

Collected Evocations,  
Readings, and  
Interventions: 2019-20

## Thinkings 9



Jeff Noonan

**Thinking 9: Collected Evocations, Readings, and Interventions: 2019-20**

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# Evocations



# John Brown's Body

Posted on **March 22, 2020**

John Brown, b. Sarnia ON, July 4th, 1953, d. Toronto, ON, March 21st, 2020

Worse than cruelty is indifference. Cruelty is intentional: we can comprehend it and combat it. But you cannot fight that which is indifferent to your existence or make it care that you are suffering. I was working in the garden two days ago. In a temperate climate, winter snow and cold are redeemed by the joy of seeing and hearing the world come back to life in spring: perennials push through the soggy ground, birds call out to mates, your cheeks feel the first flash of warmth in the sun's rays.

But I had to stop. Because as my senses bore witness to the natural world springing back to life, my mind kept reminding me of the threat the Coronavirus was posing to our human world. *And I could feel that nothing cared.* Nature might be a womb that nurtures us, but it is not a mother who loves us. We are special only in our own eyes. The crocuses will blossom and the trees will bud with or without us.

Today— my birthday— the sun is the brightest it has been all year. There is a chill, yes, but the city is sunlit gold. And I cannot bear to look, because yesterday John Brown died.

Jack was my uncle, but he was really my brother and best friend and teacher in one person. He died and nature did not stop being beautiful and indifferent. It leaves me alone to mourn— and it keeps turning and being beautiful. And I cannot bear its silence. It should call out in sympathy, but it has nothing to say that can speak to our grief. Death is our tragedy, but nature's means of renewal.

I have known Jack my whole life, but he became of supreme importance to me as a teenager. Once or twice a year I would leave the little mining town where I grew up to visit him in Toronto. The excitement would build as the bus sped down highway 69, intensify as it became the 400, wide with cars and trucks moving at southern Ontario speed, and reach a pitch as we turned onto Avenue Road for the final stretch to the bus station on Elizabeth Street. I still love Avenue Road— that is where I felt I had reached The City!

In retrospect, Toronto was much more provincial when I first visited, but it was the biggest city I had ever been to and its ranking in the league tables was irrelevant. Jack unlocked a secret world of art, punk rock, super cool clothes, new cuisines ... but most of all, freedom.

Freedom from the conformity of my small town, but more importantly freedom to live as a creative subject. I am sure that the lives of he and his fellow artists had stresses and strains that I could not understand as a 13, 14, 15 year old boy, but I could understand that they did not get up for work at 5 am in the freezing winter to work at the nickel smelter like my dad. They would be going to bed at 5 am, after a day of painting, or film making, or video editing, or installation installing, and a night of German beer, music, talk, and new ideas.

I had only one thought at the time: “I have to live here!” In 1986 I moved to Toronto to start school York University. I lived with Jack and Howard Lonn in their studio on Richmond Street. Our lives were books and paintings and talk about art and culture and philosophy. Whether you are Milton or me, words cannot express how I felt that first year in Toronto. I felt as though my body had to grow larger, to become more capacious to contain the new ideas and experiences to which Jack introduced me. Life was total open-eyed childhood excitement, except that I was an adult (sort of) and could spend my nights in clubs listening to local bands that played their own songs—loudly. I felt a part of something that connected me to New York and London, but cutoff from my roots, (which is what I wanted at the time).

Queen West then was not just a shopping destination: it was artist studios, the coolest bars, greasy spoons, and bookstores. A few blocks away was Kensington Market and its vintage clothing shops, reggae, punk, and the House of Spice, where we would get supplies for the curries on which we lived.

Jack painted and I went to school. If I could have picked my life I would have been an artist, but I lacked the talent. I was a fellow traveler in that world and not a participant. I learned from watching Jack paint and talking, incessantly talking with him, about art and art history. I learned two truths: One: that a painting should make us see something new. And two: real creativity is about inventing the rules the work obeys through the process of making it. Creativity is “working out” an idea: it is not just “expression.” If it were, everyone would be an artist. Most people are not artists precisely because they cannot give themselves over to the work, to let the idea work itself out through their eye and hand.

This process is what makes art art. Art is neither illustration, nor adornment, nor decoration; it is not story telling, edification, or moral instruction. It is the working out process through which something absolutely singular, something which expands the human sensorium in an unpredictable way, comes to be. Art educates or instructs only in a derivative sense.

Jack created a [superb body of work](#) over his more than thirty year career. He was an artist that was appreciated more by other artists than critics. I think this was because Jack’s work was very much about the process of painting and less about an obvious, politically resonant message. For me, it is a long meditation on mortality, embodiment, and what human being is at its very core. The layering-scraping process by which he fashioned his works were a metaphorical question: what can we take away from the representation of a human being and still see a human being? (Had critics more philosophical depth, they could have seen this in his work). I know it bothered him a great deal that his work was not more widely collected by the major Canadian museums.

From the standpoint of the quality of his work, he is without argument one of the giants of Canadian painting of the past forty years. I do not think there are many Toronto painters who would disagree. The critics (with the exception of the late John Bentley Mays, a long time champion of Jack’s work) disagreed. I could understand his frustration: people should pay more attention to my work too! But I would console us both with Krishna’s admonishment to Arjuna’s complaints in the Bhagavad Gita: You have the right to the work, not to the fruits: no one can predict how the work will be received, in other words, but we must perform it nonetheless.

Last year we were riding the Queen Street Car, heading to Parkdale to see a show. I remarked as we traveled west of Bathurst how much had changed since we lived together on Richmond Street. “We could wax nostalgic about every block,” he replied, resigned to the truth that things change. Why should our city of thirty years ago be today’s city?

The worst thing is not to die, but to have one’s life reduced to a set of dimly remembered facts and anecdotes. Life is the feeling, needing, self-realizing whole, not the particular things one did or experienced. And yet, I hope memory is not just nostalgia, and that honest reflection is the final completion of the whole which is a life: a last raising up of the person as this irreplaceable being that they have been, a celebration of their unrepeatable intervention into the indifferent order of things.

# Hand Writing Painting

Posted on June 19, 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 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 of 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 # 2c.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 scraped 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.



# Mayworks 2020: North of Wyandotte/Poem of Despair and Great Longing

Posted on April 19, 2020

North of Wyandotte/Poem of Despair and Great Longing is the fifth collaboration for Mayworks Windsor between Windsor photographer Douglas MacLellan and I. Originally, the plan was to produce a series of 3×5 handbills with MacLellan's photographs and a five part poem by Noonan and distribute them at random in different bars around Windsor and Detroit. However, since it may be some time before there are any bars open in Windsor and Detroit, we present the work first in virtual form. The tenor of the times forced me to change the structure and tone of the poem.

Doug has now created these attractive portfolios for sale. They contain a printed version of the poem and 8 limited edition prints of his photographs. Please contact me in the comments if you are interested in purchasing a copy.



Portfolio cases for

various projects and stand alone made in 2020 in Windsor, Ontario.

### Poem of Despair and Great Longing

Last night you said: "It's so quiet,



and we can finally see the stars!”

I replied: “But look how dark, behind them.

And listen how uncaring,

its monstrous eternity.

The next night,

incautious,

you stepped into

the void.

You stuck

to its circumference

as it expanded.

It neither laughed nor smiled,

but just increased

the distance between us.

I was fixed in place,

but could see

your beautiful face

drifting off.

I cried out:

“Take my hand!

It’s not too late!

Reach out!

We can pull each other back!”

But we could not.

The more I needed

you,

the faster it pulled

you away.

[And I thought: “It is my fault

for thinking,

that cold January day

walking down 16<sup>th</sup> St.

in Philadelphia

that travel is too much bother

just to:

Eat the same different food,

see the same different people,

drink the same different drinks.

and look at the same different buildings.”

And thinking that, I tightened my scarf

against a dry-ice cold wind

blowing up the Delaware River

kept walking,

and wished I were home].

