6 June, 2019

The public sector “salary restraint” legislation expected by public sector union leaders was formally introduced on June 5th ([Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, 2019](#)). I will get to the criticism in a moment. First, I have to acknowledge the Orwellian chutzpah of this government: without a climate change plan, it cheekily appropriates the language of “sustainability” and concern for “future generations.” They could have topped themselves by tipping their hat to the indigenous traditions they are also ignoring by adding “seven” in front of “generations.” Perhaps the next spending restraint bill can be more inclusive.

Titles aside, the bill is not about a sustainable anything, but first and foremost a shot across the bow of public sector unions (and especially the teachers’ unions, who will be in bargaining soon). The public service has been a target for governments of all denominations (remember Rae Days, everyone)? We can be certain that, if— as I hope— we are able to mobilise a staunch defence of collective bargaining rights, the government will try to drive a wedge between public sector “fat cats” and those hard working Ontarians in the private sector for whom this “government of the people” is working so hard.

Problem is: already, 75 % of “the people” think that the [government is on the wrong course](#). We have seen an impressive mobilisation of the parents of autistic children against the government’s plans to change the funding support model for their children. There has been a sizeable demonstration in support of public health care in response to the serious threats of privatisation lurking in the government’s [health care bill](#). Now, they are openly challenging 1 million broader public sector workers to put up or shut up.

We need to put ’em up.

The issue here is not salary restraint. The bill caps total salary increases for workers and management at 1 % per year for the three years following the signing of the next collective agreement. (It will not apply retroactively, but it will apply to agreements signed at any point in the future. Thus, if your agreement expires in two years time, it cannot include salary increases in excess of 1%/year for the next three years). No one in the broader public sector has achieved salary growth much in excess of this figure for over a decade. (An analysis of salary growth over the period 2013-2017 by the [Ontario Confederation of Faculty Associations](#) shows that nominal salaries have increased from a low of an average of .5% in 2013 to a high of 1.9% in 2017). I say ‘nominal’ because, once we factor in inflation, real salaries have shrunk. If inflation is roughly 2 %, then a rate of “growth” less than 2 % is actually a reduction of real wages.

“Well, so what,” a hard working citizen might respond. “A lot of you *are* fat cats, and your wages are not being cut, they are just being capped. Deal with it. If I have to suffer, so should you.”

Ok, on one level this response is fair enough, if it is targeted at the highest paid members of the broader public service (which would include tenured university faculty). However, in response, it is necessary to, first, remind everyone that the broader public service is not all tenured professors and deputy ministers. The majority of workers in the public sector are not raking it in, and they face the same rising costs and declining public services as everyone else.

Second, and more importantly, the threat this bill poses is as much or more political as it is economic. No one will die of starvation if their salaries are capped for three years. However, the collective power of workers to govern our work conditions (already nearly dead after forty years of neo-liberal attacks on unions) will take another fateful step toward the grave unless we can turn this attack into fuel for a serious mobilization. Our goal has to be, in the short term, to block the passage of this bill. That short term goal has to be connected to a longer term strategy to protect public services as an actually existing alternative to priced commodities in consumer markets, adequately fund them, and ensure that Ford is back making decals in three years time (if not before).

It is true that collective bargaining is not workers control. Even before this bill, legal power is still overwhelmingly in the employer's hands. Nevertheless, the principle is a step in the right direction. The principle that underlies collective bargaining is that work life should not be determined by market forces but by workers' collective interests in safe, secure, meaningful, and socially valuable work.

As the OCUFA analysis shows, public sector workers do not have a vendetta against the public we serve. We have not bargained so as to fiscally destroy universities, hospitals, or government agencies. Still, we are not volunteers, we need to be paid, and we have a democratic right, (which, like all democratic rights, is the fruit of decades of struggle from below, not a gift from above), to bargain our conditions of work. The Bill claims that the right to collectively bargain is not compromised. But this is legalistic nonsense designed to ward off a Charter challenge (the Supreme Court has consistently affirmed the right to collective bargaining as a protected right under the Charter). The bill gives the Minister the right to void any collective agreement that contains salary increases above 1 %. So, we can bargain anything we like, but if the Minister so decides, the agreement can be scrapped. Some right!

Some of us in the broader public sector enjoy something that approximates those conditions of work. We will not improve other workers' conditions by allowing our historical gains to be undermined. Governments and their business allies know that driving a wedge between different groups of workers (or dividing the problem of work from the problems of democratic citizenship generally) serves to undermine our collective power, and paves the way for across the board attacks on democratic achievements, public services, and the institutional infrastructure we all depend upon for the satisfaction of our natural and social needs.

To be sure, cuts to welfare spending or hospitals are more dire and immediate threats to the satisfaction of the needs of the most vulnerable than capping public sector salaries at 1% for three years. However, politically, we have to resist the urge to divide struggles in this way (although, if it comes to a triage situation where choices have to be made, then, by all means, we have to choose to protect the most vulnerable). Political progress against attacks and for a well-

funded infrastructure of robust public services is best made when we find common ground and fight together. Now is the time for those of us with a high degree of job security to put it to work, not to defend our right to make as much money as humanly possible, but to defend democratic achievements and insist upon better opportunities, better public services, and better life-protection for everyone, starting with the most vulnerable.

We do not need more words. We need action. And that has to start with the leadership of the major public sector unions (including university faculty associations) meeting as soon as possible to map out strategy and tactics. The Days of Action against Harris had his Common Sense Revolutionaries on the run, before we let them off the hook. Let's not make the same mistake twice.

# The Limits of Politics, (But Why They Still Matter)

Originally posted, 15 July, 2018

Politics is the assertion of human freedom against material forces. Freedom is real, but limited, and any politics that sets itself against the direction of material forces is bound to lose in the long run.

In the long run, therefore, conservatives at war with reality can never win, but only hasten catastrophe by trying to legislate against inexorable natural and cultural tendencies.

Let us consider the already embarrassing Doug Ford regime in Ontario in this light. It has repealed the 2013 sex ed curriculum (much loathed by Catholic and Islamic fundamentalists) and cancelled a number of subsidized wind power projects.

In both cases, the Ford government has set itself at odds with processes of cultural and material change that cannot be stopped by legislation. The cultural pressure towards inclusion of gay, lesbian, and trans people has been relentless for 50 years, since the Stonewall riots of 1968 firmly planted the flag of gay liberation in the midst of the global youth rebellions of 1968. Since then they have faced down police and vigilante violence, hostile legislation, moralistic abuse, and everything else homophobes could throw at them, and not only survived, but transformed the popular culture. With the exception of male dominated pro sports (and even here things are changing), youth culture has embraced gay, lesbian, and trans identities. A gay-straight alliance in my Catholic High School in the 1980's would have been unimaginable; today, (despite opposition from the same fools who oppose the sex ed curriculum), they are commonplace. I am sure it is still a struggle for young people to come out, but come out people will, in peer environments far more supportive than they would have been 35 years ago. Whatever is taught or not taught in schools, the cultural pressure towards inclusive gender relations in everyday life cannot be stopped by Doug Ford's vapid grin and the antediluvian beliefs of a semi-literate farmer masquerading as the Minister of Education.

Explaining the changes, "education" Minister Lisa Thompson stated: "The sex-ed component is going to be reverted back to the manner in which it was prior to the changes that were introduced by the Liberal government."

Good thing that it is not being reverted forward!

Natural processes are even more resistant to fundamental re-direction than cultural pressures. The chemical processes unleashed in the atmosphere by 150 years of unconstrained carbon emissions will not be persuaded to change course by unscientific wishful thinking. Climate change is as real as evolution— sorry, fundamentalist fools— and it will force an energy transition. The only question is whether people will embrace the changes willingly and pro-actively, or whether climate calamity will force it on us. Thus, we can either phase out of



fossil fuels, accept higher energy prices in the short term as the transition proceeds, and reduce our demand for energy by ending wasteful consumption that adds nothing of value to life-experience and activity now, in a planned and life-coherent manner, or we can react to a catastrophe later. Ford and other scientific illiterates can try to legislate against physics, but they will lose.

However, in losing they can also cause enormous damage. Sex ed curriculum is not the only determinant of sexual behaviour, and not every problem is going to be solved in the classroom. However, what people do not know can hurt them, as the story of a [young Muslim woman](#) told in an opinion piece in the Toronto Star on July 14th illustrates. Where same sex desires and trans identities are normalized, stigmatization and demonization is minimized. Working with cultural pressures towards inclusion, a virtuous circle emerges in which what kids learn and how they relate to each other outside the classroom reinforce practices of respect and acceptance. When education works against the cultural grain, those who, for whatever complex reasons, feel threatened by gay, lesbian, and trans identities feel affirmed in their hostility, and are more likely to act out their antipathies in violent ways. Judging over the long term, the demonization of sexual difference is a fading force, but it can be encouraged in the short term by conservative reactionaries. They empower the bigots who can do enormous damage to individual victims.

It is likewise with the needed energy transition away from fossil fuels. Take a look at the *globe*. It is a sphere with finite volume. Thus, it follows that it can only contain a finite amount of oil. Since all finite, non-renewable quantities must be exhausted if continually used, oil will run out. Whether that is in one hundred or one thousand years does not matter. It will run out, and society, if it is to continue, will have to generate its energy from renewable resources. However, in the case of fossil fuels, we cannot continue to burn them at historical rates and avoid catastrophic climate change. Hence, any sane energy policy must simultaneously aim to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and increase reliance on clean renewables. The scientific evidence linking climate change to CO2 emissions is overwhelming. One cannot cherry pick well-established scientific evidence. The method that produces computers and smart phones that everyone uses and no one believes run on magic is the same method that leads to conclusions about the capitalist causes of CO2 emissions and climate change. Governments can fight against these conclusions by cancelling wind projects and trying to lower the price of gas, but they are hastening their own demise, since they, like everyone, depend upon an environment that can support human life.

However, neither conservative governments nor the people who vote for them are always rational. Change is difficult and people resist it. However, if you do not treat cancer, it will kill you, whether you believe that it will or not. Social cancer is the same way. Where governments and their supporters are allowed to demonize minority groups or unsustainable systems of production and consumption, they hasten the death of the body politic. Sane politics works with life-coherent trends to generate the virtuous circles noted above. Insane politics thinks it can turn the clock back to continue practices that have been proven failures (and not only failures, fatal failures).

Confronted with insanity of this sort, people need to mobilise. If we add the 42% of Ontarians who did not vote to the 60% of voters who rejected Ford, it becomes clear that his mandate is very thin indeed. At the same time, it is worrying that in a polarized political environment 42 % of people chose not even to vote. I have never been amongst that group of leftists who believes that this “silent majority” (or more accurately, large minority) is just waiting in the wings for a real revolutionary alternative.

[Studies](#) on intermittent and non voters in the US do not reveal a block of latent revolutionaries ready to spring, but people who are indifferent to politics. They say they do not vote because they do not know enough about the candidates and issues or do not believe what any politician says. It is unlikely they are going to go from 0 to 60, from total disengagement to waving the red flag on the barricades. Hence, if the “overwhelming majority” of people really are opposed to Ford (and Trump, and the rest of the right wing populists winning power across Europe, the left has a Herculean (but hopefully not Sisyphean) task on its hands.

# Closed for Business

Originally posted, 26 November, 2018

Less than four weeks after Doug Ford unveiled his first embarrassing and moronic “[open for business](#)” signs near the US Border, GM is set to announce that it will close the [Oshawa assembly plant](#) in 2019. When global economic realities collide with political platitudes, the realities will always win.

Ford will no doubt try to blame this news on the Liberals, and the local [NDP MP](#) blamed it on “callous” decision making by GM. GM itself is expected to argue that not only are the models that the Oshawa plant makes not selling, the company as a whole needs to pivot towards a smaller manufacturing footprint that focuses increasingly on green and autonomous vehicles. None of the explanations and excuses will really matter to the workers. They have downed tools in protest against the decision, but not working in a plant that is slated to close will obviously not be sufficient to change the company’s decision.

The decision, if it is for the reasons that GM is rumored to be acting upon, is a classic case of what Joseph Schumpeter called the “creative destruction” at the heart of capitalism. He attributed its ability to recover from crisis to its technological dynamism and marketing creativity: old forms die and take the workers who were dependent on them with them, but new forms are born from the ashes. There is always a future for capitalism, Schumpeter argued, but it must sacrifice the present in order to be born.

And that is just the problem, is it not? Creative destruction does not just destroy plants and equipment, but workers’ lives. People cannot re-invent themselves on the fly. When their workplace closes, they are thrown out of the job upon which they depend. If another equally well-paying job could immediately replace the one they lost, then change would just be that: change, neither better nor worse. But as manufacturing jobs in old plants and industries disappear, they are not replaced with equally good manufacturing jobs in new industries that locate in historical working class communities. Workers suffer.

Politicians will respond with words and transparent efforts to blame their opponents, but part of the problem with capitalism is that there really is not any *one* to blame. Markets shift, technologies change, the demands of competition force companies to change. Trade agreements like the re-negotiated NAFTA, government subsidies, or localised workers struggles do not make any difference to solving the deeper problem: how to align economic values and forces with the satisfaction of people’s needs. Trade agreements and subsidies serve the very market forces they are supposed to bend in one rather than another direction. Ultimately, those forces send investment to where profits are likely to be highest: there are no chosen people under capitalism. Localised struggles, on the other hand, while they are demanded by the dignity of the affected workers, cannot succeed. So long as investment decisions are driven by calculations of profitability, and profitability depends on competitive forces, workers in older industries will eventually have to pay the price that creative destruction demands: unemployment and then re-employment in lower paying service industry work.

Imagine for a moment if we could plan the economy the way that individual firms plan their futures. Mainstream economics denies that it is possible to plan something as complex as a national economy, much less the global economy, but we are imagining here, so let's not worry about the details today. If we did plan economic changes, then, in principle, we could have the creation without the destruction of people's lives. Work in one capitalist industry rather than another is only the be all and end all of life because people are dependent on wages to survive. Reducing that dependence means reducing the social and personal costs of plant closures and job losses. If the wealth created by the collective labour of everyone in the economy were socially controlled, and used to ensure that people are able to satisfy their fundamental needs, and not, as of now, augment private profit, then we could reduce the time anyone in particular would have to work, creating more opportunities for more people to work while reducing the amount of life time that individuals would have to spend working. At the same time, by reducing socially necessary labour time in a planned way, we could think together about what sorts of work are life-affirming and creative, and what sorts we could automate without loss. We could coordinate economic changes across the country, evening out the uneven technological development that condemns some to obsolescence while others thrive just because they happen to live in a dynamic urban setting. Re-founding the economy on the basis of the principle that the purpose of economic institutions is to satisfy fundamental needs, and allowing democratic deliberation and not market forces to guide their operation, is the only ultimate solution to problems posed by capitalist economic forces. So says our imaginary intervention.

Sadly, imagination does not pay the bills. Hence the political paradox that bedevils all efforts to solve the underlying structural problems that manifest themselves as local tragedies. In order to survive, people are forced to think short term. Desperate times make some prey to the illusions spun by right-wing populists that their problems are due to political enemies or other (foreign) workers. In order to free themselves from the capricious destructiveness of capitalism, people must think long term about how to build new economic values and institutions rooted in and growing up from our shared fundamental needs. But then those needs call out, from the stomach and the head, and people have to shelve their imaginations and find another job.

The solution is working class unity, some will respond. Yes it is, but without a political vehicle to build it the same paradox will return. In the long run, workers interests are served by a unified struggle for a democratic life-economy. But in the short run their needs will demand that they accept whatever good fortune capitalism bestows upon them: if one group gains at another group's expense, the winners will invariably grab the spoils. In the not too distant future those winners might well be losers, but that argument again depends upon adopting a long term perspective that the immediacy of need and the actuality of dependence on labour and commodity markets makes it almost impossible for workers to adopt.

## Second Time Farce

Originally posted, 6 September, 2018

If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, imitation of a failing model is the highest form of stupidity. Hence, it comes as no surprise that the Decal-maker in Chief, Doug Ford, is copying Trump just at the moment where the latter's presidency seems to be coming undone from within. He is clearly following the script that Bannon wrote for Trump: act early and often on symbolic issues that prove to "the base" that you mean business.

For Trump, that meant whipping up racial animus towards Muslims and migrants; for Ford, it is reversion to an antediluvian sex ed policy, always fun attacks on Toronto, and now "free speech" in the universities. Last week Ford announced that all universities in Ontario would be required to pass "[free speech](#)" policies or lose funding. "Colleges and universities should be places where students exchange different ideas and opinions in open and respectful debate ... Our government made a commitment to the people of Ontario to protect free speech on campuses."

I do not recall Ford making such a promise, but in any case, if he did, it would not be a difficult one to fulfill, since students already do exchange ideas freely on Ontario campuses. The "problem" is yet another right-wing illness that infects conservatives causes them to confuse their own fears and fantasies with reality. The main threat to free speech on campus, if we think of free speech as academic freedom to research and teach free from the need to answer to external masters (business and government) is the ever-intensifying pressure to turn universities into job-training centres. Doug Ford cannot take credit for that degenerate tendency. The Wynne government, with its Strategic Mandate Agreements, led the way in forcing universities to align themselves with government and business priorities. Ford need not worry: soon there will be no need to fire high profile leftist professors; the few remaining dissident voices will retire and be replaced by more useful people.

But right-wing populism needs spectacle in order to keep its supporters from realising that their emperors have no clothes. So we have the blow-hard Ford managing to keep a straight face while *threatening* universities and students with sanctions unless they comply with his diktat. "Freedom of speech, just what what you say!" as Chuck D. once rapped

His real concern is not with free speech, therefore- which, again, is not under threat save from government and business- but with trying to undermine campus democracy by giving administrations and governments a new tool to block protests against far right speakers. (And watching what we say will be the supposedly "arms-length" Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. If anyone is still naive enough to believe that this office is anything more than a disciplinary tool of the state, Ford's charging it with monitoring compliance with the new policy should sufficiently clarify the matter. What is that taking shape in the mist? Is it- could it be- yes, indeed it is- a Campus Freedom Metric!)

I can think of only one campus event that has been cancelled as a result of protests: minor celebrity racist [Faith Goldy's](#) talk on "Ethnocide" (a fantastical far right theory that the white

race is disappearing because it is being out-bred) was disrupted by a fire alarm in 2018. Note that the event was not cancelled by administration but was opposed– and the whole value of free speech lies in its being a tool of opposition to power and odious ideas– by students who argued that campus should not be a sounding board for irrational, baseless, fear and hate mongering. One can object to someone pulling the fire alarm (or not) but a single disruption hardly signals a crisis of free speech.

I have been [critical](#) of tactics that try to prevent the articulation of even far right ideas on campus, because I think it is better to challenge and refute them in open debate. We have to teach students to argue and to have the courage of their convictions. The world is not a safe space; if you want to change it, you are going to have to deal with nasty people and hateful ideas. The right will not go away just because their ideas are offensive.

(Organization is another matter– where far rights group try to mobilise, we need to stand in their way: No pasaran!)

Overreacting to right-wing arguments can also have the unfortunate effect of amplifying their power. Jordan Peterson is not a right-wing rock star because of his looks or the depth of insight of his arguments, but because protestors create a spectacle wherever he goes, drawing more people to his talks. Where there is fuss, there must be fire. We need to have the courage and confidence to refute bad arguments with better ones.

We–academics and students– should also have met Ford’s proposal with critical arguments that explained why we will not comply with his demands. Instead, both the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) and the Ontario Confederation of Faculty Associations (OCUFA) have issued weak statements that fail to expose the real government agenda. The COU statement asserts that “Ontario universities share the Ontario government’s interest in protecting freedom of expression, and are committed to working with all stakeholders, including faculty, students and the province, to provide opportunities for thoughtful debate and discussion on our campuses.” This is leadership? The policy has nothing to do with free speech– which is not threatened by student protests but by constant government and economic interference with the academic mission of universities. One would hope– in vain, alas– that senior administrators– who were, in a past life, academics– would provide a more robust defence of the integrity of their institutions.

Opposition to the Ford policy could have been common cause between administrators and faculty associations. Sadly, the OCUFA response mirrors the COU abdication of responsibility to protect academic freedom and university autonomy. I have great respect for OCUFA President Gillian Philips, and have enjoyed working with her in the past, but we really need better from her and OCUFA than:

The government should have invested more time working with university administrators, faculty, staff, and students to understand the potential consequences of this directive. Over the coming months, it will be vitally important that members of the university community have opportunities to exercise their speech rights through broad and comprehensive campus consultation about these policies, their implementation, and their likely impact on campus speech and university funding.

OCUFA should know from its more robust opposition to the Strategic Mandate Agreements that “consultation” over bad policies only results in slightly better bad policies. What we needed (and still need) is cogent critique in support of political defiance.

# Politics. Fools. April.

Originally posted, 1 April, 2019

In honour of April Fool's Day, observations on recent events in which I lament the elevation of political posturing over problem solving.

Doug Ford. Oh, my, Doug Ford. Fool in chief. The business man who appears not to understand how capitalism functions. In response to Fiat-Chrysler's announcement that it would end the third shift at the Windsor Assembly Plant (costing Windsor 1500 jobs lost in the layoff, and probably five times more as the decreased output has knock on effects on local parts suppliers), Ford tried to [pin the blame](#) on the "anti-business" policies of the former Wynne government. Of course, the decision has nothing to do with the policies of Wynne. As [Ken Lewenza Sr.](#) (former Head of CAW/UNIFOR) pointed out, the lay offs are a direct consequence of falling sales for minivans, something which Wynne— out of power for months— clearly could not have caused.

So Wynne is off the hook for events that happened after she left power. Not so with the Ford government itself, for decisions that it has made while in power. In only a few months, its ante-deluvian climate policies have cost jobs in Windsor, which can ill-afford to lose them. Immediately upon assuming power, he froze all new wind energy development in the province. Windsor was attempting to diversify its manufacturing economy by branching into the production of hardware for the renewable energy industry. Once the province cancelled the contracts, CS Wind, a subsidiary of Samsung that was manufacturing wind turbines and towers here, lost business. Last week, it closed for good.

But Ford is not first and foremost a business person, or a politician, he is a distraction, a side show that manages to garner attention for awhile before disappearing into a retirement of corporate board-sitting and golf. Then another one will come along. He is particularly politically retrograde, but he is not qualitatively different from most politicians, whose primary function is to provide content for chatter and social media "outrage" and not solve real problems.

One would hope that people would stop voting for clowns— from whatever party- who refuse to square up to economic and environmental realities. Those realities pose a philosophical problem and three social policy challenges that every society, but especially the high-consumption societies of the Global North, are going to have to meet. Meeting them will require *serious* and sustained argument about values, priorities, and practices that politics as presently constituted is ill-prepared to lead.

The philosophical problem— and the policy challenges will not be met unless this problem is solved— involves a re-valuation of the values that have traditionally legitimated capitalist society (and many versions of socialism, as well). So long as growth of income, wealth, output, and consumption is the aim of social policy and individuals' sense of their own well-being, the socio-environmental consequences of capitalism cannot be solved. Capitalist social dynamics and class structure might be the deep drivers of environmental destruction, but people are also motivated by the "more is better" ethos. Wanting ever more is not a consequence of corrupt human nature,



but a direct consequence of commodification of life-necessities, meaningless work and vacuous popular culture. People feel a void and advertising-induced fantasies of perfect lives obtainable with a quick cash transactions fill it. Nevertheless, so long as those motivations are not overturned from within, people will continue to chase the dragon rather than demand the social changes necessary to begin to deal with the crisis in a systematic way. People do not *want* catastrophic climate change, but (many of them) also do not want a carbon tax, higher gas prices, or higher taxes to fund serious investments in public transit and renewable energy.

However, neither social value systems nor peoples' private motivations are fixed once for all. People can change, but they have to be convinced, through a combination of experience and argument, that what a given social value system asserts as good is actually in the interests of a minority class, and what is really good is fundamentally different from what they have been encouraged to accept, although not a utopian ideal in an unattainable future. How do we discover what this good is, and how it differs from the ruling value system of capitalism?

We can begin by posing some questions. Ask yourself and challenge others: would you trade a loved one's life for your dream car? Would you sell out your best friend for a new smart phone? If you could be put in an environmental bubble and survive alone, but have to watch everyone you care for die outside the bubble, would you be able to enjoy your subsequent life? If you could choose to live on an island by yourself, forever cut off from contact with everyone else, such that you could truly say you were not responsible for anything that happened in the rest of the world, would you choose that splendid isolation, or would you choose to remain and accept some responsibility for the future?

I do not typically like to argue through thought-experiment and hypothetical questions, because nothing prevents people from answering contrary to what the experimenter hopes they will answer. But I am not really interested in the answers: anyone could *say* they would trade their love-one for a new car, and no doubt there are some who would. The point of posing these questions to people is two-fold: 1) to get them to think about what is really important to them; and 2) to get them to think about the implications of their individual choices on the wider world. Questions create time and space: when we reflect on values, we have to stop what we are doing to think about them as causes and motivations of action, and whether those actions are leading to the goals we unreflectively expect them to achieve. When outward action stops and we turn inward to reflect, we have time to ask ourselves whether what we achieve is really meaningful and fulfilling. When we create time to think, we also create space to discuss. Self-reflection demands a turning inward, but in order to become political, it has to turn outwards, towards others. It must move from self-reflection to political conversation and argument.

I could be wrong, but I am convinced that whenever people stop to reflect on what they actually find meaningful and fulfilling they will point to relationships to nature and other people as the constant. These subjective feelings have, I believe, objective grounds. Donne is correct, no one is an island, we need to maintain constant connection to nature and other people in order to live, and the fulfillment of these connections—satisfying our needs for resources and relationships—generate feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment (pleasure). We have multiple needs and five senses, and so multiple forms of pleasure are possible. What has happened is that pleasure has been disconnected from the effort of forging relationships and the interests of the other partner(s)

in the relationship and packaged as commodities for purchase. In this form, it appears as unlimited as an abstract value like money. Once this connection has been implanted in peoples' minds, they believe that the more money they have, the more pleasure they can experience. But we are bio-social beings, and our pleasures depend upon nature and other people. Therefore (ultimately) pleasure is destroyed if nature and other people are destroyed. The point of my questions is to provoke the sort of reflection that creates time and space for people to work towards these conclusions, both on their own and in conversation with others.

If these conclusions are not ideological impositions but grounded in the reality of human bio-social nature, they entail three key policy priorities. The crisis of values cannot be solved by philosophy alone. If people really do value relationships more than buying things, then a good society (which establishes the general conditions for good lives) has to prioritise the preservation of that which anyone requires to live, and live well. Hence the first task of a public policy actually geared to peoples' good is to decrease the rate of non-renewable energy and resource consumption to a minimum. That means, on the one hand, increasing the use of renewable energy, and, on the other, reducing our demand for energy. That cannot happen in a competitive economy in which standing still means bankruptcy, bankruptcy means unemployment, and unemployment means inability to access that which anyone needs to survive. Workers are locked into spend cycles not only because their pleasures have been tied up with consuming commodities, but also because they depend on wages to buy the commodities they need to survive. Seeing no alternative, they throw in their political lot with whomever promises jobs and higher wages. In the context of capitalism, this choice is not irrational; the irrationality lies in the system itself.

Hence, the second major policy challenge is to gradually reduce peoples' dependence on wages. Reducing the dependence of workers' lives on wages expands time and space to experience life differently. People can experience for themselves the truth that sensuous fulfillment requires connection to nature and others, and that purchased commodities are poor substitutes for real sensuous connection. Implementing these changes will be extraordinarily difficult, but concrete policy options exist which can start the process: unpriced public services increase the real wage while decreasing dependence on paid work; a *planned* and proportionally distributed reduction of socially necessary labour time would create more free time for individuals and more jobs (and more opportunity for each person to choose how they can best contribute to society through the work that they do). Projects like a Guaranteed Basic Income could be combined with increased investment in public services to ensure that the profits of capital (produced, ultimately, let us remember, by human labour) and not individual workers bear the costs. These changes can be integrated into a more ecologically responsible economic system by combining them with a comprehensive plan to transitional to a fully renewable energy economy (such as is sketched in the [LEAP Manifesto](#) or the [Green New Deal](#)).

There is nothing utopian in these projects but all have been tried in fragmentary form (or, as in the case of Guaranteed Basic Income projects, worked out with sufficient theoretical sophistication to meet the objection that they are unrealizable). The main problem— and this problem is the third public policy challenge— is to democratise democracy. That is, whatever short term temporal costs it will impose on people, we must take back political life from mainstream politicians, their enablers in the media, and the business people whose interests are

always served no matter who is in power. The entire news cycle, on air, on line, mainstream and social media is consumed with utterly meaningless spectacle and scandal, garbological excavations of peoples' past, moralistic pontification about their "character;" and equally insipid lionisation of some and demonisation of other individual personalities. It is all distracting rubbish that gets in the way of real popular mobilisation. By "real popular mobilisation" I do not mean just demonstrations or # whatever manias. I mean serious and efforts to build movements and parties that sustain support by making real differences in peoples lives. Real differences are made when resources are reclaimed from their capitalist owners and used to satisfy our needs and enable our capacities for sensuous enjoyment of the beauty of nature, forms of self-creative activity that do not generate patterns of unsustainable consumption of natural resources, and mutualistic relationships with others. Politics in this democratic sense is a vehicle in which we rediscover that the essential value in life— its prime source of meaning and joy— is connection to nature and other people. It can only arise from people's desire to live differently than they do now.

# Hard Question, No Answers

Originally posted, 5 October, 2018

I knew it would be coming: an essay in the [Bullet](#) trumpeting the “breakthrough” of Québec Solidaire (QS) in the recent Québec election. I agree: it was a breakthrough. QS increased its seat totals from 3 to 10, and won 16 per cent of the popular vote (over 600 000 votes). Unfortunately, their right-wing rivals, the Coalition Avenir Québec, won 7 times as many seats and almost three times as many votes. Québec thus joins Ontario in having dumped a Liberal for a right-wing populist party. The two largest Canadian provinces join the United States, the United Kingdom, Italy, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia in electing parties with openly anti-immigrant platforms. The question that the QS results pose for me is: if 600 000 Quebecois can recognize the superiority of the QS platform, why not all of them? What explains the current division, replicating itself across North America and Europe at least, between a smaller minority of people embracing anti-austerity, social democratic (with gusts towards democratic socialist) solutions to capitalist problems, and larger minorities embracing right-wing anti-immigrant populist pseudo-solutions? I do not have a conclusive answer, but perhaps by raising questions about some standard explanations, the way towards a better answer will be cleared.

I want to begin by stating flatly that the type of polarization we are seeing today puts to rest any crude Marxist theory of the formation of class consciousness. In the narrowest possible reading, Marx held that capitalist crises would steadily intensify. Their effects would hurt working people the hardest, and they would be forced to confront “the real conditions of their lives,” as he and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto*. He expected that this confrontation would produce growing class consciousness, and that growing class consciousness was the crucial subjective factor necessary (but not sufficient) for successful revolution. All the evidence since 1848 suggests that while crises may force workers to confront the real conditions of their lives, they do not draw communist conclusions with any mechanical regularity.

Lenin tried to correct this problem by arguing, in *What is to be Done?* that on their own, workers would only attain “trade union” consciousness. That is, workers could correctly understand their short term economic interests, but not that securing even these ultimately depended upon a political solution to the contradictions of capitalist society as a whole. To reach the correct inference: that communist revolution is necessary, requires the organizing work of a professional party of revolutionaries. History tells against this argument as much as against Marx and Engels. First, workers no longer even reliably reach trade union consciousness. Second, no one, in any class, would take seriously calls for the sorts of organizing and insurrectionism of the Bolsheviks. Those tactics made sense in the context of 1917 Russia. In 2018 Europe and North America, socialists who have gained a hearing and had political success have wisely reconciled themselves to organizing within the framework of parliamentary democracy.

As QS once again shows, those successes are real. However, they are not overwhelming. 16 per cent of Quebec voters cast their ballot for QS, which means that 84 per cent did not. [51 % of](#)

[young Americans](#) have a favorable view of socialism (social democracy), which means that 49 % do not. One might reasonably wonder why not, when only the delusional can deny the reality of social crises. These can be described empirically without making any tendentious Marxist assumptions about capitalism. Climate change is real and uncontroversially linked with “human activities” (i.e., over use of fossil fuels caused by the demands of economic competition and growth). Money has clearly captured the institutions of liberal democracy and ensured that whatever mainstream party gets elected, the interests of the rich are served. Inequality of income and wealth is wide and growing, and this inequality causes measurable declines in health and freedom the lower one goes on the wealth and income scale. Inequality ruins lives, in other words, and this can be statistically measured and explained, without ever quoting Marx (even though it is consistent with his broad critique of capitalism).

What interests me (and worries me, because I do not have a convincing answer), is how the variation within groups (classes, sexes, etc.) that different theories (Marxism, feminism, etc.) conceive of as unities held together by shared political interests are not. Why are there women who think that all women should be denied reproductive health care (contraception and access to abortion), when they could very well be depriving themselves of something they will need? Why are so many workers anti-union when unions have demonstrably (for all their problems) raised wages and improved conditions of work?

The standard answer is that members of groups who do not recognise and act on the shared group interests have internalised ruling class ideology. But this answer is just a re-description of the problem, not an explanation of why it happens. Two workers who do the same job and live in the same neighborhood and share the same language, interests, and friends, can radically differ in their politics. Why does one draw the appropriate conclusion, based on objective evidence and not Marxist theory, that, for example, the company is not providing adequate safety gear, and his friend thinks that safety should be an individual responsibility?

Could it be that one is smart and the other stupid? Aside from difficulties defining “intelligence,” it does not seem to explain the nature of this sort of case. The two could give logically valid arguments in support of their position. The problem concerns the truth of the premises from which they begin, and what they count as valid reasons and evidence. Relative degrees of intelligence do not seem to explain these sorts of rational political disagreement.

Could differences in experience explain the divergence? Perhaps one friend has been well-supported by a union in a previous job, while the other person felt he had been screwed over by a union in the past. That would explain individual cases, but it is hard to imagine that these could explain statistically significant movements towards or away from a political position. Mass waves of unionization cannot be caused by each individual having had a good experience with a union: a movement depends on a rapidly spreading conviction. So how and why do they spread, and why are they not *universally* successful (anymore?) in appealing to all members of a group who share an interest?

Is it just a fact that people have different ultimate commitments in modern societies? That liberal explanation pioneered by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* faces the same logical problem as the Marxist invocation of ideology. It just re-describes what needs to be explained.

The key to an explanation seems to me to have to lie in the region of persuasiveness, and not objective interests. I am not skeptical about objective interests. My entire career as a philosopher has been anchored by the goal of proving, against skeptics and radical pluralists, that there are objective interests, rooted in shared human needs and goals. If these needs and goals are real, and people are rational and able to understand their own interests, then they should be able to choose parties and policies that further those interests, but, repeatedly over history, they do not.

I am not willing (yet) to concede that either there are no objective interests, or that people are not rational enough to recognise them. I think people do recognise them, but are persuaded that they are better served by policies and parties that, impartially considered, are not designed to actually address those needs. The paradigm case in point is working class support for Trump. Trump always begins by recognising the unmet needs of these workers. He thus connects to the objective interest that I am talking about. Yet his policies have only served to de-regulate business and lower the tax burden on the rich. The move has provided short term economic stimulus and the growth of low wage work (lowering the unemployment rate), but I do not think unfree, exploitative work at low wages really meets the needs of workers.

Political persuasiveness is thus the place to look for an answer to the question, but, alone, is not an answer, because it does not explain why a demagogue like Trump is successful, only that he is persuasive. What is it in his message that is not in left-wing messages? One suspicion I have harboured is that it has to do with the simplicity of the message. I am not saying that workers are stupid and can only understand simple messages. What I am saying is that people want immediate solutions to their problems. Whether people can understand complicated theoretical explanations of capitalism and patriarchy and their intersections is besides the point: people want solutions, not theoretical explanations.

Look at the similarity between Bernie Sanders and Trump. Given the machinations of the Democratic Party, Sanders was thwarted in his bid to become the Democratic candidate for President. Had he won the primary, he might well have beaten Trump. There was certainly a large movement amongst UAW workers in Michigan that supported Sanders, and Trump's margin in the mid-Western states that he won was only in the tens of thousands. Sanders, like Trump, had a simple straightforward message, as well as concrete policies that demonstrably addressed fundamental unmet needs, while also advancing a set of democratic values that could be the source for deeper transformations.

As one moves further left, from Sanders or the NDP towards groups like QS, one moves steadily away from straightforward, simple (not simplistic), platforms and positions. I know this fact from having been an active member of a far left group for more than a decade. I learned a great deal about Marxism and capitalism and the contradictions of contemporary society— all of which helped me become the philosopher I am today— but I cannot say we advanced the revolution. Most of these groups are composed of intellectuals, who think through the complexities of issues and are sensitive, (spending their time in universities and arguing with each other), to the dangers of excluding voices and perspectives. The result is that their platforms and policies tend to be complex and demand a great deal of time to think through. They appeal to other intellectuals and politicised people. However, most people are not

intellectuals by profession or demeanour. Nor are most people consumed with politics. They look to politicians to defend their interests so that they can pursue projects which are meaningful for them. Few show any inclination to constantly engage in argument and activism. Hence— (I suggest, but cannot prove), perhaps what explains the deviation between political position and objective interest is the degree to which people are motivated to act politically. The less political one is, the more inclined one is towards straightforward positions and platforms. (I realise that this leaves open the question of why people are or are not political). If the right wing candidate is the only one speaking that way, they garner a plurality of votes.

I want to re-iterate that I do not think that this explanation is the whole answer to the question. Far from it. At the same time, I do think that it is a factor worth thinking through, in connection with other elements of an explanation.

# Straw Dogs, or Last Straw?

Originally posted, 28 February, 2019

In only four months in office, the Ford regime has, without exaggeration, implemented policies which have already or will negatively affect every worker in the province of Ontario. He has cancelled the minimum wage hike from 14 to 15 dollars per hour, repealed the Wynne government's labour law reforms, threatened the autonomy of elementary and secondary school teachers as part of his repeal of the Wynne-era sex education renewal, has forced universities to adopt otiose "free speech" policies and cut their funding by over 300 million dollars, cancelled OSAP reforms that had been providing, in effect, free tuition for low income families, and cancelled the Guaranteed Basic Income pilot project. Absence of intellect, but optimism of the will!

For the ultraleft amongst you, there is an important lesson here. The state has real power and it can be used to make life far worse for workers. If the reformist left ever had a thousandth of the *chutzpah* of the right when it won elections, it would discover that state power can be used to improve lives significantly too. The problem is that the leadership of these movements is too easily cowed. They would be less easy to push around if they worked more effectively with social movements to create mass pressure from the street. Then, when the right-wing push back came, there would be a loud enough commotion to give reactionaries pause prior to launching their sabotage efforts.

Remember the 1990s. All it took to push Bob Rae's NDP government off its plan for public auto insurance was a march of 1000 or so blue-suited clowns up Bay Street to Queen's Park. Had he stepped out onto the steps, and been backed by 100 000 trade unionists, and said "You choose: public auto insurance or unemployment for all of you," what do you think they would have done? They would have slunk back to their offices. We would not have had socialism, but we would have public auto insurance (as in Manitoba, thanks to the more decisive efforts of my former colleague Howard Pawley, when he was Premier of Manitoba).

The lesson to be learned is that nothing good happens from reticence and caution, but also, in order to be bold, one needs back up. If people do not mobilise in large numbers, the right wing and ruling class will always get their way. But numbers alone are not enough. Unless the leadership of the movement is either willing to provoke a crisis, or the mass base is strong and organized enough to remove overly conservative leaders, the forward momentum of demonstrations can easily give way to political inertia.

(There is also the opposite problem, now coming to the fore again with the '*gilets jaunes*' movement in France, that sponatneous, 'horizontalist,' leaderless movements can "change the world without taking power." (John Holloway). It makes a catchy slogan, but there is no evidence to support its truth. Movements need democratically accountable leadership and they need to take power).



Success therefore depends on the proper relationship between leaders and movements. Effective leaders need to synthesise the demands coming up from the base into a coherent platform that everyone can get behind, and the base needs to send this information to the leadership, and ensure that they continue to advance that agenda, especially when the inevitable reaction comes. When leadership fails by being overly conservative (as they tend to be) , then the mass base has to replace them. If they do not, then the forward pressure will be lost.

That lesson was taught by the ultimate failure of the Days of Action (1995-98) in Ontario. The Rae government was defeated by the hard-right populism of Mike Harris, who, (like Ford now) came to power promising to open Ontario for business by cutting red tape, disciplining unions and the poor, and taming the deficit. (It is amazing to me that no mainstream social democratic politician ever notes that the panic about deficits is decades old. If they really were such an economically fatal problem, every Western economy would have been dead long ago). Unlike the response to Ford thus far, the labour and other social movements were pretty quick to react to and mobilise against Harris. Most impressively, the Ontario Federation of Labour and its allied local labour councils were able to build a crescendo of opposition through a series of one day general strikes in different cities. (The high point of my labour activism thus far was participating, with 75 000 other workers, in the Hamilton Day of Action. I was a proud member of the now defunct Canadian Union of Educational Workers which organized the Teaching and Graduate Assistants at McMaster, where I was doing my PhD). The movement crested with the Toronto Day of Action in 1998, which brought about 250 000 people out. Despite 3 separate resolutions passed by the OFL rank and file, the leadership got cold feet and refused to call a general strike. The movement wasted away, and Harris was re-elected

Nevertheless, the [Days of Action](#) themselves were spectacular successes, true carnivals of democracy in which you felt more fully alive marching with thousands and thousands of comrades. There are few better feelings than being charged by the energy that unites the individual members of a mass movement. But that energy has to grow or die, move forward to contest for power or give up. Sadly, despite having had the wind at our backs, the OFL ultimately pulled up sails, and the rank and file allowed them to do it.

As of yet, in response to Ford we (the labour movement) have not yet begun to fight, or even given public signals that some sort of organized response is in the offing. I saw a sticker campaign in Toronto warning Ford to back down from his threat to repeal the Wynne labour reforms, but he was not frightened off by stickers. The Ontario Confederation of Univesrity Faculty Associations issued tepid press releases against the free speech policy nonsense and the funding cuts, but has not been pushed by its local associations to mount a real fight back. Students have organized a few demonstrations, and hopefully that will be the beginning of a larger movement, which faculty can join, but there does not seem to me to be much momentum (judging from the situation on my campus). The repeal of the sex ed curriculum is being challenged in courts, but court battles are poor substitutes for democratic action.

Political reality is always fluid, and can often turn rapidly in unexpected directions. But the labour movement especially has been hammered so hard and so often over the past three decades that I worry that all the fight is out of it, at a moment where it really needs to re-activate itself. (A case in point is UNIFOR's chauvinist response to the closure of the GM plant in Oshawa. They

recently started a boycott of cars built in Mexico, even putting up billboards telling people how to identify Mexican-assembled cars by their VIN number. So punishing Mexican workers will restore Canadian jobs? This dead end is a repeat of the nationalism that undid the possibility of a coordinated working class response to the first NAFTA).

But I am writing as if the “labour movement” is some thing separate from me and other workers. If we are going to renew our movement, then we all have to re-discover the desire to fight. A general strike cannot be wished into existence, and it is not going to happen tomorrow. It will not ever happen unless each of us starts to do the hard work of micro-argument and organization where we are. Ford will not go away on his own, nor will the courts save us. Democracy is the opportunity, but also the hard work, of saving ourselves.

# Enough Bullshit About the Rule of Law

Originally posted, 12 March, 2019

Two recent controversies in Canadian politics have raised questions about whether the “rule of law” has been compromised. However, commentators have not gone on to raise the philosophical question of what the “rule of law” is, whether it really can be independent of “politics” and whether it is the essential good it is supposed to be.

The two cases are the arrest— at the behest of the American government— of the Chief Financial Officer of Huawei, Meng Wanzhou, and the very unscandalous scandal of the Trudeau government’s alleged “interference” with the decision of former Attorney General Jody Wilson-Raybould to allow the criminal prosecution of SNC-Lavalin to proceed. I am neither a journalist nor a detective. I am not going to try to resolve the legal issues both cases raise. The details of the cases only interest me in so far as they illustrate the deeper philosophical-political problems with the liberal idea of the rule of law.