The dark expanded,

But then, from its centre

a faint light,  
like an LED glow.  
I could see you,  
but it did not lessen  
my loneliness,  
but burnished it with melancholy.  
You were already becoming  
just a memory.  
You looked the same,  
even from a distance.  
I would be happy  
just to see you,  
maybe,  
if I were an electron cloud,  
or a wave function,  
or an image, an avatar, an algorithm.  
But I am substance:  
mass, bone, tissue, blood;  
flesh and soft curves.  
A knowing glance  
is not enough  
for me.  
I say: silence is better

than weak wit  
and saccharine sentiment.  
I do not want your  
thoughts and prayers  
or hopes  
or home recipes  
for profound positive change.  
I want to touch.  
I want to kiss  
and be kissed.  
I want the sun on my face  
as I walk along the river,  
free.  
And if I cannot have that,  
I want to weep, suffer,  
and mourn my loss,  
while I make onion gravy,  
and play loud music  
and drink strong drink.

## North of Wyandotte













# Observer Perspective

Posted on March 8, 2020

Early winter:

December damp;

gloom and a trickster

grey wind

sneaks in

the open door

behind me.

A greasy spoon: inside,

an old woman,

all hair and hips

mushrooming over

the lunch counter stool.

She scowls,

then looks back

to her Scratch and Win

and drags out the time

it takes

to scrape the dime

over the last square

to reveal

that again,

her hard life,  
now mostly lived  
will go on, unredeemed.

I think:

She will endure.

She long ago  
started living  
only for the moment  
just before  
the hope is  
dashed.

On the next stool,  
a man: wild whiskers  
and blue eyes  
commiserates.

His look might say:

“We’re white. Where’s our privilege:  
to stroll carefree  
and buy nice things;  
drink five dollar coffee  
instead of watery 2 dollar  
draft  
at 11:50 in the morning?”

I think:

How much he looks like Marx!

And then: How much Marx  
would have looked like him.

How often  
must he have been mistaken

for a drunk

or a bum,  
shuffling to the British Library,  
arse worn out of his pants.

Outside: shoppers

hurry past  
this last forsaken corner  
of grizzled drunks  
and piss-stained stairs  
towards westqueenwest boutiques.

While I wait  
for the light to turn  
a man twirls past,  
clubbing in his meth-fueled mind.

Too thin to be alive,  
much less as

graceful and dexterous

as he in fact is.

And I think:

What it takes to stop bodies living!

And there is a truth in that

which is not sad.

# Live.Long.Enough

Posted on November 25, 2019

My unsettled soul

prefers unhappiness.

It hymns

autumn's grey on grey

to the rhythm of the chill west wind

trapping the refulgent sun.

Long ago,

I turned into it,

tied my scarf,

buttoned my coat.

My footfalls

failed to impress

my weight

on the bone dry ground.

I left no mark,

but just

displaced

a mote of dust,

or perhaps

only knocked a molecule

onto a different trajectory.

Was there nothing,

then,

to say: *I* have been here?

The next day

others' steps

crossed that hard dead ground

just a little out of phase

with my own.

It is together

that we make the road

by walking.

Today,

I return

and ask:

Was this the spot

where I once stepped,

scared and hopeful and young,

not knowing

how it would all turn out?

It looks different now,

but familiar,

like a foreshadowing

of my older face

in a photo

of my younger self.

I am I and you.

Who are we,

together?

This sum

of our dusty displacements?

Or this name

that declares

to the unhearing heavens:

“I am,

and cannot be erased

from the book of life?”

Her eyes do not burn bright

but stare,

mercilessly,

true,

green-gold:

“Your self-importance is laughable.”

“Tell me the name

of the walker

who passed by here

10 000 years ago.

Are you special?

Why should you be known

by name

forever?

To fear

what must happen

is childish.

You exalt your mind,

but it ruins you

and your kind.

Erasure is not sad.

Think of all the places

where,

right now,

you are not.

Are they the poorer for it?

Do they lack for your absence?

Your service has been recorded

in the order of things.

It is enough

for the world

that you have been.”



Space-time is stretching:

One day

the stars will be

too far away to see.

The absolute:

dark and silence.

Is this your wish:

to call out your name

forever

to cold nothingness?

Toronto/London(UK)/Windsor (Oct-Nov 2019)

With borrowings from George Santayana (“Unsettled souls prefer unhappiness” from the essay “Long Way to Nirvana,” I think; Goethe, Faust, Vol. 1, (“grey on grey”); a phrase from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado (“we make the road by walking”) which I learned because it is the title of a book by Myles Horton and Paolo Friere; William Blake, “Tyger” (Eyes (not) burning bright) and a BBC show about the end of the universe).

# Peregrination

Posted on 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  
that would listen  
to the story of your confinement.  
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 are 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,  
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:

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.

## Five Haiku for Cape Breton

Posted on August 19, 2019



Middle Head Trail, Ingonish.

1.

Coffee's on the roof,

The harbour looks almost clean.

The street is one way.

2.

My receptive eye.

Supple alabaster forms.

A hidden caress.

3.

Unstoppable force

Plus immovable object

Equals erosion.

4.

Blue exhalation,

The sea rears up, crashes down.

Nothing else matters.

5.

Off the beaten track,

Silence opens, thought closes.

Road, stories; an end.

# Walking, Thinking, Drinking

Posted on December 31, 2019

Many years ago at a conference I met an eccentric Italian philosopher (whose name I cannot recall) who led a group called the International Society for the Study of Estrangement. The group's journal (it was rather more like a zine than an academic journal) was called *Lo Straniero* (The Stranger). On its masthead was a quotation (from whom, I cannot recall, maybe Max Stirner) that said something to the effect that we should always be strangers wherever we are.

I interpreted the quotation to mean that only nomads are truly free. If we tie ourselves down to one place that we call home, a place that we ultimately need to be, we give up on the adventure of living. If, on the other hand, we always maintain an affective distance between ourselves and wherever we happen to be, if there is no one for whom we long, no place we would rather be, then our happiness is contingent on ourselves alone. The stranger is never nostalgic, can always leave, and never has regrets.

I was never a member of the group. When I am away, I long for home, and this longing— for me— is proof of that I ultimately need to be there. At the same time, I understand the value of nomadic anonymity. To be by oneself for a week or two, silent most of the time, clears the mind. It is a pleasure to be quiet and let thoughts arise and resolve themselves. Not world historical thoughts, not thoughts that need to become much more than fragments, just ideas that arise in the course of a mostly silent day walking, looking, stopping for a drink...

## Curator's Notes: Serpentine Gallery

I am told to be impressed by the “studied amateurism” of Albert Oehlen. But how does one tell studied amateurism from the real thing? I suppose it takes a professional eye to tell the difference. But: in the interests of authenticity, ought one not prefer the real to the studied? Why not hang an exhibition of true amateurs, if the appearance of amateurism is what marks Oehlen's work as significant? I think: “Perhaps the whole world of contemporary art is supported by nothing more than the opinions of a very few people who have learned how to make bullshit sound insightful but otherwise have no demonstrably superior capacity for discernment than anyone else”

It might all rest on sand and the stage would collapse should anyone push even slightly against the support beams.

## Teens and Kids at the Tate Modern

I always seem to be at a major gallery on class trip day. Packs of bored as shit teenagers being talked at by their teacher or a gallery staffer and filled up with facts about this and that painting as if the art is identical to its context of production. Quiet as church-goers, they stand in a semi-circle to endure these pointless lectures. Some lucky keeners (always girls, it seems) are allowed to go off on their own to sketch some of the paintings. They take to their task with great

earnestness. I am tempted to tell them to draw it the way it makes them feel, not the way it looks, but everyone is so uptight these days I would probably get arrested. Behind them, the semi-circle is herded to the next great work.

With kids, it is completely different. They have no idea what “Great Art” is, so they do not revere it. They do not care about facts and dates and names; when they draw pictures they imagine and express rather than copy. Unself-conscious, they do not worry— as their older selves soon will— about looking uncool or stupid. They behave as kids behave when they feel unleashed: they are boisterous, happy, noisy, darting about like electrons. Behind terrified eyes the teacher tries to calculate how many millennia it would take for her to pay off the damage small greasy hands might cause to a Bacon or Picasso.

### **French House, Dean Street.**

I know it is a bad idea to go to a place which was once The Place for other people to whose circle I would have greatly liked to have belonged had it not been fifty years before my time. But, well, here it is, and I knew about it already, I didn’t go looking for it, and I most certainly was not steered here by a guide book, and well, it is time for a pint. Fuck it. If the people are too arch or too obviously bathing in reflected glory I can turn around and leave.

But it is great: tiny, cramped, like a neighborhood bar in a big American city or the front bar in the old Spadina Hotel. Half pints only, which is a drag, but I do have a great conversation, which almost never happens.

### **The Geometry of Desire**

It is possible to observe while minding one’s own business, to see without leering, and learn without interrogating. We are social beings, and the presence of others exerts a pull on our attention. “Pub” is short for “public house” after all, and unless one is going to stare into their beer other people will enter into one’s visual field ...

Two attractive young people sit across from me at the back of the pub. They look like they have just come from work, or a training session, or something that required their attention. The young man is too old for adolescent posturing: he wants to be serious, to take her seriously, to let conversation, wit, intelligence, and his ability to listen dictate how the evening will play out. I cannot hear and am not eavesdropping, but I can imagine his responses to whatever she is saying: “Hmm, yes, exactly! I have always thought that way too. Are you serious! I thought I was the only one who liked him! I haven’t heard of her, but I will definitely have a look.”

But his laugh is a little too easy and one decibel too loud. But it is his eyes that most betray less intellectual intentions. Every second sentence they scan her up and down: furtive, but not surreptitious. He wants the gaze to be noticed and not noticed.

What would we be without ambivalence and contradiction?

## **Getting Your Money's Worth**

Walking across the Millennium Bridge to the Tate Modern I paused to watch the tidal bore force its way west against the current of the Thames. Everyone else carried on with their business: for the Londoners it is a mundane event, others perhaps just did not notice, but it caught my attention and I lingered a moment to marvel at the power of the moon dragging millions of gallons of water back up river.

Fifteen minutes later, after shelling out my 18 pounds, I am at the much hyped Olafur Eliasson show. In the first room there is a wall of lichens, two narrow rectangular wave pools on the floor, and a window down which water is flowing to simulate the patterns of falling rain.

The lichens are extraordinary natural sculptures, but so little valued in nature that the artist has torn up a whole field of them without any protest from Extinction Rebellion. One hundred meters away, the tidal bore racing up the Thames offers a far more awesome spectacle of wave action than the artist's tame models. As for rain: how often does it fall in London: 200 hundred times a year? I am guessing that the earnest gazers at the rain wall have never spent even a second watching the exact same patterns on their own windows.

I turn to the guard next the wave pools and say: "I just watched the tidal bore come up the Thames, and here we are paying 18 pounds to see two inch waves." He smiles, and says, pointing to his head: "It is all in the mind, people want to see."

Indeed it is: so much of what we invest with value is an illusion, especially if we have paid 18 pounds to see it.

## **Blake: Angels, Devils, and Slender Youth.**

"He was very religious, he had a religiosity about him," says the thin attractive gay boy to his boyfriend or date. At first I think: "It is great that someone takes his date to a William Blake exhibit. Young people are not as jaded and unhistorical as the aging professor that I am fear." Then the aging professor in me returns and I sneer to myself: "What gave his religiosity away? The biblical references in every single etching?" But then a further thought: "Well, do the fussy curatorial notes amount to much more?" And then, more honestly still: "Isn't my philosophy just dressing up the obvious in unfamiliar words strung together in long sentences? And then, finally: "Could that be all any philosophy really is?"

"It is all in the mind. People want to see!"

# Readings





# Readings: Ato Sekyi-Otu: Left Universalism, Africentric Essays

Posted on October 13, 2019

## Thanks, Giving

On October 3rd, I was honoured to have been invited to speak at a conference celebrating the career of Dr. Ato Sekyi-Otu. In 1990 (if memory serves) I was a precocious fourth year undergraduate at York University. In those days (which I guess are old), students had to get permission from the professor live and in person to take a non-prescribed course for credit. Ato was warm and gracious in hearing my case and agreed to let me enroll in his famous “Marxism and Political Discourse” seminar. It was a must-take class for all the grad-student radicals in the Social and Political Thought Program. It was daunting and demanding: the students were sharp, committed, and engaged. They were not competitive and welcomed me, but it was intimidating to be in a class with MA and PhD students.

And Ato.

He was and is a rare intellect, equally at home in the world of German Idealism, Marxism, literary criticism, and African literature. The range of texts that we covered was extraordinary—from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*; from Laclau and Mouffe’s then-infamous *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* to early work by Charles Mills, from Aime Cesaire and Paulin Hountondji to the great Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah.

Ato was the through-line that held it together. His erudition was breathtaking, matched only by his expansive humour and obvious love of teaching. What made him a great teacher was that he risked letting us learn.

When you first start life as a professor, your primary worry is filling the hour and half of class time. Soon, you realise that the easiest way to prevent dead air is to talk incessantly at the students. If you never stop talking, no one can contradict you or expose a gap in your knowledge! But that does not teach anyone anything. The learning happens when the professor stops talking. They might guide, shepherd, re-orient, and question, but the best professor risks letting the students learn. They know—because they have learned—that the learning happens in the moments of quiet reflection and intense interaction between the students.

Ato has retired from teaching, but not from the work of thinking. His latest book: *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* was published this year by Routledge.

## *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays*

The book consists of five essays: “Is She Not Also a Human Being?,” “Difference and Left Universalism,” “Ethical Communism in African Thought,” “Individualism in Fanon and After,” and “Enigmas and Proverbs.” Together, they are the latest iterations of the major themes of

Sekyi-Otu's thought: the critique of the politics of difference, freeing Fanon from both Marxist and post-colonialist misinterpretation, and the meaning and global significance of African philosophy and literature. The essays have deep roots in Sekyi-Otu's intellectual history, but assume a new poignancy in contemporary conditions. As a rapacious capitalism continues to consume life-sustaining resources at unsustainable rates, right-wing nationalist atavisms have taken control of governments in the Global North and South alike. Sekyi-Otu's "left universalism" supplies the ethical foundation for a renewed socialist politics, a politics contoured to local conditions, but guided everywhere by universal, humanist values.

What, then, is a specifically "left universalism?" The short answer is that *left* universalism develops out of an understanding of the histories of resistance of oppressed peoples. That which is of universal value emerges through the particular struggles of different groups. Of most importance is the capacity for self-determination: oppressors deny that the oppressed can determine their own lives; the oppressed prove their humanity by proving their oppressors wrong.

Self determination has a collective and an individual side. Left universalism affirms the capacity of all peoples to collectively shape their societies and govern themselves. It is thus resolutely anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist, and anti-Eurocentric. However, by the same principle, it also affirms the right and capacity of all individuals to grow beyond whatever traditions they are born into, even those traditions given the imprimatur "authentic" by communitarian celebrants of ethnocentric difference. "The left universalist has a problem with a politics of difference allied with communitarian particularism ... although the question of the human is indeed the latter's silent and unavoidable presupposition, it formally evades that question ... In so doing, communitarian particularism dispossesses itself of critical resources for reasoned condemnation ... of practices and conditions of existence at home and abroad." (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 80) There are either universal standards of criticism, which apply anywhere human needs are deprived and life-capacities suppressed, or every culture is just in its own terms, in which case internal structures of oppression with deep roots in any particular history cannot be understood or criticised.