In both cases journalists, opposition politicians, and the government have all invoked “the rule of law” as if it were some holy principle descended from heaven. Chrystia Freeland, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, assured the world that “Canada was a rule of law country,” in response to criticisms that Canada was helping the US wage a trade war against China by arresting Wanzhou. Yet it is obvious that the arrest of Wanzhou is part of a global campaign against Huawei in particular, and China and Iran in general. Trump as much as admitted that was the case [in his comments](#) shortly after her arrest. If those comments were not enough, consider the fact that the US has been [warning countries](#) not to use Huawei’s equipment as a platform for 5G wireless service (under the laughably hypocritical pretext that it could be sued to facilitate Chinese spying). And if more evidence is required, consider further that the charges to be brought against Wanzhou concern the violation of US sanctions against Iran, which do not have the force of international law, and Chinese companies are under no legal obligation to obey.

Or are they? The law— whether domestic or international, and regardless of what some journalists, politicians, and legal theorists might think and say — cannot be separated from political power. We think of obligation as the opposite of force, but the law is always backed by force, and the right to create and enforce law coincides with the power to impose and enforce it. Obligation likewise: if China wants to continue to trade with the US— still a vastly superior power— it must answer to American law, and is thus in reality obliged, even if it might formally resist. American law is not formally the same as international law, but if America has the power (economic, political, and military) to enforce it as if it were, then there is no real political difference between the two. What counts at the level of politics is compliance, not abstract formal validity. Wanzhou thus finds herself quite legally behind bars. The rule of law coincides with American interests. Thus, there is simply no meaningful difference between “the rule of law” and the “rule of the politically stronger.” The law is ruling, not Donald Trump or Chrystia Freeland, but it rules the way it does *because* of politics, not despite them.

To better understand my claim, consider periods of revolutionary social change. Here, the inseparability of law and politics becomes clear. One set of laws replaces an older set when a new social class arises that cannot consolidate its hold over power legally, according to the traditional laws. From the standpoint of the social forces that ruled under the old law, fundamental change will look like illegal usurpation. From the standpoint of the rising class, radical change will be legitimated by appeal to the principle that arbitrary personal authority (the deposed power) is finally being replaced by the rule of law. To conform this argument, consult the history of liberal philosophy as it takes shape from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth century. The “rule of law” that Freeland and Raybould-Wilson invoke has its origins here, in the liberal critique of monarchical and ecclesiastical authority. Locke, for example, made nonsense of the traditional claim that the Kings of England held their authority from God, and justified handing the English crown to William and Mary of Orange. He would agree that the law and not personal interest should rule, but he made it clear that the law served deeper interests. If those class interests were violated, then citizens retained the right of revolution.

[There are of course older antecedents to the liberal idea of the rule of law. Aristotle’s argument in *Politics* that in free states, laws, not men, rule, and the legal traditions of republican Rome, and Renaissance republic theorists are important historical bedrocks. It is also true that written, positive law itself is much older than Greece and Rome, going back to Babylonian times (the code of Hammurabi, 1754 BCE). Other cultures have their own legal histories, even if they have not always been written or acknowledged. Indigenous law in Canada is an example. However, the rule of law that has been invoked in both cases at issue here is undoubtedly the liberal ideal that the law must rule regardless of any partisan interests in one outcome rather than another. Given that this idea of the rule of law was imposed by colonial Canada on indigenous peoples, (in a process akin to the way in which traditional forms of law were overthrown by liberal revolutionaries) I found it strange that in her testimony Raybould-Wilson concluded by arguing only that indigenous people had suffered from failures of the rule of law. That they certainly have (i.e., they have not been respected as equal citizens). But the original problem was not the failure of the Canadian state to abide by the rule of law, but to impose by force the colonial rule of law over and against indigenous law, which the colonisers— of which Locke was an explicit supporter- simply ignored)].

To be sure, the liberal idea of rule of law, in so far as it rejected moral hierarchy as a basis for unequal treatment (the law is no respecter of persons), was an advance over the legal systems of absolute monarchy. But to say that it is somehow apolitical would render its origins incomprehensible. It emerges historically in a quite definite set of political, social, and economic struggles, and was itself a partisan idea in that struggle.

The point is: one cannot separate law and politics if we mean by “politics” the general, class-based struggle to acquire the power to rule society, and “law” as the general principles that legitimate that rule. The rule of law and politics are never separate in those senses of the terms. However, critics of the government’s handling of the SNC-Lavalin case are not using the terms in these senses. Rather, they mean by “politics” the struggle of particular people and parties to control government, and law as impersonal rules that limit what it is permissible to do in that struggle. Here, to be sure, one can discover violations of the rule of law if political power is

exercised to allow some person or group to escape justice just because of who they are, and not because of what they in fact did.

Maybe Trudeau violated the rule of law in this sense, (although I do not think that he did, but perhaps too persistently asked for a reconsideration of the Attorney General's decision). I think the issue is ultimately trivial when compared to the deeper question of whose interests the law serves, and how it should operate in a democratic society. The law is not a set of unchanging, divine principles, and, ultimately, in a democratic society, it has to be subordinate to the shared interests of citizens. Liberal-democratic law has co-evolved with capitalist social forms and forces and ultimately serves to protect them. To the extent that other interests have been recognised and acknowledged in particular laws (the interests of workers and oppressed groups) it is because they have fought for recognition, not only against this or that law, but the idea of the 'rule of law' as some principle that fixes certain principles in place forever. Those principles must always be revisable in a democracy— rule of the people, not the law— otherwise an advance over arbitrary power becomes cover for class interests presenting themselves as universal truths.

# Give the People What They Want: An Alternative!

Originally posted, on 4, July, 2018

## Bad News Comes in Threes ...

Progressive Americans continue to hope that with each new outrage against the basic human values of compassion and hospitality, (not to mention international treaty obligations), the Trump regime will reach an inflection point and implode under the weight of its contradictions. Thus far, the opposite seems to be happening. The more brutal his assault on victims fleeing the carnage of a century of American imperialism in Latin America, the more popular he becomes with Republicans. His base is not the majority of Americans by any means, but it numbers tens of millions of people, enough to prevent significant Republican losses in the mid-term elections next year if everything remains as it is at the moment.

Trump has not only weathered the storm of opposition to his policy of imprisoning Latin American children, he has emerged apparently stronger than ever. The US Supreme Court handed down three decisions that pleased the hard core anti-union ruling class segment of the Republican Party, the anti-abortion evangelical element of his core supporters, and nativist Islamophobes. The [anti-union](#) decision ruled as unconstitutional (via the absurd reasoning that it violates the First Amendment protections for free speech) automatic dues check offs for purposes of funding collective bargaining. The decision will deprive public sector unions of needed funds and create splits within their ranks likely to cause further decline in union membership. (When similar laws were passed in Wisconsin, union membership [declined](#) precipitously).

The [anti-choice](#) decision overturned a California law that forced “crisis pregnancy centres” to disclose what they actually are: ideologically motivated anti-choice organizations. The court again hid behind free speech laws to protect the anti-choice movement.

The third decision upheld Trump’s (modified) [travel ban](#). The issue here was more clear cut, if not more palatable to Trump’s opponents. The Court ruled (5-4) that the travel ban fell within the very broad Executive powers of the president (powers which Trump has been enthusiastically exploiting since he was inaugurated). I have no expertise in American constitutional law, so I have nothing to say about the narrow legal question of the extent of legitimate executive power under the US Constitution. However, even a non-expert can see that what is driving these decisions is not legal hermeneutics but naked power. The first two issues have nothing at all to do with free speech: The first case involves ensuring that the entire membership pays for services from which the entire membership benefits, and the second is a straightforward effort to deceive vulnerable women and undermine their rights to medical care. In the third, the justices split on the substantive issue of whether America should be open or closed to the world on the basis of race and religion.

On an ideologically split court, the numerically stronger side carries the day

### ... Or Maybe Fours

No one could imagine that the worst was yet to happen. Twenty four hours after these rulings came down, Justice Anthony Kennedy announced that he would retire. This move creates an opening for Trump to appoint another conservative justice, raising fears that *Roe vs. Wade*, and thus American women's abortion rights, could be in jeopardy. To be sure, the appointment of a fifth dogmatically conservative justice would lock in a conservative majority for the foreseeable future, but that on its own does not determine the political future of America.

Abortion rights were won, as all rights of oppressed people have been won, through political struggle. Once they have been won, they settle into the landscape of political normalcy. People forget about the herculean efforts it took to institutionalise them. When they are attacked after the fact, the default strategy is to look to the legal system to protect them. Hence, in the aftermath of successful struggles, the legal system, and not mass struggle, appears to be the guarantor of people's rights. But law—like war—is politics by other means. No group should ever entrust their rights to twelve people. The only security for democratic gains is political vigilance and the ability to mobilise in overwhelming numbers.

In Canada, it was the Supreme Court that overturned the existing abortion law, but it was decades of struggle by Canadian women and heroic allies like Henry Morgenthauer who created the conditions on the ground that made the law untenable whatever the Supreme Court would have ruled. It was the vigilance of groups like the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics that subsequently mobilised thousands of people to defend the clinics against harassment and violence from so called “Campaign Life” vigilantes. Whoever is ultimately appointed to the Supreme Court in the US, women will have to take their future into their own hands and mobilise in “huge” numbers, not only in one off demonstrations, but in active defiance of any re-introduction of anti-abortion legislation should *Roe vs. Wade* be overturned.

### Is the American Left Up to the Challenge?

There was also some good news from America last week. “Democratic socialist” (i.e., social democrat) [Alexandria Octavio-Cortez](#) defeated incumbent and Democratic Party insider Rep. Joe Crowley in the New York Democratic Primary. The victory reinforces the criticism that the Democratic Party establishment erred fundamentally when they backed Clinton against Sanders in 2016. Octavio-Cortez's victory will likely be interpreted as evidence that the Democratic Party can be democratised and continue to function as the tent under which progressive opponents of Trump should gather.

I have argued against that position in the past and urged progressive Americans to break with the Democratic Party. In America (everywhere, in fact, but especially there) left-wing forces need a new fighting organization, broad-based, but grounded in a social and economic program that starts with a sustainable energy future, builds in costed and realizable transitional programs for workers still dependent on fossil fuel industries, includes a realizable plan to gradually reduce hours of work and re-divides social labour time to simultaneously increase overall employment while reducing dependence on the labour market, expands rather than destroys public health care, education, and pensions, re-affirms the security of civil rights gains and the rights of

women, gays, lesbians, and trans people, and actively pushes back against xenophobic and racist fears fueling the immigration wars. If the Democratic Party can be bent to these tasks, great. I doubt it, but I am not a participant so I will leave it to my comrades across the river to make the tactical decisions.

Howsoever the party debate plays out, there are encouraging signs that the American left has been spurred into re-birth by the openly authoritarian politics of Trump. Notwithstanding his rhetorical embrace of blue-collar interests, it is clear that his domestic and international economic policy is all about promoting the interests of American *capital* against international rivals. American workers are supposed to benefit as a consequence of policies designed to reduce taxes on the rich (spurring them to invest) and to make American corporations more competitive against Chinese and European rivals (allowing them to bring some manufacturing jobs back home). There is no mention of strengthening unions, in particular by organizing “illegal” migrants whom American businesses or only too happy to exploit), raising wages as a percentage of profits, or progressive taxation to increase public spending and thus raise real wages- mild policies indeed but which would nevertheless clearly be in the short term interests of workers.

Octavio-Cortez is but a single symbol of a real cross-country mobilisation, a still-developing “political formation.” In a recent essay in *The Bullet*, [Seth Adler](#) drawing on the work of stalwart American socialist Stanley Aronowitz, charts the full spectrum of opposition groups that have emerged or been energized by the Trump regime. Twelve years ago, in the midst of the second term of Bush II, Aronowitz posed the problem of the American Left in startlingly prescient terms

“Before us is the urgent necessity of launching the anti-capitalist project in the United States and, with great specificity, making plain what we may mean by an alternative to the authoritarian present. We are faced with the urgent need to reignite the radical imagination. We simply have no vehicle to undertake this work – a party that can express the standpoint of the exploited and oppressed that, in the current historical conjuncture, must extend far beyond the poor and the workers, since capital and the state have launched a major assault on the middle classes. In short, we need a political formation capable of articulating the content of the ‘not-yet’ – that which is immanent in the present but remains unrealized” (p. 160). (*Left Turn*, 2006)

Adler takes up the mantle of Aronowitz’s position. He describes in rich detail that I will not reproduce here the tremendous variety of left initiatives that could form the mobilized basis of a transformed Democratic Party or a new anti-capitalist party. Adler does not take a decisive stand against either option, preferring instead to chart a way that encourages both formations to co-operate. In his view, the short term key is for co-operation on the electoral front towards the goal of retaking the House and Senate in 2018 and defeating Trump in 2020, while patiently building a new party that can, in the longer term, replace the Democrats as the alternative– not to Republicans– but capitalist society as such.

If polarization vis-à-vis engaging an outside-inside Democratic Party strategy gave way to common strategy-making – scenarios like the following could conceivably be possible: imagine Green and independent activists allying with the Sanders forces to win battles in the Party’s



power centers and localities (on wedge demands such as banning all capitalist-corporate/large-capitalist-personal donations, committing the party and candidates it supports to single-payer, zero tuition, a \$15 minimum wage, and winning key committee majorities). Would they not, together, likely win more victories than the Sanders' forces have realized (Sanders is an independent: why not imagine what it might take to have independents such as, [Jill Stein](#), [Cynthia McKinney](#), [Kshama Sawant](#), [Lawrence Lessig](#), [Brian Jones](#), and [Ralph Nader](#) stoking these fires)?

If cross-partisan strategies are eventually reduced in scope, in favor of developing one platform and one independent party (or taking over the Democrats), the formation-cohering process might become more strenuous. The experience however of collaborating in sizable cross-partisan formation-cohering campaigns and candidacies, plus whatever the political tensions of the time would inspire in greater solidarity, could place participating polities in a better position to succeed, than if no such organizational guiding force in a formation were developed. Eventually, they might get to a mutually trusting place where they could vote on which single presidential candidate to back/run.

The prospect of a left formation rising, and helping build a unified party, might be met with the retort: because the Independent and Democratic lefts have incorrigible (north-south-pole-like) differences, it'll never happen. Does that mean it should not be pursued, even as it is already happening?

The last point is crucial. The process of political fermentation has already begun: Trump is helping people to see that Trump is not the problem, but the pressures of managing an exploitative and racist global capitalist system, with the United States at the centre, is. As long as these structural pressures remain, authoritarian, police-state, repressive tactics will be required, whomever their spokesperson is: the suave sexist Bill Clinton or the boorish misogynist Donald Trump. The demand for an alternative is not the result of academic argument but a growing recognition in the heart of the beast that the moment for real change is at hand.

# Imperialism, Not Trump, is the Problem

Originally posted 24 December, 2018

About ten years ago, I was speaking at the Left Forum in New York City. I bought a t-shirt that challenged liberals by asking: “Is it Ok if O-bomb-a does it?” The “it” in question was raining bombs down on the people of Afghanistan. In case you are wondering, the principled answer is: no: imperialist warfare against relatively defenceless peoples in the Middle East is wrong no matter who the commander-in-chief- of the United States Armed Forces is.

If that is the principled answer, then it follows that if a different commander-in-chief, even one whose politics and personality are odious, decides to stop raining bombs on (some) people, then he has made the right decision, however wrong he might be about everything else. Yet, once again, Trump’s taking steps to remove American troops from global conflict zones has been met with derision by the liberal foreign policy establishment (the same establishment that has managed and cheerleaded every disastrous conflict from Viet Nam to Afghanistan, the latter war now entering into its 18th year). It is essential that we stand against their objective war-mongering and support the decision (and not Trump the person) to remove American troops from Syria and to begin to withdraw them from Afghanistan.

We have have seen this liberal playbook before. Trump was mocked for meeting Putin and was supposedly suckered by Kim Jong-il. But the great liberal humanitarians offered no alternative way forward beyond platitudes about the need for muscular confrontation with adversaries. Of course, they won’t be doing the standing up, being too busy sitting down at cocktail bars in New York. It is easy to urge on the fight 5000 miles behind the front lines.

I come to bury left-liberal American triumphalists and not praise Trump. It says much about the politically incoherent times we live in that people who think of themselves as “progressives” are worried that the departure of Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mathis is a blow to a just and peaceful world order. How do the high priests of the Church of CNN liberalism think a Marine Corps General gets the nick name “Mad Dog” in the first place? Hmmm? Might it have something to do with his zeal for killing non-white people in non-America? Or, (second best), his zeal for training others to do the same?

The incoherence runs deeper. The same choir that sings hymns to its “rules-based order” chants menacingly against Trump’s decision to withdraw troops from Syria, *even though there was no justification under international law* for their deployment. Ah, but America is the indispensable nation. The rules have always been whatever American power has said they are. On this essential point there is no difference between Trump and any other American president. This truth cannot be repeated often enough: the rules-based order was a function of American hegemony in the Cold War era. Its military operations around the world today continue that same struggle to maintain global dominance. They have nothing to do with keeping any human being in the Middle East or North Africa safe or free. All are expendable for the sake of preserving America’s (more and more tenuous) pre-eminence.

When the liberal foreign policy establishment waxes poetic about the humanitarian essence of America the globally beautiful, they in effect deny the humanity of all the occupied and oppressed peoples of the earth. To be human is to be self-determining, and to be self-determining means to have the right, the need, and the power to fight one's own battles. Canadians and Europeans have never called upon the peoples of Africa or the Middle East to invade and remove our oppressors. If we face social problems, we regard ourselves as competent to solve them. We owe it to the dignity of the humanity of everyone else in the world to let them find their own way, fight their own fights, and determine their own social lives. Politics and revolution are blood sport on this planet. We might imagine a world where oppression is overcome without a fight, but that is not the world in which we live. If there are fights to be had, the oppressed themselves have to lead them.

The United States Armed Forces are fighting organizations trained to kill in the service of American goals. These goals have never and do not now coincide with the goals of people fighting for their own liberation. The liberation of any people must be the act of that people themselves. That is the only principle of international politics that respects the humanity of everyone. America is very much dispensable to their struggles and it is always a good thing when its armies withdraw.

# The Politics of Impunity

Originally posted, 3 August, 2018

In Book 2 of Plato's *Republic*, Glaucon, Plato's brother, pushes Socrates to justify his belief that a just life is better than an unjust life. He frames his challenge through a story of a magic ring, the Ring of Gyges, which renders its wearer invisible, and thus invulnerable. The ethical conclusion is that the only thing that keeps people on the track of justice is fear of being caught. If people were rendered invulnerable to punishment, they would give free reign to their desires, reduce everyone else to the status of mere objects, exploit them for their own pleasure, and discard them once they were no longer of service.

Politically, the argument is used to support a proto-social contract theory of the origins of social institutions and law. I do not think that social contract theories are adequate to the known history of social development, but the psychological forces that Glaucon points to seem real. There is abundant evidence that when people are shielded from suffering the consequences that public knowledge of their activities might cause, they give free reign to those thoughts which, as Mark Twain said, would shame the devil. Think of patriarchal households when they are regarded as "the private sphere." Or residential schools where indigenous children were shut away from the rest of the world. Or Catholic Churches into whose basements no one looked because people assumed priests were trustworthy. All turned out to be cauldrons of abuse and violence which boiled for decades, even centuries, because no one could see the perpetrators, and they knew it.

Political crimes are also perpetuated because the perpetrators are invulnerable, but here the cause of invulnerability is different. Those with superior military might do not need the Ring of Gyges: they do what they want in the open because no one can stop them and they know it. Israel and the United States provide the best contemporary examples of the principle. In the last six months Israel has filmed its soldiers executing unarmed Gazans and [laughing about it](#), jailed a [16 year old](#) for trying to protect her family, [jailed another young poet](#) for her poetry, and passed the "[Jewish Nation State](#)" law that explicitly defines Israel as a Jewish state and explicitly reduces Arab citizens to subordinate status.

Nothing happened. No one summoned any Israeli ambassadors, or expelled them, or demanded sanctions. Nothing. Instead, the United States, the main enabler of Israel's racist policies, yawned, stretched, and went back to watching the national soap opera: the fiction that Donald Trump was elected by Russian meddling and not the combination of a ruling class who wanted his tax cuts, and enough members of the working class in middle America who bought his racist scapegoating of immigrants as the cause of the (real and brutal) hollowing out of their communities. Not a word of public criticism from anyone whose name the general public might know. No Republicans, no Democrats. In Canada too, our great champion of justice, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland, said and did nothing.

As they have been for the past 70 years, the Palestinians will be left to fight on their own against an enemy they cannot defeat without serious international support. They have tried everything: armed resistance, international lobbying, peaceful mass protest; guerilla struggle and international law, patience and urgent demands, and still they lose land every day to new settlements. Has any group in the history of anti-colonial struggle been as bereft of meaningful international support as the Palestinians?

Soviet support for anti-imperialist struggles in the 3rd World was rooted in cynical *raisons d'état*. Nevertheless, it was meaningful support that enabled Africa and Southeast Asia to free itself from colonial control. De-colonisation created other sets of problems (most of which can be traced back to the ways in which economic domination by the First World replaced direct colonial rule). Still, the successful anti-colonial revolutions after the Second World War must be counted amongst the high points of the wave of struggle of human beings from freedom from oppressive social and political structures.

Palestinians' struggles for self-determination and formal nationhood are part of that longer history of anti-colonial struggle, but it is taking place in vastly different political conditions. There is no Soviet Union to provide material support to the cause. China has turned its sights to Africa, and is providing massive investment funds, but only to those states to which it can either export infrastructure technology (high speed trains) or purchase land to help ensure its own food security. There is no need for a high speed train between Ramallah and Gaza, and there is not enough land to interest the Chinese belly.