The philosophical key to unlocking the power of Sekyi-Otu's argument is the distinction between abstract and concrete universals. The Eurocentric versions of humanist values which Sekyi-Otu (following Fanon, and in agreement with post-colonial critics) condemns, are rooted in abstract universal conceptions of humanity. An abstract universal is a concept that is abstracted from particular instances and expressed as a definition or criterion for membership in a set. This process is necessary for all thinking (true particulars are things which cannot be referred to but only pointed out), but becomes politically problematic when applied in an exclusionary way. They are applied in an exclusionary way when practices and one way of realizing general human capacities specific to a given time and place are abstracted from that time and place and asserted as *the* essence of human being. The definition becomes pernicious and destructive when it allies with political and military power to justify the domination of groups and cultures that do not "measure up" to the definition. In those cases (think of the way in which residential schools were justified as necessary to "civilize" indigenous people in Canada) humanist values really are tools of the agents of oppression.

Sekyi-Otu's 'left universalism' accepts this criticism, but warns that the problem with Eurocentric forms of humanism is not that they are universal, but that they are abstract. His response is that we need to build a version of humanism— Fanon's "new humanism"— which understands the concrete ways in which universal values speak through the particularities of cultures, and in particular, indigenous cultures. (As the title states, Sekyi-Otu's focus is Africa, but his arguments apply to any indigenous culture and, indeed, to historically subaltern groups like women and demonized sexualities and gender identities). Universal values are not Western exports, as both critics and defenders of Eurocentrism maintain, but implicit in, at the root, and grow from the soil of, every human culture. As concrete universals (a Hegelian term that explains universals as the processes whereby abstractions like "freedom" become historically and socially real) humanist values are the variety of ways in which people everywhere recognize and respond to harm and struggle to alleviate its social causes.

The roots of this argument lie in Fanon's critique of colonialism. Sekyi-Otu builds on his earlier, epochal reinterpretation of Fanon in *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*. There Sekyi-Otu argued that Fanon was neither the high priest of revolutionary violence, nor the glorifier of pristine ancient cultures to be restored to their pre-conquest purity, but a resolute defender of "partisan universal values." Fanon dissected the hypocrisy of Western humanists with rare but unforgettable vehemence. "This European opulence is literally scandalous, for it has been founded on slavery, it has been nourished with the blood of slaves and it comes directly from the soil of and from the subsoil of that underdeveloped world." (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 96) This vehemence has led many interpreters in post-colonial studies to read Fanon as anti-universalist. That is not in fact the case, according to Sekyi-Otu: Fanon is against abstract Eurocentric versions of humanism, precisely because they are neither humanist nor universal. There are, however, universal human values, central amongst which is the foundational value of anti-colonial revolution: self-determination. "All the elements of a solution to the great problems of mankind have, at different times, existed in European philosophy. But the action of European men has not carried out the mission which fell to the... let us reconsider the question of mankind ... of the cerebral mass of all humanity, whose connections must be increased, whose channels must be diversified and whose messages must be rehumanized." (Fanon, 1968, 314) His new humanism— to which Sekyi-Otu's essays should be understood as a signal contribution— will be created when all the world's peoples and subaltern groups are free to articulate their human needs in their own voice.

The new humanism will not be a return to a romanticised past. Commenting on the complex role that recovery of traditions despoiled by Arab and European colonialism play in the literary works of Ayi Kwei Armah, Sekyi Otu insists that looking to the past for redemption does not necessarily invoke "irredentist romanticism." (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 271) The desire to return to an unsullied past can be, paradoxically, a demand for a future of as yet unrealized possibilities. Sekyi-Otu calls this misunderstood aspect of Armah's poetic-political work "Visionary foundationalism." (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 272) *Remembrance* of the past can recover the value of *reciprocity* in relationships between humans, the earth, and each other. (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 271) The *return*, however, is not going back, but going forward in a collective act of "telepoesis": creation of the goals the will redeem a damaged community. (Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 273)

Free recovery of the past is thus an essential moment of the articulation of human values as concrete universals. The roots of this position are found in Fanon, in whom we can hear, Sekyi-Otu argues, “an ideal of individuality more liberating ... than the forms mandated by racist culture’s mandatory collectivism. ... The idea of individuality is twin with Fanon’s vision of ‘a new humanism.’ ... Such a humanism would testify to a concrete and truly shareable universal.”(Sekyi-Out, 2019, 166) This new, concretely universal humanism will be created as peoples who have been reduced to the status of objects assert their essential subjecthood– their collective capacity to determine their own lives and their individual capacity to shape their existence in accordance with plans of their own.

All human beings are connected to the earth and each other through shared sets of needs. These needs are not– to paraphrase Marx– abstractions inherent in each individual. Rather, they are experienced as concrete requirements that must be satisfied if life is to continue. As such, they are experienced within the real social and cultural contexts of real human lives. Sekyi-Otu defends the “universality of the universalism that speaks in variegated tongues as they convey the ordinary languages of moral and political judgement.”(Sekyi-Out, 2019, 14) As needs, i.e., as *life* requirements they are the same and form the foundation of a shared human project: to overcome structural obstacles to comprehensive need-satisfaction like exploitation, alienation, and oppression. As concrete universals, the needs and the resources and relationships that satisfy them are different in their details. Groups need to organize their symbolic life in their own language, there are important dietary differences and rituals surrounding dinner which are not just cosmopolitan colour for tourists but essentially meaningful for some groups. Woman and men both have bodies, but their health care needs differ. Most importantly, all historically dominated people need to organise their own social and political and economic lives as social self-conscious, deliberative political agents. Colonialism denied the humanity of colonised people by denying they could not manage their own affairs– that they were still in their “non-age” as J.S. Mill said of Indians. Colonialism denied that humanity, but it could not destroy it– the proof was in the pudding of anti-colonial revolution.

Within this still vital political argument lies a sophisticated philosophical argument. Sekyi-Otu is not claiming that there are universal values up there in the heavens which all human beings *apply* to their own circumstances. Rather, his point is that there is no “up there” from which values can be drawn, but rather that the universal is the particular expressed as the basis of evaluative judgement and criticism. Sekyi-Otu explains that this “metaethical principle” “is neither an abstract ideal nor a foreign import ... it is homemade, a regular product of our domestic discursive industry ... committed to the criticism of unjust acts and relations in everyday life.”(Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 18) This principle is activated every time we resonate with a *fellow suffering human being*: “It is under the aegis of such an everyday universalism that, upon encountering a victim ... of harmful or degrading treatment, an Akan speaker in Ghana voices her outrage with this simple question: ... Is she not also a human being?”(Sekyi-Otu, 2019, 17) His target here is ethnocentric ethical reasoning which says that all standards are local and the human good is the way things are done around *here*.

Drawing on the disappointments of African workers and women with the sorry results of post-colonial society (disappointments which he now shares first hand following his move back to Ghana from Canada) Sekyi-Otu warns (as Fanon did earlier) that these arguments too often are

nothing more than ideological cover to excuse local ruling classes. Again, he pulls no punches when it comes to assigning ultimate responsibility for African problems to the legacy of colonialism. At the same time, a proper valuation of the humanity of African cultures and peoples demands that people criticise their own traditions— or those who would appropriate them for their own political and economic purposes.

The problem with ethnocentrists of any stripe is that they unwittingly repeat the very Eurocentrism they intend to contest. “To abjure universalism *tout court*,” Sekyi-Otu argues, “because of imperialist, Eurocentric, and discriminatory auspices of certain versions—as certain Western conscripts to the anti-imperialist cause in common with certain voices from the global South invite us to do, is the last word of the imperial act.” (Sekyi-Out, 2019, 14) By dividing the world into a Europe that speaks the language of universals, and indigenous cultures and subaltern identities that assert particular values in response, these critics miss the universal logic at the heart of any culture’s values- and thus *undervalue* it in the process whereby they aim to vindicate it. Here his work resonates with the “liberation ethics” of Enrique Dussel, the life-value philosophy of John McMurtry, and my “materialist ethics.” All concur on this essential point: universal values grow up out of and are embedded in the connections between human beings and the earth and each other. Higher level symbolic expressions grow up out of this soil. Different groups express these universal in their own way: they are the originators, but the origination is not out of nothing, but from the common ground of life-conditions and life-requirements.

Sekyi-Otu does not confine his arguments to the western philosophical canon. Exemplifying his own claim that the universal is not an abstract “one apart from many” but is always expressed in concretely individual form, he examines in illuminating detail in how the argument between individualists and communitarians has played out in specifically African thought. As both listener to and participant in this conversation, Sekyi-Otu lets African philosophy speak in its own voice. This approach is a refreshing departure from too many anti-Eurocentric criticisms, which attack Eurocentrism using ideas drawn exclusively from the history of European philosophy and launched exclusively from within the halls of European and North American academia. Of all the chapters in the book I learned most from the fourth, in which Sekyi-Otu masterfully combines sympathetic and charitable reading with uncompromising critique of post-colonial African thought. It has failed to solve the main problem that it has with which it has grappled— reconciling space for individual freedom with the recovery of collectivist traditions attacked by colonialism— because it has operated with reified ideas of both community and individuality. Instead of either opposing a Western individualism to an African collectivism, or, conversely, finding in African traditions analogues of Western (possessive) individualism, African philosophers have to re-read, he argues, their own history to find (hopefully) Africentric but not romanticised alternatives to failed western models of individual and collective life. Again, the universal can only ever be found in particular ways of *life*.

But Sekyi-Otu is a restless thinker. He wants to understand life from the inside as well as the outside. For this knowledge he turns to post-colonial African literature. This literature has long been dismissed, Sekyi-Otu tells us, for its purportedly superficial social realism, the obviousness of its politics, and the mechanical functionalism of its characters. Against this interpretation, Sekyi-Otu reveals the tensions— psychological as well as political, ethical and well as practical, metaphysical as well as mundane- that structure the best of this literature. In Sekyi-Otu’s re-

reading, post-colonial African literature gives voice to the deepest tensions and contradictions of human life. It thus speaks to universal human concerns and ambivalences, but in the particular context of one of the greatest dramas of human liberation yet staged: the struggle to build democratic post-colonial societies. The chapter on post-colonial literature is a fitting conclusion to the book. It exemplifies the ways in which post-colonial African literature exemplifies the ways in which the universal always speaks a particular voice, which is the unifying theme of the five essays.

# Readings: Aaron Bastani: Fully Automated Luxury Communism

Posted on July 18, 2019

Bastani's provocative and hopeful "manifesto" aims to bring the idea of communism into the twenty-first century. Rooting himself in the technotopian side of Marx's economic works, Bastani nevertheless aims to free the idea of communism from its nineteenth century roots by arguing that on-going revolutions in information technology are incompatible with capitalism. Hence we must choose between a future of catastrophic climate change and a massive population rendered surplus by Artificial Intelligence and autonomous robotics or a world with an embarrassment of riches achieved without anyone having to work and enjoyed in democratic peace. It is a seductive argument with much to recommend it. The problem is that Bastani himself seems at times to have become seduced by technologies whose promise seems magical, but like all such seeming, hide a darker side that he does not fully explore.

*Fully Automated Luxury Communism* is the latest in a long line of technotopian promises that the road to social peace, health, and wealth will be paved by machines. These arguments come as much from the right, (for example, Andrew Ure (*The Philosophy of Manufacture*) in the 19th century, Ray Kurzweil (*The Singularity is Near*) in the 21st), as the left (for example, Paul Lafargue (*The Right to be Lazy*) in the 19th century, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (*Inventing the Future*) in the 21st). All share two beliefs: absolute abundance is the material condition of human liberation, and unbridled technological development can make absolute abundance a reality. So long as what Rawls (following Hume) called "the circumstances of justice" obtain, conflict will endure. (*Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition, p.109). They mean that if goods are relatively scarce, then there will have to be rules defining private property and specifying legitimate means of distributing them. Every set of rules will create winners and losers, and so there will always be the potential for social struggle. Unless, that is, there is so much material wealth that one person's appropriating one thing does not deprive anyone else of the ability to obtain the same sort of good with the same (minimal) effort.

Right wing technotopians argue that only unfettered market competition can produce unfettered technological development; their left wing opponents argue that only public ownership, public direction of science, and an end to the anarchy of the market can unlock the full potential of the scientific truth to set us free. Without rejecting the truth-value of science or the good of technology, I think both sides miss a deeper existential problem about the value of human life.

Bastani locates his argument in the soil of Marxism, in particular, the section of *The Grundrisse* in which Marx speculates about the ultimate consequences of the mechanization of production. Setting aside the detailed implications for the labour theory of value, Marx concludes that as capitalism approaches full automation, labour becomes more a supervisory intelligence than a

materially productive force. At the point where “machines can do for us what we formerly did for ourselves,” the historical mission of capitalism— to develop the productive forces to the point where we can free ourselves from the need to work to survive— has been accomplished. (*Marx-Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 28, p.250) The communist revolution liberates the productive forces from the exploitative clutches of the bourgeoisie, and people (following an extended transitional period) live happily ever after in the realm of freedom. Bastani comments: “despite his calls for the working class to liberate itself, Marx did not believe that work makes us free— nor that the society of work expands the scope of human possibility. To the contrary, his view was that communism was only possible when our labour— how we mix our cognitive and physical efforts with the world— becomes a route to self-development rather than a means of survival.”(p.55) The ultimate goal, in Bastani’s view, is a fully automated communist society in which there would no longer be “any distinction between labour and leisure.” (p.54)

Bastani is correct that the Marx of *The Grundrisse* and the three volumes of *Capital* argued that technological development could free us from the need to labour for our own subsistence. However, Marx’s attitude towards labour as the defining form of human activity is more ambiguous. Earlier in his career, Marx did not argue that the path to communism lay through the development of labour saving machinery, but rather through a social revolution in our relationships to each other, nature, and the forces of production. The goal was not emancipation from *labour*, but from exploitation and alienation. This revolution would leave us *free* to work in non-alienated ways. We would emancipate ourselves from wage labour, but not so that we could play all day and night, but in order to experience labour as a *vital human need*. (*Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.274) Labour and leisure (I would argue) remain distinct.

Leisure is also a vital human need, but it is a need to relax, a need for a respite from the struggle to create, to build, to satisfy natural and social needs through the work that we do. This work is valuable not only as an expression of self, but also as proof of our commitment to realise our capacities in ways that contribute to the good of the world we belong to and help to create. Non-alienated labour is this self-expression and an opening and growing beyond narrow ego-centrism. I would argue that this side of Marx expresses a much deeper insight into the conditions of full and meaningful lives than his more technotopian moments. Bastani and other technotopians underestimate the importance of challenging, naturally and socially necessary, but non-alienated work to good human lives. The failure to understand this connection is the existential *aporia* at the heart of their argument in general, and Bastani’s in particular. Before cashing out what I mean more fully, let us look in more detail at his account.

Bastani begins by arguing that the world is threatened by five interrelated crises: climate change, resource scarcity, societal aging, a growing surplus of poor people, and the threat of long term structural unemployment. (pp.22-3) He correctly and convincingly argues that none of these problems is soluble under capitalism: its growth dynamic will pose insuperable problems to the environment, its drive to reduce labour costs will exacerbate structural unemployment, surplus populations, and the capacity of societies to save to support people once they are past working age. Fortunately, developing within capitalist society but whose potential is unrealizable without radical social change are five technological clusters. Together, these new ways of creating goods and services, producing energy, health, material resources, and food will create “extreme supply” of every resource necessary for life. Appropriately utilised, they will free our time from the need



to labour to survive. These clusters are the material conditions of “fully automated luxury communism” The practical movement depends equally upon imagination and political organization.

Much of the lively and well-written text is given over to a somewhat starry-eyed picture of the most advanced technologies in each of the five clusters. If his picture is correct, then we are indeed on the cusp of a third great “disruption” that will change our lives even more radically than the agricultural revolution of the neolithic period and the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The Third Disruption is the Information Revolution. Its scientific core is the discovery that inorganic and organic matter are essentially information and thus subject to conscious re-programming.(pp.37-49). Hence, the ability to process information is, quite literally, the ability to re-program and re-purpose matter to create absolute abundance in everything that our lives require.