More shamefully, the Arab countries have also abandoned the Palestinians. They have never been effective supporters (and often, outright opponents), but today there is not even symbolic support for the struggle. The leader of Arab reaction in the region, [Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#) of Saudi Arabia, flat out lectured Palestinians to accept whatever Trump offers, or "shut up." Having solved that problem, he was free to return to bombing Yemeni children. (Speaking of impunity....).

On the international stage there are only a few NGO's and the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement that openly organize in solidarity with Palestine. But Israel is too small a player in export markets (with the exception of arms) to really be hurt by boycotts. Sanctions are unthinkable, given the political realities described above. The European Union is useless, an essential part of the global system that has protected Israel for decades, and thus in no sense a potential "honest broker" when it comes to Palestine. Canada is too small and subservient, ultimately, to American power. No party in America supports Palestine. Recent youth insurgencies into the Democratic Part might give some cause for hope that by 2020 genuine criticism of Israel might come from the Democratic Left, but I think that is wishful thinking at best. Only in the UK has there been sharp criticism of Israel from the Labour Party under Corbyn. The result has been predictable: [vilification as an anti-Semite](#) and open attempts to split the party over the issue.

Meanwhile, Israel intercepts another [protest boat sailing for Gaza](#), restricts fuel and medicine, divides, conquers, divides again, demolishes more homes, builds more settlements, eggs Trump

on to war with Iran, bombs Syria, [sends weapons to Ukranian neo-Nazis](#), and courts real anti-Semites like [Hungary's Viktor Orban](#).

And nothing happens.

# Salvation? Not Yet

Posted on 15 November, 2018

Saudi Arabia and its allies (including the United States) continue the genocidal war in Yemen. Mike Pompeo and John Bolton threaten to starve Iranians into submission. Israel is bombing Gaza. California is on fire. The migrant caravan continues its march north. There is much for the leaders of the “free world” to do. And we have a whole new batch them, Democrats, elected to the House of Representatives in sufficient numbers to put a stop to Trump’s legislative agenda. But will they use their control over the House to push back against the most odious problems the world faces, or will they waste time trying to impeach Trump and continue the Mueller spectacle?

I will bet on the latter, but we will see. Liberals in America and around the world are nonetheless giddy. Van Jones rhapsodised about the Rainbow Wave that washed over America. In the UK, [Will Hutton](#) in *The Guardian* sang that a “new, progressive US is slowly taking shape.” There was dark, and now there is light. Liberalism used to pride itself on being the philosophy of nuance and context, but it is now the vehicle for absolutes. Ignoring completely both history and the deep divisions that have not disappeared from America, liberals like Hutton see only catastrophe (Trump) or salvation (a Democratic majority in the House). Not only do they paint the world in political absolutes, but (worse) they valorise these absolutes in the most vacuous moralistic terms.

Case in point (also from *The Guardian*) is [Moira Donegan’s](#) question: “What is wrong with the white women who support Trump.” That is a good question. Her answer, not so much: “There is a battle on for the soul of America, between the peevish, racist cruelty of Trump and his supporters, and a vision of inclusion, justice, and decency forwarded by an increasingly diverse coalition of the left.” So there you have it: anyone who votes for Trump is racist and cruel, while “the Left” stands for “inclusion, justice, and decency.”

This type of kindergarten thinking fails the most basic test of political analysis because it tries to account for historical, political problems in terms of fixed personality structures and moral dispositions. Instead of following up her appropriate question (why would women vote for a misogynist like Trump) with the political question: what social forces help shape people’s political beliefs, values, choices, and goals, she reverts to a simplistic explanation in terms of the kind of people they are (cruel). But cruelty and racism are the problems that political analysis has to explain, not the explanation. If the white women who vote for Trump are racist and cruel (it is certain that not all of them are, but leave that empirical detail to one side for the moment) then the question has to be: how did they become that way? And once we understand that question, then we can start thinking about ways to address the causes. If we do not do that, then we have no arguments but only names to call people. In my experience, calling people names is a very good way to make them defensive, but rarely produces a change of belief or values.

The same argument holds for the values driving Hutton and Donegan's supposed new American Left. What exactly do the platitudes "inclusion, justice, and decency" mean in terms of the lives of real people? Is this a society really worth being included in? What about the deep fissures of class, race, sex, and so forth that have been endemic to capitalist society from the beginning? Does "decency" make them go away? And what of justice? Justice means getting what you deserve. So what do we deserve? Liberal equality of opportunity? A chance to find work as an exploited and alienated wage labourer? Or an opportunity to scramble 24/7 to make a living in the gig economy? A fair shot at claiming asylum to become a super exploited nanny or gardener for an inclusive and decent rich white person?

There are good answers to these questions. They must start from the reality of human needs, proceed to a systematic explanation of why the needs of so many go unmet in capitalist society, and from there to a practicable series of institutional and structural changes that would solve that most fundamental of social problems. The outcome might then be called inclusive (of everyone's real natural and social needs), and just (we deserve that which we require to live and cannot procure for ourselves acting alone because the resource is socially produced and distributed). If we had justice and inclusion in those senses we could dispense with "decency" as otiose weepy moralism.

There are and have been from the beginning forces in America that have fought, in different contexts, with different concrete expressions, for democratic control over the resources that everyone needs to live. There is not now and never has been "Progressive America" which then gets overwhelmed by "Conservative America" and then magically re-appears. Both America's have always existed in contradiction and struggle with each other. The American Revolution was an anti-imperialist thrust against Britain, but at the same time an imperialist assault against indigenous people. The Civil War ended slavery, but began as a struggle to keep it from spreading north. Radical Reconstruction unleashed the talents and capacities of ex-slaves to determine their own future, and formed the pretext for the creation of the first Ku Klux Klan and the re-domination of the Black population through informal and state sanctioned terrorism. The New Deal created the American welfare state, and catalysed the reactionary movement whose contemporary form is the Republican Party under Trump. The struggles of the New Left in the 1960's generated momentum for sexual revolution, black liberation, and anti-imperialist solidarity with the Third World, and became the demon haunting neo-conservative nightmares and the spectre they used to mobilise the counter-counter-cultural assault that all those cruel racist white women who vote for Trump belong to still.

We cannot make any headway unless we start from the tensions and contradictions and find ways to use the spaces they create to organise and mobilise. If society is contradictory, it is neither progressive nor conservative, but both, and because both, unstable and dynamic. The instability is the space for political organization. If it is to be successful, if the small gains in the mid-terms are to develop into a serious movement for fundamental social change that we have not seen since the 1960's, then supporters need to develop serious political arguments, not Manichean platitudes.



# Naked Power

Originally posted, 16 October, 2018

As I write, goats are being scaped and lambs readied for sacrifice. Saudi Arabia seems poised to admit that its agents murdered Jamal Kashoggi, after denying, with less and less plausibility, that he simply disappeared from their consulate in Istanbul. “Rogue” elements or an interrogation gone bad will be served up in explanation (and exculpation). The world will cluck and tut-tut about how troublesome the Crown Prince has become, and then go back to buying the country’s oil, selling it arms, supporting its war in Yemen, and extolling the medieval kingdom as a reliable ally in the fight to “contain” Iran.

Why will nothing happen? Because, although he offends liberal sensibilities, Trump is right: money makes the world go around and Saudi Arabia has a lot of it. It makes no capitalist economic sense to not sell it 110 billion dollars worth of weapons. Thus, the weapons will be sold. If the moral price to pay is one journalist’s life, so what? How many tens of millions of people have been killed by colonialism, wars to prevent former colonies from “going Communist,” two world wars, and the daily grind of imposed poverty? Anyone who thinks this outrage is going to make a difference to global political-economic alignments must have just arrived on Earth from another planet.

The same can be said about the almost as sorry spectacle of the appointment of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. I told my partner as I watched Jeff Flake that it was all an act. The twisting and contorting and getting red in the face and huffing and puffing and looking down at his shoes, being oh so diplomatic as he pleaded for a “short delay” and an “investigation” of the allegations against Kavanaugh was all theatre. He pretended to make demands of his fellow Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee but it was clear that by asking only for a time-limited investigation, he was suckering the Democrats. Did anyone notice how quickly and quietly the White House accepted the need to ask the FBI to interview other witnesses? Trump knew that the investigation was just the out that Flake and Collins needed to vote for Kavanaugh. I was proven exactly correct, unfortunately. The opposition was vigorous, courageous, and morally unassailable, but the Republicans simply used the power they had to force the appointment through. If the people with power are willing to use it with ruthless partisan intent, reactive protest will not be enough.

In Brazil too there is bad news. The right wing appears poised to seize power. Lunatic evangelical Christian Jair Bolsonaro leads after the first round of elections and probably cannot be stopped at the ballot box at this point. However, he is only in this position because of a coup dressed up as a war against corruption that removed one Worker’s Party President from power (Dilma Rouseff), and threw another (the most popular politician in the country) in prison (Lula da Silva).

In the face of the Kavanaugh travesty some liberal celebrity-bot on NPR said last week that the greatest enemy of the Left is cynicism. This claim is historically vacuous. The greatest enemy

of the Left has always been, and remains, the right wing's willingness to use both the legal power of the state and extra-legal ultra-violence to maintain its power.

What is the lesson for the Left? We need to win power and use it. Decades of defeat have encouraged leftists to make a virtue of necessity and over-estimate what can be done by social movements. Along these lines, John Holloway wrote an influential book called *Change the World Without Taking Power*. The success of the right over the past forty years shows why he is wrong. Changing the world *requires* power, and the organized power of the state is vastly stronger than that of social movements. State power does not have to be used in a primarily repressive way. The formal legal authority of the state can also be used to regulate, transform, improve, re-distribute, and formalise the informal power of social movements in ways that, cumulatively, over time, if replicated in enough countries that link up in new international alliances, could profoundly transform the globe. Climate change, massive inequality and the damage to life that it causes, and other social problems cannot be solved by protests. They have to be addressed at the level of enforceable law and public policy. State power is required to implement both.

In power, the left has tended to be overly cautious and deferential to capital. In 1990, after a surprise victory in an election campaign in which he was tirelessly red-baited, Bob Rae gave up his plan for public auto insurance after a protest of a few thousand Bay Street Blue Suits. He later completely undermined the prospects of the Ontario NDP for a generation by attacking public sector unions' collective agreements and working conditions. In admittedly more dire circumstances, Syriza in Greece, after winning a referendum on a platform of no more concessions to European banks, made more concessions to European banks after they threatened to withhold further funds. Rather than push the issue and leave the monetary union, Syriza continued to implement the cuts it said it would not implement and a large majority of Greeks had refused in the referendum.

In contrast, in power, right wing populists have done what they said they were going to do. The policies are mostly xenophobic, reactionary, illiberal, authoritarian, and rabidly pro-capitalist. The Left needs an alternative agenda, clearly. Yet, it also needs to learn the important political lesson the right in power is teaching: be bold, provoke crises, pursue the agenda you were elected to pursue, don't back down at the first sign of trouble, and dare your enemies to defeat you.

# Red Dawn II

Originally posted, 17 July, 2018

Just since 1947, American administrations have disrupted, destabilized, attacked, and [overthrown 72 governments](#). Literally millions of people have been killed by these machinations. The most recent intervention was in Ukraine, in 2014, when the CIA and [US State Department](#) decided who would replace the elected President. Keep the wreckage of other peoples' societies that America has wrought in mind as you try to digest the hypocritical nonsense being spewed this morning about the Putin-Trump Summit.

The non-event (what, actually, has changed of any importance in the world as a result of a 2 hour conversation?) has not yet been compared to Chamberlain and Hitler, but the pundits have to keep something in reserve to sustain interest for a few days at least. I am sure it will be coming.

To hear great American patriots tell the tale, the “free world” has been sold out to Vlad the Impaler. (Funny, just yesterday the propagandists of The Free World were singing from the mountaintop that Russia had joined the Free World. Unfortunately, the “reform” agenda they prescribed led to the theft of state property by a handful of apparatchiks and opportunists (these are the ‘oligarchs’ you hear about, a pure creation of Western economists who called for ‘shock treatment’ as the preferred means of transition from a state controlled economy). It was shocking. It led to a complete collapse of living standards, life expectancy, and social chaos. I have no illusions about Putin’s ruthlessness, but he is not a self-made man. He is a direct consequence of the way in which Western advisors stage managed the transition from Stalinism. If he is popular in Russia (and he is), it is not because he has Trump in his pocket, but because he brought stability.

Mainstream political analysis is typically mindless and unhistorical, but the past 24 hours of so-called “commentary” have been egregiously stupid. Since everything has to be judged in terms of a sporting metaphor, headlines scream “Putin” wins. What has he won? Sanction relief? No. A relaxation of NATO pressure on his borders? No. Promises for the US to reduce its military budget? No. Does he now control the Pentagon, the US Congress, and the Supreme Court? No. Is Russia anything more than middling economy heavily dependent on its export sector for revenue? No. The [per capita GDP of Russia](#) was just over 11 000 US dollars in 2017. The [US per capita GDP](#) was just over 53 000 dollars in 2017. The US [defence budget](#) for 2017 was 610 billion dollars; Russia’s 61 billion dollars. Anyone who believes that Russia is somehow going to take over the Baltics, Poland, and Germany while they are at it is delusional, or ....

Has an agenda.

Here is the agenda. Exploitative and oppressive societies need external threats to bind the population to uncritically accept their own exploitation and oppression. Trump uses immigrants, Trump’s opponents, and especially the Democrats, have re-invented Russia as a new Red Menace. In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, Al Qaeda and then ISIS fit the bill, but

they have largely been defeated. Everything old is new again. We are back to the Russian Bear pawing at “The Free World.”

Here is the drill: stop thinking about history, context, politics, and empirical facts about power differentials between America and Russia and fall in line behind the flag. Where are you Patriotic Republicans? Save us! Former CIA directors of all people calling out Trump for: Treason! High crimes and misdemeanors! (Since when is it treason for the elected President to disagree with intelligence agencies? Is it a law that their findings must be accepted? Think of the totalitarian implications if that were actually a law, people).

It goes on. The most disgraceful display from a US President Ever! (Tell that to the Viet Nameese killed by US bombs during Operation Rolling Thunder authorized by Mr. Great Society, Lyndon Johnson). Shameful! Cowardice (I am surprised no one has said “unmanly” yet).

Why the histrionics? Because— as everyone knew he would— Trump failed to directly and explicitly attack Putin for interference in the election. Why would anyone think Trump would change his script? He has maintained all along that the inquiry is politically motivated. Why would he change his tune now?

Here is what matters. 1. America consistently bribes, threatens, and invades countries that fail to fall in line, and thus its rulers’ complaints about Russian interference are pure hypocrisy. 2. More importantly, the Democratic Party did orchestrate Clinton’s victory, and they are desperate to distract from their own failures. 3. More importantly still, Russia did not smuggle voters into the United States. More than 50 million Americans voted for Trump for reasons that have nothing to do with Russian meddling. 4. More importantly still, if America would abolish the Electoral College (an aristocratic and racist institution that was explicitly designed to protect the election of president from the passions of the great unwashed working and later black masses) Trump would not be President. 5. Finally, and most importantly, the only interests served by a new Phony Cold War with Russia are those of the military, military industries, and the military-academic-media complex of vapid talking heads who make their living spouting platitudes that distract people from real problems.

Real people would be wise to tune out, turn off, tell Democrats to shut up and commit themselves to solving those real problems: climate change, the economic and social destruction of Africa, violent chaos across the Middle East, Afghanistan, North Africa -all caused by US intervention- reducing economic inequality, democratising workplaces, stopping violence against women, and, in general, overcoming the causes of exploitation, alienation, and oppression).

# Les gilets jaunes, sont-ils aussi gilets de sauvetage?

Originally posted, 16 December, 2018

The *gilet jaunes* movement in France poses once again the crucial political question of our age: how far can social movements, acting outside of, and, to a large extent against, established political parties (especially of the left) go towards making structural changes to liberal-democratic capitalist society? The [list of demands](#) thrown up by the movement is diverse, but centre on income and wealth distribution, the relative tax burden borne by the working versus the ruling class, and a more nebulous, but galvanizing demand for respect from Macron in particular and political elites generally. Macron, faced with a determined movement, has made a few concessions, but nothing that could be described as structural in nature.

What do I mean by “structural” and what is the range of possible relationships between immediate demands, “horizontal” political movements, structural transformations, and the criteria democratic socialists ought to employ to evaluate the direction of political struggle and social change? Social structures are rules, institutions, and values that organise and normalise a form of control over basic life-resources. Control over basic life-resources is the deep basis of social power. Social structures embody and protect a given configuration of social power. Social structures persist through changes of social and political personnel. People and governments come to be and pass away, social structures persist so long as a given form of control over life-resources persists.

From this understanding of social structures, it follows that structural changes are those which change the form of control over life-resources. Merely changing the personnel of government is not sufficient to bringing about structural change. Changing values, institutions, and practices, on the other hand, can help to promote structural change because, even if, over the short term, the underlying form of control over life-resources is not changed, the freedom of the owning class to use those resources to enrich itself at the expense of everyone else and the natural world is constrained. They are weakened, working people and the oppressed are empowered. At this point in history, where older forms of working class organization have been atrophied and older ideas of socialism no longer inspire, the politics of structural change have to be re-imagined.

Two opposed dangers have to be avoided. On the one hand, we have to avoid ultra-left dismissals of anything that falls short of early twentieth century forms of working class revolution as useless reformism. Some on the far left might thus be tempted to dismiss [Thomas Piketty's](#) intervention into the on-going struggle. He suggested that the structural issues raised by the *gilets jaunes* be addressed by a massive redistribution of the tax burden. He suggests raising 800 billion dollars (across Europe) by taxing wealth and carbon, and using the funds to invest in public services. I think we should see this sort of proposal as a possible focal point for strategic political organization rather than as a final produce of expert intervention from

above. Connected to a struggle from below, it could have structurally transformative implications, given how persistent and widespread the fight to so drastically re-shift the tax burden on to the the rich would have to be in order to succeed.

On the other hand— and, given the current state of oppositional politics, the far greater danger— we have to avoid is making a virtue of the necessity of dispersed, horizontal, leaderless movements like the *gilets jaunes*. They have, very dramatically, opposed themselves to some core social problems of contemporary capitalism— inequality and an unfair tax burden especially— and have once again demonstrated the power of determined political mobilisation. But the leaderlessness, the focus on direct action, and overt opposition to existing left-wing political parties without posing an institutionalised alternative to them are serious weaknesses.

There are three key weaknesses of horizontal movements, all on display in the *gilets jaunes* uprising. First, where there are no leaders, there is no political clarity and no political accountability. Thus, it is unclear to what extent the right-wing populist ideas of Marie le Pen and the Front Nationale are having on some aspects of the movement. Taxation and equality were also themes drummed on by Le Pen in her electoral struggle with Macron, and it would be naive to think that no one in the movement is approaching these issues from a right rather than left perspective. But if there is no one to articulate a clear program and principles, there is no way to critically engage with this tension (assuming it exists). At a crucial point the tension will become manifest as contradictory political demands, and a split and weakening of the movement will become more likely.

Second, without leadership and accountable political structures, strategy is reduced to tactics. The focus is always on the next spectacular event to the detriment of long-range strategic planning based on a clear understanding of key issues. Amongst the most important structural issues that need to be understood are: the nature of state power, its relationship to social and economic power, the role of international competition and institutions in the determination of national policy, an historical understanding of how contemporary capitalism has caused key social problems, and what sorts of structural changes (not mere superficial adjustments to policies or changes in state personnel) are necessary, given a certain set of answers to the preceding questions.

Third, and following closely from the first, fetishising activism and resistance in opposition to vertical political organization is almost certain to lead to burn out. Already the numbers involved in active protest seem to be declining. Few people are committed enough to demonstrate again and again and again in support of nebulous demands. As the numbers dwindle, the remaining few become easier targets of repression. Intensified repression dissuades more people from taking part, and a death spiral sets in (as we saw in the case of Occupy, for example). I am not being unduly pessimistic, but only arguing that political vitality and energy is not enough: it has to be stored in a political vehicle that withstand the inevitable ups and downs of difficult social struggles.

What is that political vehicle in France today? I do not know, and only those involved n the ground can answer the question. It is almost certainly not the Socialist or Communist

parties. Perhaps it will be France Insoumise? Or maybe a party that does not yet exist? What matters is that movements become serious about gaining state power. The right wing populists have shown that state power can make life a lot more miserable for people. We need a party that can win elections and show that power can make life better for people too.

# The Road From Wigan Pier to Here

Originally posted, 9 May, 2019

For the past two years, a good deal of my writing has focused on the existential crisis posed by the possibility of a future without work. I was discussing some of this work with a student in my graduate seminar and he alerted me to some important discussions about the value of work in Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The student was right: Orwell touches upon what I take to be the key problem posed by the possibility of a world where (to paraphrase Marx from *The Grundrisse*), "machines can do (almost everything) for us that we used to have to do for ourselves." Left and right supporters of untrammelled technological development have given insufficient attention to the role that *work* plays in a meaningful life. Work must be distinguished from alienated labour for a wage and a boss. Work is creative transformation of materials to satisfy some real natural or social need, requiring mental and physical effort, as well as social interaction.

However, I mention that aspect of the essay only by way of introduction to another theme that Orwell explores: the values on which support for socialism amongst the working class can be built. His arguments resonate powerfully at the moment. When he wrote it, in 1936, the threat of fascism was real for everyone to see on the battlefields of Spain and the swastika-draped streets of Berlin. Today—unbelievably—they are back, as right-populist and far right forces make more and more electoral in-roads across Europe and North and South America.

Much of what Orwell argues against the effete intellectual socialists and communists that he criticises is the worst sort of workerism. The main political thrust of his argument is that the middle class intellectuals who dominate the leadership of the socialist movement repel working class people, because their "advanced" attitudes and eccentric mores (vegetarianism, feminism, etc.) are radically divorced from the village values and bread and butter concerns of working people. "One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words "Socialism" and "Communism" draw toward them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, Nature-cure quack, pacifist, and feminist in England." (p.206) The problem here is not only that he dismisses with haughty *ad hominem* serious issues of the politics of sex, sexuality, health, and peace, but the implied obverse: that working people form a uniform cultural mass that cares about nothing except employment and rent. We can hear the echoes of this caricature of working class identities and values in the right-wing of the democratic party's warning its left-wing to not "lose touch" with the working class by consorting too closely with gays, greens, and abortionists.