In [\*Embodiment and Meaning of Life\*](#), I argued that this technical power, while real, is not necessarily the salvation that transhumanists and other technotopians think. For our entire history, the goods of life have been bound up with our limits and finitude: the value and joy of creation, relationships, and experience depend upon uncertainty of outcome, struggle, trial and error. If we could get anything we wanted just by imagining it, then, I argued, the good of the goods we acquire through effort would be lost. Full automation might produce material abundance, but it could also produce spiritual poverty, robbing life of what makes it worth living: (and presumably, what makes communism worth fighting for): deeper bonds between people, greater opportunity to struggle to create and give shape to our ideas, richer and more enjoyable sensuous experience of the world.

Bastani, like other technotopians, gives not a second’s pause to entertain the worry that by fully automating life we might be fully eliminating what makes life meaningful. Instead he is bewitched by technical details which, for all their roots in natural science conceal, an essentially religious outlook. Cornelius Castoriadis was one of the first to diagnose the technotopian mindset that the development of technology under capitalism as a substitute for religious reverence.(see Giorgio Baruchello, “Contingency, Autonomy, Inanity: Cornelius Castoriadis on Human Mortality,” *Mortals, Money, and Masters of Thought*, pp. 214 for further discussion of this point). That attitude is on full display here: for every social problem, Bastani points to a (literal) *deus ex machina* that will save us, if only it is unshackled from capitalist purposes.

This aspect of his argument is unconvincing. I am not a skeptic and I do not question the extraordinary insights of natural science into the workings of the natural world. Our capacity to intervene in that world through technological systems is breathtaking, and it is an open question, I believe, how far Artificial Intelligence and robotics can advance in simulating the creative capacities long thought (and with good reason) to be the exclusive preserve of human beings. At the same time, as his own example of solving the nineteenth century problem of the accumulation of horse manure in London shows, one technological fix (substituting automobiles for horses) creates new and unforeseen problems (smog, traffic jams, loss of urban space to freeways, etc.). (p.73). The history of technology is a dialectical process of solving one problem and creating new and unforeseen ones. Yet, we are asked to believe, without argument, that new

technologies for power generation, gene editing, food growing, healing and working will escape this dialectic.

This problem is exacerbated when we consider the very deep ethical and political problems that some of these technologies are already causing. The extension of the Green Revolution into Genetically Modified Organisms has created massive problems for farmers, especially in the Global South. Vandana Shiva (*Stolen Harvest*) has examined those problems in depth. The growing ability to consciously reprogram the genetic code of animals and humans extends the instrumental logic of dominating at the heart of capitalist society into the very chemical foundations of life, creating the potential to cure disease, yes, but also to consciously manufacture human beings whose purposes are not their own but their programmers. Hans Jonas was warning about the potential loss of existential freedom even before the technological means existed. yet Bastani pays no heed to the counter-arguments long available.

Well, Bastani might respond, to avoid those problems is exactly the reason why we need radical social change, to ensure that they are used to benefit human beings and not deepen the domination of some over the others. But maybe some technologies (like hydrogen bombs) cannot be freed from the logic of domination. It is true that Mutually Assured Destruction “prevented” nuclear war, but a better way of avoiding nuclear war is for everyone to give up their nuclear weapons. By the same logic, genetic engineering might allow us to cure some diseases, but perhaps a better way would be to address the social causes of ill health (the social determinants of health) while accepting our mortality, meditating on the necessity of death while we are alive, contenting ourselves with a limited share of life, and go gently into that good night happy if we have lived, loved, and created and now make way for a new generation.

That position will sound monstrously stupid to technotopians, but it is the fruit of thousands of years of philosophical and poetic reflection across the world’s major cultures. At no point does Bastani consider that there is another road to communism: the road of sufficiency, self-government, and self-constraint. Everything good for Bastani gets better the more of it that there is. (p. 101) His slogan for the future is “promise everything!” (p.192) That is a child’s way of thinking, and any parent who promises their child everything is setting the child up for a miserable life. The material conditions of life are such that some unforeseen eventuality will spoil disrupt our plans. More importantly, the conditions of meaningful human lives, I think, would be undermined if the promise came true.

Beyond the unpredictability of the long range effects of specific technologies, the most dangerous possible outcome of full automation is loss of the conditions of existential freedom and meaningful activity and relationship. Bastani criticises Greens for their supposed anti-modern, small is beautiful simplicity, but what he presents is shopping mall consumerism for everyone with no limits to appetite.(p.189) Like Kurzweil and Max More on the right, Bastani fails to inquire into whether a life of nothing but play and leisure could be meaningful, and, if not, whether a meaningless life could be bearable. We cannot answer that question by going into the future, so we have to argue on the basis of what we know. I think that the evidence suggests that people [need to be needed](#) and one of the most important ways in which we try to satisfy that need is through work.

Work is alienated under capitalism: *that is the problem*. If it were freed from its alienated conditions then it would (perhaps better said, might) become the vital need that Marx thought it would. After all, his principle of distribution for a communist society was not “take all that you can stuff into your gullet, comrades,” but “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” (*Critique of the Gotha Program*) In other words, contribution is the basis of citizens’ claims on society’s resources (including free time). We contribute through our labour. As Andre Gorz rightly argued, (one of the few in the twentieth century to understand the permanent importance of the problem) we *want* to contribute because it is a crucial way in which we prove ourselves valuable and valued members of a community. (*Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 207)

Socialism: society. Communism: community. These terms highlight the essential importance of human relationships. They are realizable (if at all) only through changed social relationships. If we do not care about each other, then nothing is going to change at a fundamental level. By like reasoning, if we think that technologies that make all life-goods super-abundant will lead to better social relationships, we are being naive. Already, we are discovering that “social media” does not make us more social. Technological advance along current lines could just as easily further silo us in our domiciles ordering super-abundant junk, getting bored with it, then ordering more. He asserts that there would be common purposes, but nothing Bastani argues assuages my fears that this outcome is more likely than anything we might affirm as “communism.” (p.189).

Unless we assume— and it would be both false and self-contradictory to make such an assumption— that no one prior to the latest technological advance ever enjoyed anything— then we must conclude that the good of our lives depends upon the quality of our connections to other people and the natural world. Improving the quality of those relationships is the ethical foundation of socialism and communism. Improving them means making them less exploitative and violent, more mutualistic and loving (in the original sense of erotic: unifying and elevating). Multiplying the opportunities for connection through technological mediations does not make them better. Would you die for everyone one of your so-called Facebook friends, or only that handful with whom you have off-line bonds?

That said, Bastani is certainly not incorrect to argue that technological and scientific advance are rapidly taking us towards a future which will either be socially and naturally catastrophic, or put our understanding and productive power to use ensuring that everyone’s fundamental needs are satisfied in clean, sustainable ways and our life times freed from alienated labour. The capitalist alternative is brazenly spelled out by current bank of England (and former Bank of Canada) chair, Mark Carney. Bastani quotes Carney’s blunt assessment that technological development will “mercilessly destroy” peoples livelihoods.(p.86) Assuming that is true, it is morally insane to continue down that path. Thus, despite my differences with Basatani on the fully automated and luxury sides of his communism, I agree that the solution is not to abandon or impede technology, but to choose more wisely how to integrate it as part of the solution to the problems that threaten us. But I think we can pursue clean energy and non-animal sources of nutritious and delicious food and still reserve the need to work in non-alienated ways, for less time than at present, at forms of labour that are demanding, socially valuable and valued, as proof of our commitment to each other and as a vital source of creativity and meaning in life. At one point, Bastani seems to admit that perhaps not everything will be automated, but the overall thrust of

argument is towards a collapse of the difference between leisure and labour, a collapse I would caution against.(p. 217)

The question then is: how do we get from here (crisis) to there (utopia). The last section of the manifesto concerns concrete political strategies and transitional demands. Here I find myself in closer alignment with Bastani. He wisely rejects nineteenth century models of insurrectionary violence as the model of radical social change in favour of popular-democratic movements that work within, and expand, existing democratic and public institutions.(pp. 185-200) I make similar arguments in favour of democratic forms of social transformation in [\*The Troubles With Democracy\*](#). Like Bastani, I argue that democratic societies, although severely threatened by authoritarian right-wing populism, gross material inequality, exhausted traditional parties, and a wearied cynicism amongst citizens, nevertheless retain the potential to change themselves. What is lacking is a cohesive mass movement, capable of translating itself into effective political power. Once in power, left-wing governments need to be bold using that power to pry the resources that we all need to survive and develop (including the scientific and technological apparatus) from private control and exploitation for profit.