I grew up in as cliched a Canadian working class family as you can imagine, in as uniformly working class mining town in Northern Ontario as you can imagine. As closely knit in some respects as the town was, as uniform as the socio-economic conditions of life we all shared were, people were more open-minded and tolerant than Orwell's cliches would lead one to believe. *Outwardly* people might have looked the same. Outwardly, we might have said things about people who were different in some overt way that would lead an unsympathetic observer to conclude that we were—die hard racists or homophobes. Racists and homophobes there certainly



were, but most people employed a certain vocabulary because that was the symbolic currency that circulated. To think everyone who uses a word is committed to the world-view implied by the word, without investigating conditions of life further, is to confuse a way of speaking— which people acquire from their environment and have a hard time changing if they are not exposed to different cultures, whether through travel or education— with the values that they actually adhere to in their real relationships with other people. In my grade school, there were two black students (brother and sister) and there must certainly have been racial taunting. But after a few months both were popular and no one ever made any issue about their race. Their father worked at the mine with everyone else and I never heard that he had any unique problems because he was black in an overwhelmingly white workplace.

I am not romanticising my home town but simply offering a counter-argument to Orwell, who drew his conclusions from his journalistic observations of working class people in Northern England. He lived amongst them, but he was not one of them, and he therefore could never understand, from the inside, the complexity of what those people actually thought about the issues. I can well imagine that in Wigan in 1936 a male coal-miner might have been intimidated by a feminist, and him and his wife might tut-tut to George Orwell about Southern freaks from London. But what would the workers' wives have said when they gathered without the men present? Indeed, what might the men have said to each other about, say, birth control, so both they and their wives could enjoy sex without bringing another baby they could ill-afford into the world.

You can hear lots of awful things said by people who live in smaller worlds. But you do not always know what people really think unless you a) actually know them, or b) sit down and talk. To converse effectively you have to speak, but first of all you have to listen. When you learn to listen, you can learn to question and challenge. When you question and challenge, you find that appearances can be deceiving. You will find that working class people are as diverse in their thoughts as everyone else (although maybe not as politely articulate as professors) and that, far from being afraid of vegans and feminists and environmentalists, many of them are vegans and feminists and environmentalists.

And many are not. And many will certainly make fun of what is different. But that is where the art of political conversation is essential. Orwell would have socialists divorce themselves from any “counter-culture” which is not overtly present in the coal-village. But there is a reason that the socialist movement (at least at one time, when it was more vital and powerful), attracted fruit-juice drinkers, peaceniks, and feminists: it was because they understood that capitalism was not just an economy, but a comprehensive *life-denying and life-destructive value system*. Orwell sees this point too, and very clearly, but he fails utterly to see the need for dialogue between the economic demands of the working class and the wider field of social and cultural struggle that socialism used to, and I hope might one day attract again. If we retreat to certainties about what working people are afraid of, will not vote for, reject in their heart, we are doomed. To draw that conclusion means turning our back on what the working class really is: not just white straight male miners like my dad and uncles, but bank tellers like my mom, and black miners like my classmates' father, and today's kaleidoscope of creative young people playing with gender and sexuality and working like hell to survive the gig economy.

Still, there is another side to Orwell's argument, and those of us on the Left but working from the relative security of the (tenured) academic world would do well to remember. The standards of argument of the academic world and the virtues of toleration as the default position of encounters across differences are not always the norms of real life. Life can be brutally hard for people and they do have immediate pressing concerns that mean that not all of them immediately consider the position others. For example, it is essential to insist that migrant rights be respected, but one also has to understand that people who feel threatened in their jobs might think otherwise. Screaming and yelling that everyone who does not believe in open borders is a mouth-breathing racist will ensure only that the opponent becomes hardened in their demand for tighter immigration controls. Pontificating in place of argument is not only morally obnoxious, it is politically counter-productive. Anyone who is serious about building a socialist movement has to resist the urge to call names, listen first, and then patiently argue with the opponent. Maybe the argument will fail, but it might work. Regarding one's own self as angelic and preaching from on high is bound to fail.

# The Personal is Political, but the Political is Not Personal

Originally posted, 27 August, 2018

People remember the feminist slogan “the personal is political,” but forget the context of its expression. It emerged in the midst of the mass struggles of liberal and radical feminists for fundamental institutional change. Women could not liberate themselves in public life if they remained dominated in the patriarchal family. The slogan rejected the traditional argument that the family belonged to the private sphere and as such was not the proper subject of legal regulation. Feminists responded that what went on behind the doors of the family home was very much political and public. Since patriarchal and sexist structures both encouraged the formation of and were sustained by patriarchal and sexist beliefs and dispositions, those too had to change. But attitudinal change was not divorced from social and institutional changes. The personal was (is) political, but the political is not (reducible to) the personal.

I think all sides to an intensifying debate in Windsor regarding a growing homelessness crisis need to keep this general point in mind. As is too often the case, the argument is getting bogged down in shrill moralism that loses sight of the structural causes of the problem and the basic steps needed to address it. Supporters of the homeless are rightly concerned that Street Help, a private charity that has offered space and fellowship to people on the street, is threatening to close because of an on-going conflict with a neighboring restaurant. At the same time, calling out the restaurant owner and attacking anyone who tries to see its workers’ point of view as indifferent and hateful misses the political and economic point and does nothing to concretely address the problem.

However much the services of a drop in like Street Help are needed in the short term, the fact remains that private charity is the preferred right wing solution to every social problem. Homelessness is a function of uncontrolled rents, un- or underemployment, addiction, and the failure of housing markets to provide low cost and judgement-free housing options. Homelessness in a country as wealthy as Canada is not the result of personal failings of the homeless, but a complex failure of housing and employment markets in particular and social support networks generally to adequately assist people in crisis. Private charities cannot address these causes. Neighbourly feelings and an admirable willingness to help cannot correct these failures. They have to be addressed through public institutions.

Investing in public institutions requires funds which can only be obtained through appropriate levels of taxation. The right wing has attacked progressive taxation for decades (with more to come in Ford’s Ontario, no doubt). That is why they prefer the charity option: it allows them to continue to starve public services.

While the good-hearted must be defended, political movements have to be clear that the answer to the problem of homelessness— or any other social problem— is not more charity. Societies are always collective endeavours— democratic societies self-consciously so. That is, any society which claims to be self-governing has to commit itself to ensuring that the needs that *must be* satisfied if people are to participate as social self-conscious agents *are in fact* satisfied. If society does not ensure that those needs are satisfied for some group(s), then it is not (fully) democratic, because it accepts the dis-empowerment of the groups whose needs are not satisfied. Satisfying those needs is not a matter of charity, but consistency with the democratic ethos.

Right wing critics will rejoin that public provision is a hand out to undeserving free riders. Moralistic rejoinders will not do. The objection needs to be taken seriously and answered seriously, especially by socialists, who should operate on the basis of the principle “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” No one should ever be the object of handouts in democratic societies. People should make a contribution, and should want to make a contribution. I think that there is abundant evidence that, other things being equal, people recognise the necessity and value of contributing to the resources that they in turn need to live and develop. People busk, rather than just beg, they look for odd jobs or informal work, and when there are no other options and they have to beg, they feel ashamed— a sign that they recognise that the situation they have been reduced to does not befit their humanity.

But that is just the point: the problem is not the person but the *situation*. The idea of the fully autonomous individual is a myth. No one is or could be in control of all the circumstances that shape their lives. Anyone’s life can fall apart at any moment. Democratic societies, those that claim to be consciously self-governing in the interests of the good of *all* and *each*, should be aware of this fact and commit themselves to ensuring that key support systems are in place when the worst happens. The goal is not to take care of adults as we take care of infants, but to help people transition back to being contributing members to the common wealth when they find themselves for whatever reason not able to do so.

We hear much about “infrastructure” these days— roads, bridges, mythical (in these parts) high speed rail. The same Keynesian logic that supports investment in non-living things supports investment in building homes for living people. A renewed commitment to public housing can learn from the mistakes of the past. Public housing does not have to take the form of soulless ghettos. It does not have to be provided as charity to the homeless. It is an opportunity to engage the homeless, to find out what they need, and create opportunities for them to work to help meet those needs. It is an opportunity to engage public spirited architects to contribute to a democratic urban renewal that is inclusive, not gentrification. It can be a platform around which to build solidarity with First Nation communities, who have suffered from inadequate housing for decades, and who are over-represented amongst the urban homeless. It can be an organizing issue around which to confront the right wing populists, to give concrete focus to a left alternative, and to prove through practice and not talk that we have something meaningfully good to offer and the know-how to make it real.

# #MeToo Meet Tipper Gore

Originally posted, 7 December 7, 2018

Sadly, every progressive movement has its repressive-reactionary underside. #MeToo has exposed the depth of hidden sexist harassment and violence at work in offices, factories, film and music studios; everywhere, indeed, where male power could operate free from scrutiny and women were or felt dependent on that power for their livelihood and careers. Not only did it expose predators and rapists, it rightly called on all men to reflect on their own history and confront the lines they had pushed or crossed with women at school, at parties, at work, when younger or older, in the past or recently. Few would be the heterosexual men who could say that their record was absolutely clean.

This movement was made necessary by male behaviour and no man should complain of its confrontational and uncompromising tone. There is no doubt that the wider patriarchal culture has enabled us all to behave creepily, badly or, at the far end of the spectrum, to feel entitled to coerce or force women into sex acts they would not have chosen to do if their agency had been respected.

In short: #MeToo was a needed reckoning brought on by centuries of patriarchal entitlement, privilege, and violence.

However, its necessity and value cannot shield it from criticism when certain elements of the movement turn to what can only be described as repressive goals that strengthen state and corporate power to decide what art is appropriate for public dissemination. As I have argued before, censorship can never be the ally of liberatory movements. Every revolution has lifted the lid on censorship and freed artists to explore more deeply. Depth exploration of human reality cannot avoid confrontation, not only with the taboo, but with the contradictions of the human psyche. Of all the sources of contradiction, sexual desire is far and away the most powerful.

Appreciation of these contradictions is singularly lacking in the recent Internet-mediated campaign to ban the playing of "[Baby its Cold Outside](#)." According to its critics, the song advocates rape because the male voice tries to talk the woman into staying to have sex with him while she repeatedly expresses a desire to leave.

On a literal reading, the song ends in complete ambiguity. It is unclear whether the man succeeds in talking the woman into staying or not. The progress of the dialogue would lead one to conclude that he does talk her into it (she is about to go, then she has a drink, then she has a smoke, then he kisses her), but the song ends with the refrain, which just repeats his basic plea, that it is cold outside and she should stay.

I can see how someone could read the man's tone as "rapey," but one could equally well read it as a musical encapsulation of the ambivalence of human (male, female, and everything non-binary in between) sexual desire, especially in an era (1949) when women were not free to explore their sexuality openly outside of marriage (the woman in the song repeatedly tells the

man that she is worried what others, especially her “maiden” aunt and sister will think). Is anyone really so dogmatically rationalist about sexuality as to maintain that no one, regardless of gender, is ever ambivalent or confused about what they want, and that part of feeling sexual desire for another person is trying to convince them to overcome that ambivalence in favour of pleasure and risk?

In order to support this counter-reading let me compare it to another song, sung by the incomparably amazing Dusty Springfield. “[Breakfast in Bed](#)” is almost the mirror image of “Baby its Cold Outside” (but, philistine culture that we live in, it gets no radio airplay and thus generates no controversy). In this song, the woman is the sexual aggressor, trying to talk the man into continuing the illicit affair they have been having even though (it is clearly implied) he is ambivalent about it. The man shows up at his lover’s door because he has had a fight with his partner, she invites him in, they talk, he clearly wants sex, and so does she, but he is torn, so she tries to convince him that it is ok with an assurance that there will be no strings attached: “What’s your hurry? Please don’t eat and run, You can let her wait, my darling. It’s been so long. Since I’ve had you here... Breakfast in bed, and a kiss or three, you don’t have to say you love me ... Nothing need be said.”

Now, I can certainly be wrong in my interpretations of either song, but that is just the point: good art lays bear the contradictions of the human heart and creates a context for discussion and argument. Discussion and argument leads to (possibly) deeper understanding. Censorship shuts the conversation down and empowers the most timid, stupid, dogmatic, close-minded, fearful, and one-dimensional amongst us to decide what everyone else gets to see, hear, and think.

If a song as innocuous as “Baby, its Cold Outside” is banned, where does it end? There are probably thousands of pop songs that have the same tone. Off the top of my head, Bob Dylan’s “If You Gotta to Go” adopts almost exactly the same passive aggressive tone of a man trying to talk a woman into spending the night. But there is much in the world of pop music that is far darker. How about Neil Young’s “Down By the River,” which is about a man murdering his lover? The Rolling Stones entire catalogue could be censored, but the two songs that stand out would surely be “Brown Sugar” (about female slaves being auctioned in New Orleans), or “Stray Cat Blues” (about fucking a young teenage groupie and trying to get her to bring her equally young friend upstairs for a threesome). Or the violent misogyny of much gangsta rap. Or maybe it is just the relentlessly banal heteronormativity of almost all Country and Western, R&B, and soul music that gives offence. Or the apocalyptic back-country Christianity of bluegrass ...

And what about “serious” art. Rubens and Goya should be denounced for advocating extreme violence against children and infanticide for their painterly renditions of the myth of Saturn eating his children. In literature, *Lolita* is an obvious target, but what about Thomas Mann’s novella “Death in Venice,” about a male writer who is overwhelmed with sexual desire for a young Polish boy and stalks him all over Venice? If rapey seduction is of specific concern, then how about Goethe’s *Faust, Volume One*? Faust gives Gretchen’s mother a sleeping potion and then seduces the girl. Gretchen becomes pregnant and ends up going mad after killing her baby. But that is mild business indeed compared to any of the works of the Marquis de Sade, but

especially *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom*. There is nothing that is even in the same galaxy when it comes to cataloguing sexual violence (and primarily against children) and yet de Beauvoir argued that it should not be banned, because it lays bare the darkest realities at the extremes of human desire.

I could go on listing examples but the point should be clear: there is no art without exploration of the depths and the dark. Either we allow free exploration of those depths or we do not, but they do not go away just because people want to ban songs.

For those of us who have been around for awhile, this debate is a dreary repetition of the Christian Right's nonsensical attacks on Heavy Metal in the 1980's. To hear those idiots tell the tale, metal was turning good Christian kids into satanic murderers. Sadly, anyone who wants to ban "Baby, its Cold Outside" is in the same sinking philistine boat as the execrable Tipper Gore (wife of Al), who founded the Parents Music Resource Centre in 1985 to guard the nation's morality from whatever they in their self-righteous halo decided was degenerate. They were widely and rightly denounced by everyone from Alice Cooper to Dee Snider, but none were so eloquent or searing in their critique of the Christian right morality police as Frank Zappa. I will leave the last word to him:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgAF8Vu8G0w>

# Subject, Structure, and History in the Struggle Against Oppression

Originally posted, 15 February 15, 2019

## Social Media Shaming Circle

Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions. (Pslam 25:7)

Social Criticism would be irrelevant if change were impossible. The point of exposing contradictions in the legitimating principles of a society, or between those principles and practice, is that by bringing them to consciousness, movements can be built that will resolve them. If change were impossible, there would be no reason to expose problems.

People must also be capable of change, otherwise it would be impossible for them to become conscious of problems of which they were not once conscious, and to then build movements to try to solve them. But individual people are contradictions in the same way societies are contradictory. We are not born with political outlooks or value systems. Early on, children have no counter-balance to initial influences. If our early experiences and influences are filled harmful stereotypes about historically oppressed groups, the initial attitudes, sense of humor, etc., will reflect those stereotypes. If the oppressed groups are privately and publicly disparaged, made fun of, deprived of fundamental natural and social needs, segregated from other members of the community, then young members of the more privileged groups will think those stereotypes true, will make fun of them, and believe that different groups have different fixed “natures.”

Hence it should not be surprising, nor should it be grounds to debar people from employment and public life forever, if they turn out to have expressed racist or homophobic or sexist views at some point in the past when the entire cultural milieu in which they grew up, and the social circles in which they moved, were racist, or sexist, or homophobic. To constantly huff and puff in outrage at jokes, or comments, or stunts, no matter how far in the past, trades on quite wrong and reactionary ideas about fixed personality structures and unchangeable “moral character.” These are conservative and moralistic positions completely at odds with what critical social forces interested in overcoming racist, sexist, and homophobic structures must adopt as a condition of methodological and political coherence.

I grew up in Northern Ontario in the 1970's and 1980's. The racial divisions were analogous to those of the US South, with this difference: the fault lines were drawn between indigenous and white people (with white people further subdivided between French and English speakers.) There are few if any white people who lived in my city at that time who did not laugh at racist jokes about indigenous people, or accept without challenging (even if not fully believing) racist stereotypes about indigenous people. If someone tells you today that others laughed at those jokes or believed those stereotypes but that they did not, they are almost certainly lying to you. If they tell you that they had indigenous friends and so they could not have harbored those feeling, they are again almost certainly lying to you, because there was no contradiction at that time and



in that place between having indigenous friends and sharing racist jokes with them. In fact, there was no contradiction between being indigenous and telling racist jokes about yourself, as a means of fitting in, getting along, (but also, of subtly resisting the stereotype by taking ownership of it).

Their intention is less to deceive you than themselves: they are ashamed at the beliefs they harbored then but do not harbor now, and they re-wrote their own history to help shield their sense of self from who they once were, in different cultural circumstances. What matters for the current struggle against the racist legacy of colonialism in Canada (to stick with this example) is what people think today. More importantly, what matters is what people are willing to do today in response to demands for structural changes in the relationship between indigenous nations and the Canadian state. If people have shed their racist stereotypes and don't tell "Indian jokes" anymore but would take to the streets if their taxes rose to pay reparations (or something analogous that would cost non-indigenous Canadian money), then they remain a barrier to decolonization, no matter how politically correct their sense of humour.

Racism and other structures of oppression are not caused by "bad" individuals with the wrong sort of character. Those individual characters are formed in contexts dominated by oppressive structures which have been built as part of a class struggle for control over the resources and major social institutions upon which our lives depend and through which they are governed. To be sure, peoples' attitudes and daily social relationships and practices can perpetuate those structures. However, just being a "good" person in the abstract will not suffice as a cure for the social diseases they cause. To repair the damage, the structures themselves must be changed, and that requires massive social movements that bring together different oppressed and exploited groups linked in solidarity around a shared, future-oriented agenda.

Progressive politics— indeed, no sort of social practice, no sort of society— could survive if every participant had to take a moral purity test. Anyone can be "other" to anyone else, and be demonized and disparaged as such. People of any colour can be sexist or homophobic, people of any sex can be racist or homophobic; support for war or capitalism is not a function of sex or gender or race; mindless patriots can come from any identity. If you root around people's garbage, sooner or later you will find something that stinks.

If the left is to be re-built and the sort of social, economic, and the political agenda we need, one that responds to the deep threats to human and planetary life be advanced, people have to stop treating politics like Catholic confession. Self-righteousness is too easy a target for the Trumps of the world. We best not forget that whatever twists and turns of the Trump saga, right-wing populist forces are still growing in power (Bolsinaro in Brazil and the slow moving coup in Venezuela are the latest losses for the left). The debate about the border wall consumes all of America's attention, but migrants are being drowned by the hundreds every month because of policies put in place by the sanctimonious EU. The problems of the world are not the problems of the attitudes and character of individuals. It is time to get serious again about structural analysis and strategic political organization.

Enough garbology and preaching.

# Cry for You, Venezuela

Originally posted, February 5, 2019

I will not waste time searching for adjectives that have not already been employed thousands of times to decry the hypocrisy of Western leaders when it comes to the liberation struggles of the peoples of the Global South. Let us just consider some facts about the struggle in Venezuela and the contradictions that the United States, Canada and the European Union involve themselves in when they take it upon themselves to decide who should lead Venezuela.

The Bolivarian Revolution and the struggle to build 21st century socialism in Venezuela was undertaken against a history of colonialism and its legacy of violent oligarchical rule. Hugo Chavez first won election in 1998 (after an abortive coup attempt in 1992). He subsequently won four elections and beat back a coup attempt against his government in 2002.

His victory inspired a wave of social democratic electoral victories across South America. Evo Morales in Bolivia, Lula da Silva in Brazil, Lucio Gutierrez in Ecuador, Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, and Nestor Kircher in Argentina all won power between 2002 and 2005, representing a popular rebellion against austerity, neo-liberalism, vast inequality, the historical subordination of black and indigenous peoples in South America, and the legacy of American imperialism. All with the exception of Morales have now been subsequently defeated by right-wing forces in alliance with the United States (with most of the defeats coming during the rule of Obama).

In the case of Venezuela, where the experiments in democratic socialist life-value economics went furthest, Chavez used Venezuela's oil wealth to measurably improve the lives of the poorest citizens. He changed the constitution to empower poor communities; he allowed the emergence of worker managed enterprises in the "social economy;" he openly affirmed the principle that the purpose of an economy is to meet the needs of its citizens, not to enrich a class of foreign and domestic capitalists. The details about the reforms that Chavez implemented can be found in Greg Wilpert (*Changing Venezuela By Taking Power*, Verso, 2007) and (with more attention to technical economic details) Michael Lebowitz, *Build it Now! Socialism for the Twenty First Century*, (Monthly Review Press, 2006)

There were tensions and contradictions in the plan to transition to a democratic socialist economy. How could there not be? Chavez opted to proceed slowly. His hope was that an organic process of non-violent social transformation would be generated by slowly shifting resources from the market to the democratic economy. In order to succeed, he needed oil prices to stay high, but more importantly, he needed allies. Socialism in one country is impossible. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, the international solidarity he required was building, as government after government in South America shifted left. Trying to consolidate these gains, Chavez helped to create [The Bank of the South](#). Had it succeeded, (and had movements like Syriza in Greece been able to build a democratic socialist alternative across Europe to open a second front) it would have freed nations of the Global South from the neo-

colonial policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. It was supported even by left-liberal mainstream economists like Paul Krugman. It was perhaps the major threat to imperialist control over South America and the Global South generally. If these nations had access to capital for life-valuable investment, Western banks would lose their leverage over them.

Hence the need to wage class war against the Bolivarian Revolution. The worst crime of Chavez, in the eyes of his domestic and international opponents, was that he continually received such a robust democratic mandate to continue the revolution that it could not be disputed. Maduro likewise— despite what is now being said in the Western press- [has won two elections](#). No evidence of fraud has been presented. Instead, critics are pointing to the low turnout in the election as grounds to claim his second presidency is illegitimate. Since when does a low turnout undermine legitimacy? In any case, the turnout was low because the opposition called for a boycott. Now they transform their own boycott into grounds to delegitimize the government and intensify social unrest.

Nevertheless, the reality of the democratic legitimacy of the Bolivarian revolution was the main problem that the United States could not get around. Hence the forward economic and social momentum had to be slowed. The collapse of oil prices was thus the opening needed to intensify what would have been a difficult crisis in any case (given the reliance of Venezuela on oil). The loss of oil income starved the government of funds to pay for social programs and food imports and [set the stage for hyperinflation](#). Many criticisms could be made of this or that policy decision of Chavez or Maduro, but the crisis was not of their making but has deep roots in the structural dependence of the economy on oil revenue and the way in which Venezuelan capitalists used the crisis of oil production to [create a wider economic crisis](#) with which to delegitimize the government.

From this point the script plays out as usual. A champion of the people whom the people have never heard of appears as if from nowhere spouting platitudes and smiling. Guaido declares himself president after consulting with the US and its allies. The [class basis](#) of the so-called movement for democracy and its smiling champion is suppressed by the Western Press (The same stooges who decry Trump day in day out now parrot him, as well imperialist felons like Elliott Abrams, and religious lunatics like Pence and Bolsonaro in Brazil). Junior partners to the carnage of the twentieth century like Canada join in, singing the song of human rights all the while defending policies that systematically destroy the ability of the peoples of the Global South to control their own resources, decide collectively how they will be used to satisfy their needs and improve their lives, and govern themselves free from violent interference. At the end of the day, the people continue to suffer. Because they continue to suffer they must flee north, where they will be met by the armed violence of the American state. And this on-going catastrophe, centuries in the making, is celebrated as democracy and human rights.





# Evocations



# Peregrination

Originally posted, 14 [June 14, 2019](#)

If you were released  
from your moldy, dark cellar;  
let up and out  
for just one breath,  
would it not be the deepest  
you have ever drawn?  
Your eyes would dart,  
hopeful,  
looking for an ear  
to whom your story could be told.

But all you would see  
(in reverse pathetic fallacy)  
are well-dressed people  
strolling, indifferent,  
beneath a shining sun  
which gives life  
to all  
and leaves it at that.

\*

God, the news,  
it's horror after horror;

a monster movie.

I think:

“What can one man do?

I only have so much time.

On such a beautiful day,

is a walk in the sun

morally impermissible?

No matter what happened

The sun won't shine on me for ever.

What is done is done,

And I still have to live.”

\*

Despair: to suffer and suffer and suffer,

and to know that outside

people are strolling in the sunshine,

and having ice cream,

and de-coding signals

about the depths of each other's desire.

Deepening despair: to know

that they do not know

the unyielding grip

of your pain

and that they do not intend



to make inquiries.

\*

I could wax nostalgic

about every street

and every block

of this,

my former city.

But would it not be sadder

than my thinning hair

if the people changed,

but not the places?

Memory says: "It was better, then, when ..."

But it is a trick.

What was good was you, being, there.

But you are no longer 'you,'

nor here, 'there,'

and they who are who you were

were not there,

but here.

\*

Some are neither there nor here.

They are not counted

in the calculus of pain and pleasure

that determines  
the greatest good for the greatest number.

\*

Imperative of livability:

Believe that  
our finitude  
bestows a right  
to a day  
without complications.

\*

That which we must confess  
is not our sins  
(too trivial and banal to fuss over),  
but the use  
of our secret power:  
To not care  
for the troubles of the world  
when we are free  
to walk in the sunshine.

\*

Found Conversation 1

["What the chef did was fucking amazing," said one wall-papered beard to the other, in a tone which made him sound as though he was the first to have ever enjoyed eating].

\*

The scales of suburban beige  
have dropped from the young girls' eyes.

The street is permission  
to imagine  
possibilities for living  
that would shock  
bungalow conformity.

They walk close together,  
all smiles and blonde hair  
and unblemished youth,  
in crop tops  
and eyes,  
dancing in wonder,  
on Saturday afternoon,  
free from parents  
and subdivided monotony.

Even their phones  
stay holstered,  
unused in back pockets.

So this is what life feels like!

For a moment

I resent their enthusiasm.

Then, my old eyes smile,

And I think: "I remember, then, when ..."

[Maybe when they are my age

they will get together again

after a long absence

and recollect today,

when their feet and minds were free.

They will search

for the place where they had coffee,

and felt so grown up,

and talked about things

they thought would be easy

but turned out not to be.

And they will feel sad:

The place where they had coffee is gone,

and they will think: "It was better, then, when..."

And they will see two girls,

eyes dancing in wonder

on Saturday afternoon.

And their old eyes will smile.

\*

[Found conversation 2]

The little Chinese boy, 4 or 5, points at the pigeons accusingly, and shouts, "Pigeons, you're so dumb, pigeons!" and then again, louder, "PIGEONS! YOU'RE SO DUMB, PIGEONS!"]

\*

Down an alley,  
up a stair,  
in a back room:  
what tortures  
are being visited  
upon the undeserving?

\*

There are simple pleasures:  
A warm bath on a winter night.  
Being smiled at for no reason.  
A cuddle.  
But I would trade them all  
for this plate of bbq pork and rice.  
Chili oil  
leaks through the rice:  
an orange rivulet  
on the well-scratched plate,  
paste's pulped heat  
raises a sweat on my brow.  
The meat,  
brown sugar sweet  
(but not too sweet).  
A twang of salt,

(but not too much).

The crinkly fat

(but not too crinkly).

And rusty oolong tea,

Like water from tenement pipes.

The bok choy,

flaccid on my plate,

(too flaccid),

judges me.

\*

[Found conversation 3]

Two super-seniors, kitted out like the Tour de France, approach the intersection on their bikes, the one trailing, presumably more experienced, calls out what the street light makes obvious: “We got ten seconds to make the light, ok, you got it covered.”

\*

Fashionable bores

Pop into the pop up gallery,

to buy boutique condo art:

All acrylic pastels on canvas.

Dinner party friends.

Will be impressed.

Outside

there’ a riot goin,’ on

but the noise does not reach

the 51<sup>st</sup> floor.

\*

The sun might shine,

but from the humid earth

the blood of your sisters and brothers calls out.

But there is no god

to command:

“LISTEN!”

So I walk on

Under the indifferent sun.

I see

two old women,

shuffling,

arm in arm,

through *their* neighborhood.

I imagine them saying

(in Brooklyn accents

even though this isn't Brooklyn,

although it might want to be):

“The neighborhood is not what it was, then, when ...”

And their old eyes smile.

# Ephemera

Originally posted, 3 December, 2018

They hope: It gets better,  
the world,  
for some having suffered.

They say: "Once the smoke cleared,  
the accident was good.

Some died.

But lessons were learned.

Others will be saved."

No one dies in vain.

Maybe.

But maybe: Everyone just dies  
in their own way.

After it has happened,  
it will not have mattered when.

Nothing will have gotten better.

Nothing will have gotten worse.

Misery and pleasure



exchange for each other  
in a steady state.

The superiority of things?

They come to be,  
have an effect,  
pass away,  
without asking  
that anyone take notice.

The fire crackles,  
it does not think.

The window reflects the flame,  
but does not reflect  
on whether  
its reflecting is enough,  
or if,  
in the end,  
it has justified itself.

These are thoughts  
that night permits.

Silently, its naked darkness  
falls,  
inexorably,  
like the leaves  
from that tree  
that never lets them go  
until first frost.

Peace loving,  
the patient dark  
just is.

It will not resist the sun  
when it glows orange  
on the horizon.

Things do not try to hang on.

But my old bones  
resent young enthusiasms.  
Death must be stronger  
or we would never let go,  
forever correcting the young,  
not allowing them their mistakes  
after having had so much fun

making ours.

Prokofiev strings sing,  
transubstantiation dances in the flames  
[not bread to flesh- that's crazy talk]  
but matter to energy  
[that's science].

I watch.  
Those heavy logs,  
who once mocked gravity,  
have now submitted  
to the axe  
that prepared them  
for the fire  
that reduces them  
to this soft sculpture in ash.

A creation, really,  
but one might forgive the log  
for not seeing it like that.

I ask: Is the log happy

to be used up so?

You say: “The ash

is testimony

to the logs’ having been.

Their loss has been redeemed

by the pleasure they have given.”

I, (philosopher), want to argue,

but maybe I will be quiet,

just this once.

So let’s say:

“You are right:

Come spring

their remains

will be swept up,

composted,

and they will live again,

like the carbon atom

in that Primo Levi story

that I like so much.

So beautiful, but it did not save him.

Do we condemn ourselves  
by demanding that  
eternity  
worship our works?

The ashes say:

“Find what you need  
in the impermanent,  
or give up looking.

You are flesh,  
experience that burns down  
into memory,  
and dies.

Let yourself  
rise as smoke,  
and caress a cold cheek  
that needs warmth,  
and be glad for the  
pleasure you brought.”



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

Originally posted, 22 June, 2018

## St. Petersburg

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

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

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

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

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

“Rain washes over newspapers freshly glued to the walls. COUNTERREVOLUTIONARIES, SPIES, AND CRIMINALS SHOT. This column, single-spaced in 8-point type, with the names set off in bold, is the one people read the most attentively under the dreary, piercing rain.” ‘List of counterrevolutionaries, spies, criminals, blackmailers, bandits, and deserters executed by order of the special commission. Thirty four numbered names.’ (p.177)

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

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

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

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

The city was built to look European and it does. There are few onion domes or Stalinist housing estates in the centre of the city. The streets have the vertical uniformity of Paris: 7 story



buildings street after street after street. One exception is the Church of the Resurrection of Christ (Saviour on the Spilled Blood). It was built on the spot where Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by Narodniks. (Serge's parents were Narodniks who had to flee to Belgium, where Serge was born). At least Alexander's death spurred the construction of this carnivalesque-on-the-outside-breathtaking-on-the-inside shrine. Its walls are covered with over 7000 square feet of mosaics that really have to be experienced first hand in order to understand the immensity of the labour that went into them and their beauty. The Communists repeatedly threatened to tear it down on charges of "anachronism" (they had a point), but even they promised to preserve the mosaics.

## Moscow

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

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

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

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

1917 is not denied but re-woven into a longer narrative of heroic Russian history, from ancient victories over the Mongols, to Alexander Nevsky, to t-shirts of Putin riding a bear, shirtless, hunting rifle slung on his shoulder, and the message: Not going to Beat Us. Moscow is combined and uneven development for the 21st century. Impressively convoluted bank towers and winding streets that remind one of Le Marais; soviet apartment blocks, cramped little parkettes and smokes still one dollar a pack. Modelesque youth and strong armed old women who have seen it all and survived. In Izmaylovksy Market we go to a kebab shop for lunch. A woman who cannot be younger than 70 directs traffic in the seating area upstairs. She picks up a five foot long bench with ease and shouts “no! no! no!” to two Chinese tourists who were about to sit there. Work was/is life for her.

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

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

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

After my talk at the Higher School of Economics, Aaron has arranged a reception. I speak with an old comrade who teaches Mathematical Logic at Moscow State University. He had pressed

me (appropriately) on the key problem of my paper: what exactly I thought the “matter” of symbolic representations was. We sip wine and he tells me that I should read Luckas’ *The Ontology of Social Being*. “Old Lukacs much different from young Lukacs,” he tells me,” after I say that I find *History and Class Consciousness* too idealist in its conception of the natural world. He flattens the lapel of his vest and shows me a pin of Marx’s head. “See, I am Marxist.” I am curious: what is the status of Marx amongst young political activists today? He looks dismissive. “Marxism is something high and complicated, young cannot even read or write. What can they know?”

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

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

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

# Republic of Blood

Originally posted, 30 October, 2018

I'm a righteous man/who draws the line/crosses the line/holds the line/I am the dam.

Dark thoughts aloof/above the fray/I know my truth/the world's the lie/here's the proof.

The deed makes great/patriots know/rights just words/without the act/blood can't flow.

My duty's clear/there is no choice/liberals talk/but I have to shoot/the caravan is near.

I'm going in/my pure heart beats/load-lower-aim/I make the homeland/great again.

# Vespers/Evensong

Originally posted, 25 September, 2018

In both orthodox and Western Christian traditions, Vespers (Evensong in the Anglican Church), are prayers said at sunset. They combine readings and hymns with thanks to God for His protection during the day. I have never thought that belief in God was a condition of giving thanks. We should give thanks for being alive and present to and in the world.

I was in England for the past two weeks speaking at a conference and participating in a workshop on my new book. Consequently, I was alone much of the time, walking, sensing, and thinking in the streets of London and Brighton. Eventually, one needs a rest and a pint. So every evening as I had a drink I would let my mind play back over the day and see what stood out. These secular vespers are ways of honouring my being in the places I inhabited for a moment. That is not to say that any place needs my presence to make it valuable. I mean that we should honour the sheer goodness of being alive and paying attention to the places where we are.

Some may perhaps object that to affirm the good of mere being in place is selfish disregard of the pain and suffering of the world. I disagree. Pain and suffering are not caused by my or anyone valuing being present for the world's unfolding. I am of course privileged to be able to travel and follow my thoughts into the pub at night. Everyone should be able to do the same. That is what makes the fight worthwhile. Giving thanks and being indifferent are opposites. Progress comes from those who love life, not self-righteous and hypocritical lambs of God who assure us they will take away the sins of the world.

Grant us peace.

Vespers

Saturday September 8th, Ship's Inn, Wardour St., Soho, London.

Let us give thanks to the day ...

because I basked in the soft light of Blake's etchings, experiencing his innocence, felt his embodied spirits guiding me through his illuminated poetry; for being brought back to earth by Bacon's anguished mouths and contorted neck monsters; for a quiet room in which I can think along with Antony Gormley: "Making is a form of physical thinking;" for art that does not document or preach but struggles with material to make us feel something, (rather than sorry for somebody); for everything that has enabled me to be able to think these thoughts.

Sunday September 9th, Bull and Gate, Kentish Town Road, Kentish Town, London

Let us give thanks for the day...

that begins with gathering myself under clouds with strong coffee, for the earnest enthusiasms of thin old men, in their yacht club coats and insignia, greyly serious about the silliness of racing radio-controlled sailboats in Kensington Gardens' pond; and for the perfect foot of the woman who, disdainful of the filthy floor of the Central Line train, stretches its tanned, lithe, polished elegance into the aisle between us.

Monday September 10th, College Arms, Store St., Bloomsbury, London

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for allowing me to neither speak nor listen, to glide through the streets anonymous, following a straight line of no resistance, or turning up whatever street strikes my fancy; for letting my thoughts go where they need to go, growing by leaving their object free, everything I see and feel becomes a part of me without ceasing to be themselves; for loving that free appropriation, for trying to not want to own and possess; for walking and walking and walking some more, through the growing heaviness of my thighs.

Tuesday, September 11th, Heart and Hands, North St., Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for including the absurdity of tourists: the woman posing the man in the middle of the street in front of the total drabness of Victoria Station; for arriving at the grey Atlantic, inhaling and exhaling, and this big old pub cat too, breathing in time with the sea, letting me rub his neck, peaceful in his place as I sip my Harvey's.

Wednesday, September 12th, Waggon and Horses, Church St., Brighton

Let us give thanks for the day ...

for the public in public house, old friends, and the comradeship of ideas; for rounds and laughs and rising voices, the sheer joy of co-presence in real space and the unfolding of time towards the next moment.

Thursday, September 13th, The Plotting Parlour, Steine St., Brighton

Let us give thanks for the day ...

for the conversation that starts elsewhere and courses through you, that precedes and exceeds and includes you, that draws everyone together but also lets people be; for the infinitude of small differences: between people, between the shapes of the pebbles on the beach: the need to attend to the reality and not the category that can never touch it.

Friday, September 14th, The Evening Star, Surrey St., Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for allowing me to make my contribution and take rest; for the exuberance of excess drink and laughter, for buying your round and accepting another: pint, yes, whiskey, sure— for being amongst the good-hearted and large-souled, the insouciant and the irreverent, for nighttime.

Saturday, September 15th, The Quadrant, Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for the muscles in my calves, unconsciously adjusting to the uncertain ground on the beach; for the steadying rhythm of the waves; for stumbling upon this barbed-wired Brighton version of the Heidelberg project: broken bits of brick and pebble and shell mortared into faces and arches and monsters, on the verge of kitsch, but not; and for the indefatigable rocker in front of his shop, huge speaker turned to street and sea, “Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” playing LOUD.

September 16th, The Pump House, Market Street, Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day...

for not being an exile in a world of exiles, for not being a refugee in a world that hates refugees, for having a home in a world of homelessness; for the novel that draws me in and takes me elsewhere, that frees my mind for other possibilities of being, and for “Funky Kingston,” playing softly in the background as the sun sets.

Monday, September 17th, Seven Stars, Ship St., Brighton,

Let us give thanks the day,

for the violent symphony of wind and crashing surf, the terrifying menace of the breaking wave taunting me in my weakness; for teaching that work is both good and necessary for mortals, for pushing me to keep at it and not just drift, and for ambiguity: the bad faith of enjoying this perfect gin and tonic.

Tuesday, September 18th, Waggon and Horses, Church St., Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day...

for allowing my mind to wander, languorously, where it will, and to be seized, unexpectedly, attention held fast by a corner, a brick, a table, insignificant details that activate the memory that then takes off and resolves itself: yes, you have been here before, and it was good.

Wednesday, September 19th, Queen’s Head, Queen’s Road, Brighton

Let us give thanks to the day,

for making me accept the discipline of reason, for responding when I was called upon to respond, to account for my position and explain it, for the back and forth of real life dialectic: no mystical

compelling force but question and answer, another question, a deeper answer: “For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common ... the Logos.” (Heraclitus).

Thursday, September 19th, White Horse, Archer St., Soho, London

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for letting me find what I was looking for where I was not looking for it, and for what I was not looking for where I was not looking for it, for rusty trestles and lattice work and I-beams; for a history not yet erased.

Friday, September 21st, Dublin Castle, Parkway Rd., Camden Town, London

for this extra ghee-y Chicken Balti, spelling mistakes on ethnic shop signs, and finding the first Undertones album in the “Vintage Punk,” bin at the record store; for being able to replay “Teenage Kicks” in my mind- the riff as fresh as the wind after 30 years- and wondering where my copy might be now; for allowing myself to feel vintage and being ok with it; but then the rising of desire, the impulsion to keep living, feeling re-born at night in Camden Town: two guitars, bass and drums, hard, loud, fast, aggressive: old school and alive, not vintage.

Saturday, September 22nd, The Black Stock, Seven Sisters Road, Finsbury Park, London,

Let us give thanks to the day ...

for teaching me to calm the hornet stings of anxiety with a deep exhale, and to not worry about the slight menace the lads down the bar pose, (a menace that will grow by closing time, no doubt); for the good sense the giggling Chinese tourist girls show by realizing this might not be the best spot, and turning around, going elsewhere; and for bringing me purely by chance past the first pub I visited on my first trip to London, looking oldified and much more pubby than I remember.



# The Fragility of Beauty

Originally posted, 16 April, 2019

Great art is like people in this respect: the loss of an artwork, like the loss of a person, is irreplaceable. The great is distinguished from the derivative as a singularity from a copy. There is no great loss when a copy is destroyed because another of the same quality can be produced. There are no copies of people or great works of art, and so when one is lost, all future generations are deprived of the possibility of experiencing an unrepeatable value.

Whatever is left of Notre Dame, much of irreplaceable value has been lost, and no one will ever be able to set foot in the cathedral as it was prior to yesterday's fire. Fortunately, the external structure has survived, and one hopes the stained glass too. Perhaps the roof can be rebuilt, and the spire was a nineteenth century addition, so its loss is not as catastrophic as a wall collapse would have been. But what has been lost is the continuity of the structure that still stands with its history; that which was original will become copy, and no matter how skillful the reproduction, what replaces the destroyed elements of Notre Dame will be derivative.

Religious and non-religious lovers of beauty will lament, as we all should, at the results of the fire. Yet as horrific as it was to watch this soaring, magnificent building burn, it teaches everyone a lesson which is as important as it is painful: nothing escapes change and destruction. No matter how attentive our care for ourselves, loved ones, art works, all must eventually die, degrade, decay, burn. There are no exceptions, no reprieves. Stars, galaxies, the entire universe will one day dissipate into cold mist; how childish, then, to act as if a mere building could stand forever.

Yet this truth— just because it is true— is no cause for despair or nihilism. On the contrary, it is cause to love and value beautiful things all the more intensely because one day— who can predict when— they will all be gone. The singularity of beautiful things is frightful: when they are lost they are lost forever, and this knowledge fuels our desire to preserve and protect. While we can protect things from neglect, we cannot protect them from physics: as solid as the heavy grey walls of Notre Dame were and as strong as its buttresses might be, deep down they are buzzing electrons, more space than matter, and giving up their energy to entropy. 800 years is an eternity from the human perspective, but nothing to an atom. By fire, or earthquake, or the sun exploding into a red giant everything will go under in time.

“I am almighty time, the world-destroying, and to destroy these worlds I have arisen.” (Lord Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*)

I have visited Notre Dame twice, the last time with Josie and our niece the year she turned 16. I do not know if she saw the fire yesterday, or thought back to our visit. She was probably bored to visit a church,(I would have been too, at 16). Still, I think I saw her eyes widen as we walked down the nave for the first time. The ceiling seems a hundred miles above you, you feel small, you feel the aura of a holy space (even if you do not believe in the holy), you go quiet, and then you turn, and above you the sun shines through the rose window- deep blue and purple and aged

to perfection like a thousand dollar bottle of Bordeaux. The light is like nothing you have ever seen. You feel it more than see it. You just look for a minute and don't say anything and think: "Maybe god does not exist, but beauty does, and that is enough."