Bastani's transitional demands: for public banking and credit, on-going support for energy transition towards renewables, expanded use of workers' cooperatives and expanded investment in five Universal Basic Services: health, education, housing, info, democracy, legal services (214) are precisely the concrete program that the Left sorely needs. Expanding public goods and services is especially important. It is the democratic alternative to the much more widely debated but never fully implemented Universal Basic Income. What began in the 1980's as a proposal from the left to free time from alienated labour has been increasingly co-opted by the right, who see it as a relatively cheap way of gutting the remainder of the social safety net and intensifying peoples' dependence on commodity markets.

I am less convinced by his argument that re-localising economies can help spur a transition away from capitalism. In any country with wide regional inequalities, the "municipal protectionism" he advocates could easily exacerbate those inequalities.(p. 208) In some contexts (he cites the example of Preston, in Lancashire) having public institutions source goods locally might help. In others, not so much. If you think that the economic differences between Northern and Southern England are extreme, check out the differences between Northern and Southern Canada. All of the major cities in the country are clustered close to the American border. The North is resource rich but marred by the legacy of colonial violence against the indigenous First Nations. Settlements in the North are remote from each other, often unconnected by road, have spotty telecommunications, and lack basic infrastructure. A coordinated national development strategy is needed here, not municipal protectionism, which would do nothing but keep the rich regions rich and the poor regions poor.

A more serious economic issue is his lack of attention to the all-important problem of how economic activity will be co-ordinated in a non-market environment. Perhaps he ignores that question because in conditions of "extreme supply" we will not have to worry about how resources are allocated between different possibilities and distributed to consumers. (or, to be more charitable, because the text is intended as a provocation and spur to action, not a detailed solution of every potential practical problem). Even if the later is the case, I still think it unwise

to not even mention this core issue, especially if it is not mentioned because he assumes that just because we can promise everything we can do everything we promise. There will, I think, always be problems of economic coordination, and people who want the future to be communist, not capitalist, have a great deal of work to do to determine— as far as such matters can be determined as opposed to evolve through trial and error— how those allocative decisions can be made. The best alternative, to my mind, is Pat Devine’s “negotiated coordination” system. (*Democracy and Economic Planning*) Perhaps there is a fruitful dialogue to be had between Bastani’s goals and Devine’s somewhat more prosaic proposals.

No book is ever a complete reality unto itself. The best pose problems that help our thinking past existing roadblocks; to open possibilities not fully seen. Bastani’s manifesto certainly clears the road. It is bold, and because bold, one-sided. But in being one-sided it forces readers to think the other side. No traditional perspective on the left is in such healthy condition that it can afford to turn its back on new thinking. On the other hand, there is also wisdom in experience. The way forward must combine both.

# Readings: Selected Writings: Robert Motherwell

Posted on November 3, 2019

Robert Motherwell was amongst the most important of the “abstract expressionist” artists that revolutionised American painting in the mid-twentieth century. If his paintings are not as famous as those of his contemporaries Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko, his writings are amongst the most insightful and articulate in the field of twentieth century art criticism. He avoids the inscrutable and mostly meaningless jargon of art-school theory and the allusive obscurity that many practicing artists fall into when discussing their own work. The clarity that he is able to attain is perhaps a function of the fact that before he gave himself to painting full-time, he was working on a Ph.D in philosophy at Harvard. (“On not Becoming an Academic,” p. 343) (He agreed to pursue the PhD as a compromise with his father, who frowned on his artistic proclivities. This decision must surely have been the last time that a PhD in philosophy would prove an acceptable compromise with a father who wanted his son to pursue a “useful” profession!). That is not to say that philosophy has not created its own mountain of meaningless obscurities over the centuries. However, at its concise best, philosophy helps focus the mind—and then the pen—on what is essential, and cultivates the ability to say much with little. The latter virtue is on full display here.

The volume collects all of Motherwell’s essays. They were written between 1942 and 1988. With one exception (a long excerpt from a book that he edited on the Dadaists) the essays are quite short. Most are only a few pages, some, just a paragraph, but all get right to the point.

If there is a throughline, a point to which Motherwell returns again and again, it is the meaning of the notorious word “abstract.” At Harvard, Motherwell was influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, from whom he learned that “abstract” is best thought of as verb, not a noun. “To abstract, taken from the Latin, means to “select from,” “to choose from,” “to pick out” from the concrete matrix of reality that which one wants to deal with, excluding the rest. As Whitehead put it somewhere, the function of abstraction is emphasis.” (“On not Becoming an Academic,” p. 344) He returns to the meaning of abstraction again and again because he was trying to help an initially skeptical and hostile public understand what was going on in abstract paintings. Abstract paintings are still engaged with the problem of all art: to interpret and render meaningful the world of human experience. What abstract painting tried to show was that art does not have to copy or illustrate experience in order to present it.

Motherwell argues, convincingly, that the origins of abstract painting (of which the cubists were the real pioneers) in symbolist poetry. “I think the so-called “abstractness” of modern art is not that it is about abstract things, but that it’s an art in the tradition of French Symbolist poetry, which is to say, an art that refuses to spell everything out.” (“Painting as Existence: An Interview With David Sylvester,” p.208). Mallarme, to cite the most important symbolist, was at war with any poetry that merely narrated events in verse. He despised literalism of all sorts and thought that it was the function of poetry to create a poetic world of images, sounds, and meanings. The

cubists transferred this war against literalism to the painted surface. Picasso, Leger, and Braque radicalized tendencies away from illustratively accurate rendering of objects that had been developing since the later part of the nineteenth century. "Cubism began as an analysis of the nature of the aesthetic." The specific problem that they tried to solve was the conflict between "representation and structure," which they resolved in terms of structure in a way which "broke the back .. of centuries of naturalistic representation." ("Preliminary Notice to Kahnweiler's *The Rise of Cubism*," p.69) Their revolutionary achievement was thus to see the problem of painting as how to arrange pigments and shapes on a surface, not how to accurately represent a state of affairs in the world.

Motherwell and his colleagues then radicalized this tendency further by completely abstracting the elements of painting — colour, shape, and their distribution in a two-dimensional field—from the portrayal of concrete and recognizable objects. At the same time, as Motherwell argues at length in the most impassioned and, I think, illuminating essays, abstract expressionist paintings were not a retreat to an aesthetic realm disconnected from reality. "The aesthetic is the *sine qua non* for art: if a work is not aesthetic, it is not art by definition ... the aesthetic is the sensuous aspect of the world ... creating an object for sensing ... is the artist's task." ("Beyond the Aesthetic," p.54, see also "On Modernism, pp. 320-321). At the same time as the work must be aesthetic, first of all for sensing and not for thinking about or instructing, they must also avoid the danger of being merely decorative. The goal of a work of art is never to complete the look of a room, as furniture might, but to present something universal in a unique, individual, and complete and unrepeatable way.

What early publics could not easily understand, Motherwell argues, was that abstract art did not sever the connection between painting and the world of everyday sensuous reality. These artists did not sever that connection but mediated it with their own feelings: they expressed without recourse to recognizable objects, the *feelings* that the experience of the world stirred up in them. All art, if it is art and not mere illustration or decoration, mediates the materially real through the felt inner reality of the artist. "Any work of art, even a "bad" one, is a self-expression; its qualities depend on the qualities of the Self who made it. An unbalanced, incomplete Self makes an ill-proportioned, fragmentary work. One might say that a work of art is the tensions between an artist's aspirations and his limitations." ("Reflections on Painting Now," p. 83). The way that feeling mediates inner and outer reality is, paradoxically, both more and less obvious in the case of abstract expressionism.