Destruction is terrible, tragic, in the precise sense that it is a collision between goods that when they meet, destroy each other. The destruction is foreseeable, but unavoidable. We need beauty, but live in a universe of matter and energy that changes. If there were no change, there could be no beauty or life, but because there is change, things die and are destroyed.

Change also means that our experiences are unique and unrepeatable. And here is the cruelest element of the tragedy of change. The destruction of the interior of the cathedral is at the same time the creation of new value in my and Josie's and our niece's life-history. We know now that we have been enriched in a way that will never be possible again.

As with people, so too with beauty: new creations will come to be, until we ourselves are no longer. But also as with people, the birth of one does not compensate for the loss of another. People and art are more than things, one is not exchangeable for another. Whatever that "more" is, that is beauty.

# A Moral History of Objects

Originally posted, 10 [July, 2018](#)

## A Moral History of Objects

Doug MacLellan  
Jeff Noonan



“A Moral History of Objects” is a piece I created with my friend and Windsor photographer Doug MacLellan. The idea for it was born from walks and bike rides around Windsor. If one looks, the streets are an informal museum of artifacts, broken things that lay in the street as the aftermath of accidents and spills. One or two grabbed my eye. I am a curious person. I picked them up. I noticed that the patterns of fragmentation and oxidation had the effect of drawing my attention away from the (lost) function towards the surface structure of the material. It was impossible, in most cases, to reconstruct what the fragment had once been a part of; the loss of function liberated the material form, allowed it to become the focus of perception. In the ruination of their function they appeared beautiful.

But nothing is beautiful in and of itself; the recognition of beauty is a species of the general human capacity for valuation. Hence the idea of a “moral” history of objects. I wanted to explore a more general problem than why the object appeared beautiful (that would be an aesthetic history). “Moral” here should not be confused with any particular moral theory, or its

generic sense as abstract principles of right or wrong. Instead, “moral” marks the difference between life as mere metabolic activity and life as active valuation of things, *not only* as useful, *but equally* as meaningful. The meaningfulness of life, and our affirmation of the meaningfulness of life, is the precondition of the truth of any particular set of moral principles. Our capacity to value is the real light of the universe: it turns mere forces and things into sources of meaning, beauty, goodness (and also, of course, their opposites).

The surfaces, unintentionally sculpted by corrosive forces, are beautiful in a completely different way from designed surfaces. Design has a purpose: to help sell the product as commodity. The accident ruins the function, and it destroys the design. What we are left with are things in their materiality: still obviously manufactured (and thus connected with the prosaic labour upon which society depends), but beautiful not because anyone intended them to be so, but because their rich detail that fracturing and fragmentation reveals compels our attention and gives pleasure of a “disinterested” sort (Kant). I am not at all juxtaposing high and low here: these objects are sculptures, even though no one sculpted them. The objects testify to the beauty of sheer materiality and the symbolic-affective connection between people and things.

The words tell the moral history of objects, not just the objects I found on my walks and bike rides. But objects as sources of meaning generally. MacLellan’s photos capture the beauty of the raw materiality of the things. I originally thought that we should photograph them *in situ*, (and that would have been more in keeping with MacLellan’s spontaneous-documentarian photographic aesthetic). But I realized that what was beautiful about these things was not the relationship to the context in which I found them (which was purely accidental and random) but their material structure. Photographing them against the white background was not meant to be arty, but to help the viewer really look at the thing.

I don’t know if Beuys was referring to the products of accidents when he said “everything is art, everything is sculpture,” but I think these objects (and any number more that any of you can find if you look), proves that he was correct.

Copies of *A Moral History of Objects* can be purchased from the [Blurb](#) website.

The piece was created for Mayworks Windsor 2018. It was launched at an unrehearsed reading on May 8th. You can watch a video of the reading [here](#).

# Mayworks Windsor 2019

Originally posted, 9 May, 2019

As I have for the past several years, I was again fortunate to participate in Mayworks Windsor. Like many similar festivals across the country held every May, Mayworks Windsor draws attention to the connection between art and work. The Classical and Romantic image of the artist is that of an isolated genius, inspired by the Muses, or passionately expressing their inner-most truth. Maybe, but in either case, they still had to work to do it. The same is true from the other side. If there is always work in art, there is also art in work. Once we set aside classical and romantic conceptions, we are able to see the whole reality of (trans)formed matter as the product of human creativity, and as involving pleasing shapes and textures, not just price tags and functions.

My contribution this year was another collaboration with my friend and photographer Douglas MacLellan. We rode the Crosstown 2 bus across Wyandotte Street (Windsor's main east-west artery). Doug took pictures and I wrote accompanying text. I have spent 30 years studying philosophy, twenty writing it as an academic philosopher. If anyone reading this knows my work, they will know that I have committed myself to a certain set of political and philosophical positions. I also know that (although much philosophy is difficult to understand at first) it has to simplify reality. When I have the chance to explore problems through more creative and literary means (whether here on the blog or in projects like the ones Doug and I have worked on), I sometimes give voice to the worries and doubts that silently haunt my philosophical thinking.

Political philosophy generally is the realm of big ideas: Justice, Equality, Freedom. But what do those ideas really mean to people whose lives suffer the worst injustice and inequality? I always worry that- even if inadvertently- socially critical philosophy, articulated from a safe and secure tenured space, reduces the poor and oppressed to mere means to the advancement of my own academic career, i.e. that they cease to be real people and become "evidence" for a conclusion. These words and ideas that mean so much and resonate so loudly in the halls of academia, maybe they are just so many words to people who would rather have housing, respect, food, care, and love than "Justice" or "freedom." Maybe philosophy gets in the way of their saying what really needs to be said. That is the worry Doug and I explore.

We launched the project at a collective reading on May 3rd, 2019. We were joined by the brilliant Kenneth McLeod, who shared his music and love of Windsoria with the small but enthusiastic crowd. Paul Chislett recorded the proceedings and shared in on Youtube. Here it is.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-JnpkkAHls&t=8s>

# Readings



# Hand Writing Painting

Originally posted, 19 June, 2019

John Brown

Paintings

Olga Korper Gallery

June 8th-July 13th, 2019

Brown's latest show at the Olga Korper gallery consists of 8 paintings and 201 small drawings. The drawings retain Brown's career-long concern for the aesthetic-existential problem posed by the human head and face: how can a drawing or painting enable us to resonate emotionally with a face as human, even when it does not look like any actual person? The new paintings continue two trajectories that have emerged over the past decade. The first carries him towards an interest with the machinic and architectural. In a sense, the human form still haunts these paintings, but as an absent body vulnerable, threatened, and menaced by techniques of confinement and violence.



Abandoned Town

c.Olga Korper Gallery

The second, which emerged in his last show for Korper two years ago, reproduce fragments of his deceased partner's journals. This new development is pursued here in four paintings, two large large and two of smaller scale. Like the machinic and architectural paintings, these pieces are also haunted by the absent human form. Here, however, the tone is not one a menace, but

loss. The hand that wrote the journals is no longer: the painting traces the traces of the departed loved one.



Love Letter 1

c. Olga Korper Gallery

The machinic and architectural paintings warn everyone of a looming threat to their freedom as living, experiencing, loving human beings. The handwriting paintings, by contrast, begin from the most intimate of spaces: the journals which Brown's long-time partner wrote when he was working in Ethiopia in the 1960's and the furtive, desperate notes he kept as his Alzheimer's worsened. As intimate and personal as their origins were, if they are to function as works of art, they have to reach beyond the feelings of the artist to present something, aesthetically, to the sensibility of viewers, and say something, philosophically, to the minds of viewers. They do.

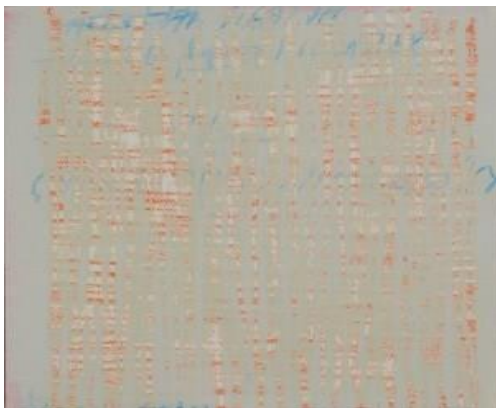




Love Letter 2

c.Olga Korper Gallery

The paintings re-situate the layering and scraping tactics long associated with Brown's work. Here they have the effect of emphasising the artifactual nature of all writing. Writing literally makes a mark in the world: the mark of the individual who thought something important enough to write down and commit to the (relative) permanence of matter. While it is only in cultures that have a written language that script can become a trace of an individual human presence (and an individuating mark of their personal identity) where people do write by hand (and perhaps, soon, they will not) our handwriting is perhaps second only to our face as a marker of our individuality. A printed text does not have the same emotional resonance as a written letter, even if it is only a mundane note. Nothing is lost when a typewritten text is turned into a .pdf, but in the case of a hand written letter, what Benjamin called the "aura" of the work of art is lost were it to be scanned. We do not feel the presence of the individual in the scan in the same way we do when we hold the actual letter: there is one technological mediation too many. We do not touch the surface the pen in the person's hand touched when we gaze at the scanned copy.



Herb's Handwriting 1969 #1

c.Olga Korper Gallery

What is this aura? I do not know— and I suspect that Benjamin did not know— exactly how it could be explained to someone who disputed its existence. When it comes to art (indeed, any object invested with aesthetic or sentimental value), sometimes you just have to open yourself to feeling something. Explanations can go too far if they rob us of the capacity for a shuddering, transforming experience. I think that these paintings (all of them, but especially the handwriting paintings) will produce that shuddering in anyone who opens themselves to them, even if the personal story from which they originate remains unknown.



Herb's Handwriting 1969 # 2

c.Olga Korper Gallery

These are paintings the subject-matter of which is the hand written journal entries of a specific individual. But they are *paintings*, not copies of the journal. The linguistic meaning of the passages transcribed in paint here does not matter. They are not interfaces of textual meaning and image: the text is transformed into image; its linguistic meaning is translated into the perceptual-emotional language of painting. They thus bear absolutely no connection to art in which text is the form and content (say, Jenny Holzer's public sloganeering, which, whatever one might think of its political goals, is excessively literal and obvious). Nor can they be compared to calligraphy, beautiful script. The handwriting as content is essential, not incidental, but it is not what it means or what it looks like *as script* that ultimately matters, but its function as a trace of a real, specific person's having been somewhere (here, but also there), once, but no longer. In no sense does the writing "explain" the painting. Even if we could read it, the literal meaning of the text would not help us understand the *painting*.

In all four of the pieces the writing is mostly illegible, either fades out or is obscured by a wash of paint laid thinly over top, or scrapped down to the gesso. They say: We make our mark, others strive to understand it, and eventually it is scrapped away by the erosive forces of time. Art commemorates and memorializes, but the best art is honest: it confronts us with our condition, it does not distract us or help us play make believe. Our condition is: mortality, finitude. No matter the relative solidity of the implement with which and the surface on which we try to inscribe ourselves, whether the transience of ink on paper or the solidity of chisel in stone, our

individuality will disappear into the anonymity of a life that goes on without us. Horribly– and beautifully– life goes on. It is not the same as if one had never been, but the longer one is gone, the more impossible it becomes to tease out one’s individual contribution.

However, art is not about salvation but intervention in the relentlessness of changing conditions. It cannot save anyone, but it can insist on the irreducible importance of particulars. That is its futility: the particulars go under, and they have to go under, the waves of material transformation (which will consume even the works themselves: no conservationist will be able to protect the museum once the sun expands into a red giant). Its futility is also its supreme importance: we are and must be particulars, not just tokens of a type or instances of an idea. Each of us is a unique embodied reality whose value is irreducible and infinite. The art work too is a particular. Even if it can be situated in relation to other works of art in a given moment of cultural history, each one ultimately has to be judged in its own terms. No painting or song makes an impression on us as “cubist,” or “blues.” If it is any good, it will have a specificity that speaks to us, that stops us and insists that we see it or listen to it on its terms.

Painting disrupts the temporal flow upon which music or written language depend. The painting is there, all at once, unlike a song or a sentence, whose meaning unfolds through time. Hence the key transformation which occurs when sentences are painted, is that our interpretative register must shift from serial attention to parts to a receptive intuition of the whole. Paintings are, first and foremost, things to be seen, not read. To see, we have to try to take the whole painting in at once (later, we might zero in on details, but the finished work is an organized whole before it is an interrelation of parts). It is not that a picture is worth a thousand words; it is that pictures and words are different forms of expression.

Looking at these paintings, our initial instinct is to try to decipher the words. Their genius is that they simultaneously invite and disrupt that desire.

Whether paintings are representational or not, their importance is never whatever ‘literal’ meaning one might attribute to them. Their meaning lies rather in the way they stop us and make us think about the very process of pictorial representation, expression, abstraction, etc. How do we recognise a face as a face when it’s three dimensional living reality is painted in two dimensions? What becomes of literal meaning when words become the subject matter of a painting? What becomes of a painting when its classical elements are abstracted out and we are left only with an arrangement of lines and colours in space? The good painting of whatever genre seizes our attention, forces us to stop, look, think; it does not answer these questions for us, but leaves us free to answer them for ourselves. If a painting provided instructions on how to “read” it, it would not be art but an illustration.

# Readings: Ricky Gervais: *AfterLife*

Originally posted, 22 March, 2019

Ricky Gervais' new series on Netflix, *AfterLife*, is probably as philosophically sophisticated a show as it is possible to make in this culture. Ricky Gervais, former philosophy student (there is hope, kids!), is probably the only comedian who could have made it. (Mark Maron might be able to pull something similar off if he would let his anxieties percolate into worries about existential rather than merely personal and familial problems). The sardonic wit that has defined Gervais since the incomparable *The Office* is on full display, but unlike his character in the earlier series, there is no twinkle in his eye when he skewers his antagonists. Self-consciously chosen alienation, not ham-handed social skills, is Tony's (Gervais' character) motivation.

The premise of the show is that loss of love causes loss of meaning. Loss of meaning is equivalent to loss of care about one's self. Loss of care about one's self leads to loss of care about what others think about you, and loss of care about what others think about you gives you the freedom to tell them exactly what you are thinking. Rarely is the thought kind.

Tony has recently lost his wife to cancer. Before she died she made a series of videos giving him both banal instructions (to not forget to feed the dog) and life-coaching (to stay funny and continue to live). His life revolves around re-watching those videos, alternating between benignly neglecting and over-loving the dog, and viciously insulting anyone who crosses his path, from the postal delivery person to his nephew George's classmates. Gervais' trademark misanthropy is on full display (and has earned him some [tut-tutting](#) from [liberal critics](#), who are afraid to swim in the deeper waters where Gervais wants to take us). The show *is* wicked funny, but not because his humour is cruel (although it is), but because it leads the viewer into an existential reflection on life that is the antithesis of the superficial 'happiness' sold by much of the entertainment industry.

This level of sophistication is usually the province of literature, not television, but *AfterLife* is very much television. It must be watched, because much is conveyed through expression. The dead stare of Tony as he cuts others to the quick, or the extraordinary, bemused eyes of his co-star Mandeep Dhillon, (who has the most expressive face on screen since Rowan Atkinson) are essential to our understanding of Tony's reality and the contradictory responses it has on others. For those who are the target of his barbs are not as deeply wounded by them as one might think, and others who hear them but are not the target (typically, Dhillon's character) understand (and help the viewer to understand) that despite appearances, Tony is not a misanthrope.

The real message of the show is that life is hard at the best of times, that it can get worse to the point where some choose death, but that as hard and awful as it can be, the presence of other people can (but do not necessarily) heal. Constant connection with them exerts a positive emotional pull that does not fill the void of the loss, but can drag even the hardest-hearted back

into life. This narrative arc sets up the rest of the show as a redemption saga, but it does not take a straightforward or conventional route.

By the end of the sixth episode, Tony's hard-heart is beginning to crack open. But the deeper point that Gervais is making, I think, is that Tony would not have survived without that hard heart. We are in an inverted moral world, where the apparent bad is good because it allowed Tony to survive long enough to really embrace life again. Two other characters commit suicide *because they care too much*. Tony in fact helps one of them overdose on heroin after the junky tells him that he wants to die because he misses his wife (who also overdosed) too much. Very tenderly, Tony takes all the money he has out of his wallet and gives it to him. In the darkest of dark ironies, it is the first time since his wife died that he makes a real connection with another person. I am tempted to say that it is his first act of love and it is the start of the process of redemption.

But it teaches a deep truth: a soft heart cannot bear this life when it turns towards the worst. The portrayal of the suicide is not moralistic: if one can no longer bear life then it is one's right to leave it, and Tony affirms that right, not out of indifference to life, but because he deeply listens to the addict's story, understands the depths of his pain, and accepts his choice that he wants to end it. Tony talks about suicide constantly, but never goes through with it. Some call him a coward, he himself says it is because he loves the dog, but I think that there is a different reason: he does not love life in a naive and unreflective way. Hence, he lacks the expectations of happiness which, in more carefree souls, undermines them once sunny days have darkened. His wife's death does not so much destroy his happiness as kill his capacity to feel anything at all. In another dark irony, his hard heart is what saves him long enough that he slowly begins to feel again.

He is thus unlike the two great anti-heroes of existential literature, Meursault, from Camus' *The Outsider*, and Kirilov, from Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*. Both are studies in alienation from the ordinary values of social life but neither are redeemed. Meursault proves to be beyond redemption, killing an Arab boy on the beach for no real reason and never repenting. Kirilov too proves to be beyond social redemption because he believes that his suicide is an apotheosis. By willfully rejecting life he proves his superiority to mere existence; that what matters to him is freedom above all, and freedom demands that we prove our elevation over mere being. Tony is indifferent. He claims that he can only feel the pain of the loss of his wife. I think, rather, that he does not feel anything at all, and that it is only when he starts to feel the care that others continue to exert towards him, that he really starts to feel, first the pain of loss, then his strength to bear it, and then the desire to reconnect.

The turning towards redemption is very subtle— another great strength of the show not at all typical for television drama. Tony is human— all too human— even though he thinks that freedom from concern gives him license to be inhuman. But he is more honest than inhuman. Even when they feel the sting of his wit, others can see that he never really says anything that is untrue. They do pity him, but their refusal to give up on him is more complicated than that: he cannot be out and out forsaken because, when you get down to it, he just tells the truths that polite society would rather not hear. There are good reasons that polite society does not want to hear every truth: people have feelings, they can be wounded, and social values have to take into account

emotional realities as well as principled consistency. Once Tony begins to re-understand this elementary (but not easy to practically understand) social truth, he slowly begins to reconnect, and even those he has treated the worst welcome him back.

# Lessons From History VIII: John Cowley, “The Strange Death of the Liberal University” (Socialist Register, 1969)

Originally posted, 28 January, 2019

This essay was published in 1969. It is a reflection on the place of higher education under capitalism, undertaken in the context of the demands of the British student movement. It remains interesting today because it emphasises that the forces that critics of the “neo-liberal” university worry about today were already at work fifty years ago. This fact should tell contemporary critics that the problem is not “neo-liberalism” (which has long degenerated into an academic fad substituting for social criticism) but the changing and contradictory demands of capitalism.

Capitalism needs educated workers. Compulsory schooling was never promoted for the lower classes until capitalist industry began to demand workers with basic numeracy and literacy skills. It is likewise with universities and colleges. “Under capitalism, as in all social formations characterised by economic scarcity, education is closely related to the needs of the economy and the established social order.”(p. 86) Long a preserve of the aristocratic elite, the contemporary university is the product of changing demographic and economic pressures. “The renewal and rationalization of capitalism requires more scientific and technical workers, administrators, communication experts ...” (88) The wave of university expansion across the Western world was the result of the maturation of the “Baby Boom” generation and the needs of newly emerging hi-tech industries for more highly educated workers.

At the same time as the institution *changes* in response to socio-economic forces, its ideological justification remains the same. In the case of higher education, this ideological justification took on its contemporary form in the nineteenth century. It was influenced above all by liberal-humanist reformers like Wilhelm von Humboldt (founder of the University of Berlin). According to this liberal-humanist ideal, education is essential to *Bildung*, the process of cultural-character formation that is essential to the all-round personal cultivation of self-creative individuals. Like all ideological justifications, the idea of the liberal-humanist university contrasts with the socio-economic reality that actually shapes the institution. At the same time— because people think, and think about themselves and the barriers that stand in the way of their self-creation- it has served, and continues to serve as the poetic basis of critique of the more prosaic social forces that threaten the ideal.

The main object of criticism, in 1968 as now, is the subordination of the university and its ideals of interest-led research and teaching, academic freedom, open time frames for inquiry, collegial self-governance, and scholarship in the service of human understanding and freedom to a position of service to economic demands. “The crisis in higher education is essentially a crisis of incorporation, arising from the ever greater inter-connectedness of university-college structures and the capitalist productive apparatus” (91) This incorporation is real, but if Cowley is correct,

then the institution has always already been incorporated, and the ideals supposedly at risk never the main governing values of the university.

Here, the critic has to be careful to avoid functionalist inevitablism (the university serves a social function, and so long as capitalism reigns, it will serve that function. Either we overthrow capitalism and create an entirely new model of education, or we we accept that liberal-humanist values are mystification. At points, Cowley comes close to succumbing to this danger, but ultimately escapes it. He does not argue that the liberal;-humanist self-understanding of the academy is worthless: “The main virtue, historically, of the nineteenth century definition of university education is that it provided at least a semblance of autonomy and freedom of the academic.”(93) However, what Cowley does contend– and here he is surely correct- is that those values are the hold-over from an earlier age, and they are largely being erased as countervailing institutional values to the dominant economism of governments and administrations. In a new social context, dominated by social demands for what we now call STEM graduates, the liberal-humanist ideal leaves on at the level of platitude, but ceases to have any purchase on the operations of the institution. Philosophersd and literary critics shuffle the hallways, dead souls who cannot delay crossing Styx much longer.

Those shuffling ghosts are evidence, to university reformers, of the shocking lack of “productivity” in the “university “sector.” “With the pressure for increased productivity, growth and efficiency in every sector, the universities begin to lose even the semblance of autonomy... The institutional autonomy of the university is attacked for shielding gross inefficiency.” (93) That claim sounds like it comes right from the pages of the previous Kathleen Wynne’s government’s justification for its “differentiation” strategy. *Plus ca change*. And yet, despite fifty years (at least) of attempted reform, the university has not yet been fully subordinated to the logic of capital accumulation. There is still a little bit of fight in academia, although it no longer takes the form of mass struggle that it did in the 1960’s.

Perhaps we are at the dawn of a new mass student movement in Ontario. Accessibility is under attack by the Ford government, and students have begun to mobilise in response. In the 1960’s the student movement was the leading edge of a mass anti-imperialist movement that brought about cultural revolution on a number of fronts: sexual, racial, generational. Students openly challenged the hierarchical-authoritarian organization of higher education and demanded a democratic say, not only on questions of institutional governance, but also on teaching methods, course offerings and content. Those sorts of demands worried Cowley, not because he was opposed to them, but because they exposed the conservative interests of all academics in preserving their prestige and power, regardless of their ideological affiliations. “Not even the Marxist teacher escapes his actual function within the educational system and he too is directly challenged by the struggles of students, for such struggles strike at the anchoring of his social personality within the system ... The personal gratifications and assurances provided by the existing student-teacher relationships, academic qualifications and titles, and the respect guaranteed by formal position provide a professional identity inseparable from the academic’s personal identity.” (96-7) Cowley is correct: it is almost impossible for academics (even those who pretend otherwise) to dis-entangle the demand for professional respect from their commitment to institutional autonomy.



At the same time, there remains real value to professional autonomy, provided that it is exercised in ways that ensure that universities continue to serve the deepest value of education: creating intellectual space for critical thought that can inform political movements that can re-channel resources and wealth away from the circuits of capital accumulation towards the satisfaction of human natural and social needs. While this value is always submerged almost to the point of drowning, it is a real institutional value, anchored not in sales pitches to prospective students, but the commitments of (some critically minded) academics to use the space that they occupy, not as a platform for sloganeering, but for pushing their students to think. To think is to suspend the hold of the given over the mind, to see that things have been different and can be otherwise. Fundamental change is impossible without it. The educators themselves must be educated, Marx argued, and so they must also educate, (rather than prescribe and program. The struggle is perpetual and difficult, but it has not yet been lost.

# Windsor Spaces IV: Caron Avenue Pumping Station

Originally posted, 14 January, 2019



Most days the Detroit River is a hard working grey. Sometimes in summer, when the sun is high and just right, it takes on a playful turquoise to rival the most secret of tropical lagoons. You will not find any surf to play in, but the pastel colour is inviting, even if the water itself is not.

When I first moved to Windsor, the waterfront trail that now winds its way for five kilometers from the Ambassador Bridge to the Hiram Walker Distillery was not complete. There was a hotel and some old warehouses and buildings blocking the route the trail takes today. The hotel burned down and many of the other buildings were removed. Of the few structures that remain, the only one worth stopping for is this small pumping station at the foot of Caron Avenue. It reflects the contrasts of the river: Blue i-beam buttresses frame the grey granite, and in between windows allow the curious to peer into the functional heart of the station. Like so much of what is interesting in Windsor it is small scale. People tend to walk right past and not notice the little not-quite masterpiece of industrial architecture in their path.

It is not quite a masterpiece because it is not as coherently integrated into its space as it should be. City landscape crews have planted trees in front of it which prevents one from taking in a total view from the front and appreciating its symmetry. Worse: the round core of the station is attached to a blocky brick structure to the north, closest to the river. The station, open to our gaze for three quarters of its circumference, is literally boxed in and closed off to anyone walking

along the riverside path. Half of the whole seems to have been built with appearances in mind and the other half simply tacked on because there was a need to house more equipment.

But that is Windsor. If you are going to love it, or at least tolerate it, you have to accept that this is a “get-the-job-done-and-let’s-not-worry-too-much-about-what-it-looks-like” kinda place. There are not many buildings with any architectural interest, but small scale treasures like this one always seem to be compromised because someone either did not see the beauty in what was being built, or they did not have the power to resist those who did not care about architectural integrity. Citizens and visitors who think places should be both aesthetically pleasing and functional have to take their pleasures admixed with some disappointment with what could have been had imagination been allowed to float more freely from workaday concerns.

Given the problems of the site and overall structure, the real strength of the building is the windows that allow us to glimpse the guts of the water system usually hidden from view. Again, I wish that the transparency were total. It would have given the building a lightness to contrast with its heavy, mundane (but essentially important) job of getting the water from the river to the treatment plant to our homes. Alas, the potential is squandered, but not completely. One can still look inside to see the beautiful turquoise pumps, almost cartoonishly cute in a Lost in Space robot kind of way.



The whole, sadly, is less than the sum of its excellent parts. The best of the building draws us in and encourages us to look. The worse part (just visible above the pump on the far left) feels like a wall that hustles strollers past on their way to the less cramped-feeling sections of the river front path. Imagine if the view of the Renaissance centre (the top of which is visible just above the middle pump) were uninterrupted and we could see the whole of the Detroit skyline through the windows. The architects clearly wanted citizens to see the work that this little structure did

for them, but how much better would it have been had the whole building been open to our gaze from whichever direction we approached.

# Lessons From History VII: Karl Marx: “Moralising Criticism and Critical Morality” (Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume 6, 1845-1848)

Originally posted, 6 January, 2019

As the liberal media in the United States is abuzz with hope that the Democratic majority in the House will be able to strike a death blow to the Trump Presidency, it seems a good moment to examine more carefully the relationship between politics and social structures and forces. This short essay by Marx— a critique of a now forgotten German commentator- is both a lucid introduction to historical materialism and a still relevant reminder that the real problems of capitalism are social and structural. Merely electing different personnel does not ensure that these structural problems will be addressed. While it is a good thing that record numbers of women have been elected to the US House of Representatives, including the first Muslim and American Indian members, their identity alone will not cause the depth changes that solutions to capitalist life-crises demand. Nor will incessant attacks on Trump the person do anything to promote global peace, solve the climate crisis, ward off another economic crisis that seems to be brewing, or free people’s lives from service to labour and commodity markets. Now more than ever people need to remember that all of these problems long pre-date Trump. They are systemic, not personal, and getting rid of Trump, however much that might be desired and in many respects a good thing, will not change anything at a fundamental level.

Ostensibly, the essay was written as a response to Karl Heinzen, a now forgotten German critic. Heinzen had penned a critique of Engels in which he chided him for downplaying the significance of Republican demands and for failing to articulate the universal human values republicanism serves. The details of Heinzen’s argument are no longer interesting, but the substance of Marx’s argument is.

The first significant argument that Marx advances is that we cannot understand good and bad in political life in abstraction from what it is possible to do achieve in any given moment. There is no point looking back at ancient Greek society, for example, and criticising it for using slaves. Almost all of the most developed ancient societies used slave labour and developed ideologies to justify that use. Moralistic criticism of the ideology after the fact and without connection to the real organization of productive life is simply an exercise in self-righteous moral grandstanding. It says, in effect, (as Marx says of Heinzen) “The perception and expression of this contradiction is on his part an exhibition of moral strength, ... of outraged human feeling.” (330). But one’s purity comes too late to help anyone.

When we shift from the self-righteous critique of the past to the present the same problem re-appears. Those who make a great profession of their values without connecting them to concrete understanding of the actual structure of the social problems that cause most damage to human

life really just want others to know how good they are. But they do nothing to actually advance the good of human beings, because that is a problem of political struggle, not individual morality. “His party is “the party of men,” in other words, of worthy and generous minded dreamers who advocate “bourgeois” interests in the guise of “human ends,” without however clearly understanding the connection between the ideal phrase and its real substance.” (334). The connection can only be understood if we connect moral ideology to the social processes through which any society is produced and reproduced.

Both supporters and critics of Marx have often made the mistake of thinking that because he attacks “moralising criticism” his historical materialism is (or wants to be) amoral social science. While there is an important empirical dimension to historical materialism, it is not amoral, but instead sees morality as dialectically linked with specific productive systems and, deeper, more universal human needs. Social systems emerge out of the basic interactions between human beings and nature that are necessary for survival. Moral systems grow up around existing productive relationships in order to justify them. While Marx never puts the point in exactly these terms, genuine critical morality exposes the difference between the ruling value system of given forms of social life and the universal life-interests that, ultimately any society must satisfy.

Marx was not interested in formulating the principles of a universal life-value moral system. He was, as Engels stressed, a revolutionary interested in the specific contradictions of capitalist society. Nevertheless, there was always a moral (but not moralising) dimension to his thought. What he wanted to avoid above all was mere condemnation without the political power to effect real change, merely utopian invocations of a better world without the struggles to bring it into being. “The extent to which the expression [critiques of unstable social forms are] more or less utopian, dogmatic, or doctrinaire correspond exactly to the phase of real historical development.”(337) Words like “correspond” and “exactly” are the reason why people misunderstand Marx’s essential argument and treat it as mechanistic and reductionist. We have to look beneath the phrasing to the meaning beneath.

What Marx is saying is that what really matters in good human lives is not good ideas about how we ought to live, but the institutions (including value systems) which structure the way we actually live. In order for the values implicit in an abstractly true critique of one form of society to inform better lives, it must be possible to build a new society. The less possible that concrete goal is, the more abstract, moralistic, and utopian the criticism will be. But that does not mean that Marx sees no critical role for morality, but only rejects the belief (of people like Heinzen and others) that moralising criticism is equivalent to organizing political struggles to change the society.

Changing society is distinct from changing the people who run it. Political systems, like moral systems, have two specific functions in social life. On one hand, they legitimate collectively binding decisions about law and policy. In a democracy, different parties compete for power by trying to convince voters that their platform expresses “the will of the people.” On the other hand, all of their agendas presuppose the existence of the given social system, and none seek to overturn it. However, if the problems that the competing platforms claim to want to solve are really caused by the basic social structure and forces of the society, then none will succeed. “The question of property, which, ‘in our own day’ is a question of world historical significance, has

thus a meaning only in modern bourgeois society. The more advanced the society is, ... the more state power has assumed a bourgeois character, the more glaringly does the social question obtrude itself.” (323) Marx’s point about the difference between the social and the political is not a dogmatic rejection of the importance of democracy, but a caution that no society can solve its fundamental problems just by changes of personnel and policy.

Here is where Marx’s essay rejoins the present as an important cautionary tale. In all the hoopla over the fact that there are now 102 women members of Congress, including American Indians and Palestinian Americans and social democrats, all of whom (some with quite delicious vehemence) have vowed to oust Trump, there is silence about the fact that Trump is just one way of managing American capitalism and imperialism, and getting rid of him— like getting rid of petty German Princes in 1848— leaves the system in tact. The diversity of the Democratic caucus does not change the party’s abhorrent position on Israeli apartheid, American chauvinism (“the indispensable country”), or establishment resistance to needed but practically mild reforms of capitalism. Conflating persons with social problems and energetic *ad hominem* makes for fun media spectacle but will end up squandering the energy needed to turn some electoral success into social-structural change.

# Readings: Liz Fekete: Europe's Fault Lines: Racism and the Rise of the Right

Originally posted, 16 August, 2018

On August 12th a planned rally in Washington DC by so-called "White Nationalist" on the anniversary of the fatal Charlottesville March fizzled. Only a couple of dozen white supremacists showed up and they were vastly outnumbered by opponents. Mobilization matters.

At the same time, no one should conclude from the small number of racists who gathered in Washington that the far right threat has receded, in the United States or anywhere else. They may have been intimidated by counter-mobilisations and fear of bad press that memories of the murder of an anti-racist protestor in Charlottesville would stoke. Or they may have concluded that at this conjuncture their ends are better served by being quiet, letting their man in the White House enact their agenda through formally legitimate means. Whichever interpretation is true, we can be certain that it is not yet dusk for the day of the far right.

Liz Fekete's recent book, *Europe's Fault Lines*, focuses on the European far right and fascist movements, but its lessons are universal. They are: a) that fascism and far right politics are response to social crises, such that they can never be fully defeated as long as society is crisis prone; b) that far right movements have deep roots in local communities and their parties have been shockingly successful gaining state power; c) that even where they have not won state power they have pushed public opinion and "moderate" parties dangerously far to the right on questions of immigration and multiculturalism; and d) they can only be combated by unified political movements that present a credible democratic socialist alternative to the neo-liberal status quo. Education and moralising are not enough.

The most important argument that Fekete makes concerns the conditions in which far-right and fascist movements grow. Hers is an essential counter to liberal moralism according to which fascism is a form of personality disorder, the politics of "deplorables" in the words of Hilary Clinton. The politics are certainly deplorable, and these movements do attract unstable and dangerous individuals. However, political theory has to explain how political problems emerge and how people arrive at the positions that they espouse. If we treat fascism as a personality disorder, then therapy is the solution. Fekete demonstrates in abundant detail that political therapy does not work.(pp.142-148) Political struggle is the only way to solve the problem, but it has to be informed by clear historical understanding of the causes of specific waves of far right mobilisation.

While liberals like to portray the far right as anathema to all "civilised values," Fekete makes it clear that the current far right upsurge is a direct consequence of the political economy of capitalist globalisation as pursued over the last thirty years. In other words, it is a product of the very "civilization" i.e., the "rules-based global order" that liberals extol. That "rules based global order" brutally subordinated the economies of the Global South to an unfair trade regime, destroying life-conditions across much of Africa and Central America. The right wing has



exploited the ensuing migrant crisis (exacerbated by imperialist wars across the Middle East and North Africa– also celebrated as part of the rules based global order!) to gain followers and power, but it did not create those conditions.

*Nationalist and nativist politics are playing out across the EU at a time of economic retrenchment as well as austerity– an accelerated form of the neo-liberal project of globalising financial markets, shrinking welfare, deregulating labour and privatising state assets. When public services are being decimated and jobs are haemorrhaging, particularly in the industrial heartlands, it is not hard to see why demands for economic protectionism are popular.(p.96).*

Economic protectionism is the thin edge of the xenophobic, anti-immigrant far right wedge. It cannot be combated unless the social and economic causes are addressed.

It is not surprising that intolerance is presented as a personal character flaw by the liberal media. It is not that they are incapable of grasping the social conditions of its emergence, but rather that, if they did, they would have to critically examine the cosmopolitan global order they have long championed. When viewed from the perspective of its victims, those who cannot afford trendy restaurants or adventure tourism, those for whom the “duty to protect” means Hellfire missiles into their wedding parties and torture at “black sites” hosted by friends of the “leader of the free world,” that order is hardly worth saving.

At the same time, intolerance does take hold at the individual level, and it must be challenged. On this crucial point Fekete is firm and clear. The social causes of xenophobia and racism have to be addressed, but Europeans who seek solace in fantasies of ethnic purity and who target and scapegoat the victims of globalization and war from the Global South have to be tackled directly and without apology.

*The slogan most associated with the anti-fascist cause– ‘No pasaran’– is, in its broadest sense, a passionate encapsulation of the interdependent relationship between the fight for humanity and the defence of democracy. Today’s socialism, like anti-fascism, must defend cultural pluralism, a basic tenet of democracy ... Democratic renewal needs its tribunes and political parties; without them, the right will remain in power. But political parties can no longer challenge the extreme right through centralized machine politics ... The left must be rooted in communities, supporting new models of economic and community regeneration based on self-help to give people hope and dignity.(p.176).*

The renewal of democracy and socialism from below must, above all, enact the culturally pluralist politics it defends by ensuring that people from different ethnicities are allowed to interact in egalitarian spaces.

Racism takes hold of individual’s hearts when: a) they feel vulnerable for some reason and b) have only a one-sided, or even fictitious conception of and relationship to the people they demonise. In Canada, for example, support for Quebec’s ill-fated niqab ban were in rural areas populated overwhelmingly by “pur laine” quebecois(e). In Montreal, where there are large Muslim communities from North Africa, support was much weaker. The defence of humanity requires experiencing each other as human beings: complex, contradictory, multifaceted

creatures with shared needs, similar general hopes and motivations, but different ways of expressing ourselves.

If broader and deeper experience of each other is the subjective condition for the rejection and defeat of far right xenophobia, then we should expect the far right to isolate migrants and refugees from the ethnic national majority. Indeed, they have pursued just this strategy. Amongst the most inhuman of the inhuman politics championed by the right is the growing use of— and I use this term literally— concentration camps to imprison and humiliate people who are quite literally fleeing their homes to save their lives. These so-called “detention centres” are increasingly being off-shored (just like industrial jobs), with camps now constructed in Africa itself, in an effort to prevent people from reaching Europe in the first place, criminalising, in essence, the mere *thought* of migration.(p.160).

The picture that Fekete paints of migrant life is— without hyperbole— terrifying. Imagine having your infant seized by heavily armed, uniformed psychotics (who else could comply with the order to seize a baby?) at the border of the nation that has destroyed your own, forcing you to flee in the hopes of saving yourself and your family. Imagine the never-ending loneliness of being locked in a cell for the crime of being poor and black and fleeing to the continent that pioneered the slave trade and colonialism. Those of us who have the freedom to organize have to try to feel that as far as we can in imagination, and use it to energise our struggles against the structural and subjective causes of these crimes against humanity.

# Readings: Hannah Gadsby: Nanette

Originally posted, 24 July, 2018

Hannah Gadsby's [Nanette](#) (available on Netflix) is being heralded as the [future of standup comedy](#). It is, in many respects, superb, but it is perhaps unfair to tag it with the expectations which come with the claim that it is "the future" of standup. A 24/7 news cycle, practically infinite capacity for the dissemination and storage of content, and no limits on who can broadcast their opinion, creates the conditions for universal hyperbole: with so much being said, the quality, impact, and novelty of everything must be endlessly exaggerated. Nothing can live up to the hype.

But that is no reflection on the excellence of the show. It is by turns funny, poignant, painful, political, and provocative. Gadsby begins with a quiet stage presence that she gradually intensifies as the routine progresses, transforming herself over the course of an hour from self-deprecating object of her own jokes to a loud, self-assertive subject able to confront the homophobic violence she was subjected to in her past and in charge of her future. There is thus an element of drama that is absent from most stand up routines. She makes us understand— as few comics do in their routines— that we are not witnessing the whole real person, but a character created, like all characters, for the stage. Since most comics go by their real names, we forget too easily that we are watching an act.

Nanette might better be thought of, therefore, as a dramatic unconcealment of Gadsby the person beneath the persona Gadsby the comic had built for herself. We witness this self-unveiling over the course of the hour, and it is what lends the act a rare emotional power. It starts traditionally enough, moves through a very insightful discussion of the mechanics of comedy, and ends with a moving denunciation of hatred in all of its forms: self-loathing, shame, homophobia, xenophobia. The consciously created dramatic arc is what marks it as new and "the future of comedy."

At the same time, I thought that her understanding of self-deprecating humour was one-sided. She tells the audience early on that she cannot continue to do stand up the way that she has done it in the past because making fun of herself is really a form of self-loathing, of internalizing the humiliation that she has been subjected to as a lesbian. Of course, she has absolute freedom to interpret her humour as she feels it should be interpreted, and to change it in response to conclusions she drew about how problematic some aspects of its deeper meanings were. At the same time, self-deprecation is not always self-abasement: in making fun of those aspects of the self that others are wont to demonize and attack, one can also affirm those characteristics, and triumph over one's abusers. It is not that she is wrong and I am right. It is that artistic and creative practices are always contradictory (as are the social relationships within which they emerge) and we should try to understand those contradictions and play with them. Truly great art brings those contradictions to the fore (although not always self-consciously) and allows us to feel them in a new way.

I also thought that in some respects the content of the drama was not radically new but very much belonged to this moment of history. Here, the show was less successful. As *Gatsby* builds towards the climactic moment, the tone shifts from self-deprecation to a highly charged and resonant disclosure of personal trauma, but then from there to overly general and moralistic call outs for an abstract class of people (“men”) to behave better. The disclosure elicits the expected sympathetic response from the audience, which is then repaid by more demands for everyone to be better people. The problem is not with the personal intervening in a directly political way and “spoiling the fun,” so to speak, but rather that politics is rendered personal in a wholly abstract way, and the solution to social problems presented as each individual member of the problem class striving to become better (as if there were no social factors involved in character formation and everything is under the control of individuals as such).

The transition from traditional routine to dramatic unconcealment moment begins in a discussion of Picasso. She starts with the standard self-deprecating joke: she wants to quit stand-up as she has known it, but because she studied art history at university, she is not qualified to do anything else. Eventually, the discussion arrives at Picasso, who is criticized for having once had sex with a seventeen year old. What follows is at once an incisive skewering of the fetishisation of artists and their works (she challenges people to explain what it is that makes a Picasso so great and expensive), and an unfortunate– but all too common– conflation of the work and the person. Whatever one thinks about Picasso’s sexual mores (and they were surely not his alone, but those of an era), and whether any particular person can explain what it is that makes his great paintings great, it is the case that Picasso did not make his own reputation, but his works rose above the many thousands of other works and artists (including Braque, who co-founded Cubism), to become the masterpieces that they are.

I don’t care what people think about the rightness or wrongness of his having had sex with a seventeen year old, *Guernica* is worth more. Anyone who has stood in front of it in Reina Sophia Museum in Madrid is overwhelmed: it is a timeless condemnation of fascist violence, a mourning for the fragility of the human bodies it destroys, and the capacity of the survivors to endure and win.

My point is not to shield people from criticism just because they are “great” artists.” If I were pushed, I would say that it is works that are great, not people (although people create them). However that issue is decided, there is such a thing as history, and it has its own contradictory dynamics, dynamics that emerge from the actions of people but are not reducible to their intentions or their moral character. Since the quality of works of art is not a function of the personal characteristics of the artist; art history (or the history of anything, including moral character) cannot be written simply on the basis of discoveries of personal indiscretions. People’s works can contradict their personal decisions, which are often abominable. Heidegger joined the Nazis and Ezra Pound was an anti-Semitic fascist. For those terribly wrong decisions they should be criticised and denounced. But the philosophy and the poetry should not be burned: they rise above the mistakes by giving us the tools to see through the political errors of their creators. Progress requires that we understand these sorts of tensions and contradictions, not revise history to suit moralistic sensibilities.