It is more obvious, because the paintings do not look like everyday objects; they do not try to copy material things, so if they express anything, it must be the psychic life, the "feelings" as Motherwell likes to say, of the painter. It is less obvious for the same reason. If one refuses images in favour of colour and shapes distributed in a two-dimensional field, one cannot *illustrate* one's feelings. The objective painting is an expression of subjective feelings in tones and hues and shapes which will not mean anything for an audience which has only the painting to go on as evidence of the psychic life of the artist that created it. If one wants meaning, and associates meaning with being able to *immediately* understand, just by looking once, for a moment, what the painting is about, then one will be disappointed— as indeed early audiences were— with abstract art.

But that is not the fault of the art, Motherwell argues, but the conditioning of sensibility to expect the obvious. But there is never obvious in art, even if the painting is a picture of a thing, if it is art there is more than appears on the surface: beyond whatever practical skill it takes to make the work, there must be something of the way the artist uniquely responds to the world that speaks through the work. Rembrandt's self-portraits are thus no less expressions of Rembrandt's personal, individual response to his ageing face than Rothko's ambient canvases are attempts to express his spiritual and emotional response to the world. Paintings are not just pictures.

This fact is best explained by looking at Motherwell's highly insightful discussions of the *work* of making art. Against the naive view that art works are simply attempts to render or explain or copy an experience, Motherwell argues that the work of making art is always a process of working out an initial experience, impression, or feeling. To our rule and metric obsessed age Motherwell reminds that creative work requires mistakes, false starts and pregnant pauses. "Abstract art is not invented or arbitrary at all, but *found* in the sensitive, passionate, and profoundly accurate— in terms of feeling—adjustments that constitute the immediate act of painting which is an effort, often clumsy, sometimes desperate, to cover the abyss, the void that the world sometimes presents, with our love, with our sensuality and passion, our commitment to a mode of expression that becomes ideal." ("Abstract Art and the Real," p. 85) There are no rules save those rules that emerge in the process of working out the idea. "The artist begins with art and through it arrives at reality ... If one were to ask such-and-such a painter what he felt about anything, his just response ... would be to paint it, and in painting it, to find out." ("Art and Reality," p.290). There is no measurable "outcome" that tells the artist when they are finished. The painting is finished, Motherwell notes, when it feels finished. In other words, it requires taste, experience, discernment and judgment, not filling in boxes on a mechanical checklist, to know when to stop. (p.340)

Motherwell also taught art, in a school he ran with other major abstract expressionists, and then at City College. I can imagine his recoil had he been subjected to the tyranny of contemporary "learning outcomes" in his classes. Our contemporary pedagogical police would do well to meditate on the paradox he learned from teaching art, as it applies to the teaching of any creative human practice (of which philosophy and science are also examples). He argued that while art cannot be taught, it can be learned. It cannot be taught, because the student has to have the courage to experiment and go where none have gone before, and thus to allow new rules for art making to emerge through the journey into the unknown: "no one has the right through destructive criticism to undermine another man's life ... Nor does any teacher have the right to enforce his existence on his students. ... I do not allow my students to resemble my modes of expression ... 'Well, perhaps I need more pink,' one of the will say – 'Why don't you try it?– 'But maybe it won't come out right'– "There is no way to know in advance." (A propos Traditional and Modern methods of Teaching Art," p.162, see also "The New York School," p. 97). *This* dialectical back and forth shared journey *to find out where ideas will take us*– is teaching and learning, and anyone who wants to bog it down in set rules and determinate outcomes is something, but *not* a teacher. The teacher is there to frame experience and – sometimes, to suggest ways to avoid going over the cliff, but otherwise to go along as a co-explorer to see where things lead.



The willingness to let things be obscure for an open ended period of time is at the heart of real teaching, and the heart of real artistry. Motherwell's reflections are the strong tonic needed in a moralistic and platitudinous age where both art and politics are bogging down in the simplistic, the sloganeering, the didactic, and the insipid. It is not the job of artists to provide clear moral instruction but to explore the dark, the ambivalent, the ambiguous; it is the job of the artist to confront us with the frightening, the sinful, the profane. There is a political vocation at the heart of art-making, but it is not to toe any party line, but the protest, through creative, inventive, sensuous activity, the limitations that bog down the human mind and heart and hand in a given period. "The function of the artist is to make the actual spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed. It is here that art instructs, if it does at all." ("The Modern Painter's World," p.29) By "spiritual" I think that Motherwell means "felt in its full emotional power; i.e., reality embraced not as a set of relations between things in space time, but as a vital field of emotional forces that move us and that we care about. Likewise, by "possessed" he does not mean owned, but rather sensuously appropriated, in the way that Marx intended in the *1844 Manuscripts*, where he mocks bourgeois theories of property as "stupid" because they assume that appropriation and use requires legal ownership. "The artist stands for the human against society." ("Beyond the Aesthetic," p. 55). The human, the felt, vital, and sensuously real, is never clear and straightforward. We need art to shine light in the void, as Camus said in the *Myth of Sisyphus*, but not such clear light that we see everything everything all at once.

# Lessons From History X: John Dewey: Democracy and Education

Posted on January 26, 2020

I have been teaching Dewey's *Democracy and Education* in my Philosophy of Education course. What a different world Dewey occupied! His American democracy was hopeful, self-confident, brashly repudiating stuffy Anglo-European ways, assured that it had discovered the solution to the opposed problems of suffocating traditions and the chaos of violent revolution. The solution was an institutional order in which intelligent citizens could deliberate together about how to solve structural barriers standing in the way of the realization of the value of democratic equality. A democratic society breaks the aristocratic chains of tradition and hierarchy. Education is, for Dewey, the means by which individuals become alive to their possibilities as self-creative citizens bettering their collective life as they more fully unfold their personalities and capacities.

One hundred years later the American experiment seems to be writhing in its death throes. A ludicrous spectacle of self-righteous theatre plays out in the "world's greatest deliberative body." As I write, American Senators preach political piety: uphold the Constitution! Defend the dignity of the Office of the President! while clearly doing nothing more than jockeying for political advantage. Meanwhile, at a global level, the ruling class gathers in Davos to plot how to increase global inequality still further, and prays to the god Hi-Tech Capitalism to save us from the scourge of the god Hi-Tech Capitalism. Dewey's optimism is impossible to sustain in such circumstances.

Yet the book remains essential reading. It is an excellent way into the deeper problems of pragmatist philosophy and it reminds us of what democratic society could have been (and still might be, if the social structures that impede the realization of its highest values could be overcome). However, the most important reason for reading is because his philosophy of education is a still living corrective to the dominant (and degenerate) trends plaguing educational institutions at all levels.

The critical message for educators at all levels is that we must be wary of and reject the position that education is value programming. We are not here to instill this or that set of beliefs and goals in students; educated people can think for themselves in the fullest sense of the term: explore and understand the demands that being a member of natural and social worlds imposes and be able to respond appropriately and creatively. To be educated is thus to be able to understand the relevant connections between self and world in a given context. The educated person does not have a set of rote responses to situations, they can rather understand what the situation is demanding of them, and respond appropriately, that is, with intelligence.

Hence, any imposition of fixed and measurable "outcomes" is fatal to genuine education. Yet here we are, one hundred years after Dewey criticized them, still having to fight the battle against governments, employers, administrators, and some of our colleagues against "learning outcomes." The only "outcome" of any educational process is, as Dewey says, "learning to

learn:” being able to respond creatively and appropriately to novel situations because you know how to question, observe, infer, interpret, communicate, revise, and act. If education makes us better people, it is because it awakens us to the social nature of individuality, the need to take others into account in our decisions and goals. Education does not ‘pour’ information into a head as if it were an empty vessel (what Freire will later criticise as “banking” education.( p.38).

In keeping with his pragmatist philosophy, Dewey rejects any radical separation between mind and material world, thought and object, theory and practice. Like Marx, he thinks that in reality human beings must prove the truth, and education enables more complex and efficacious modes of interaction between people in social space and between societies and the natural world. Thinking does not lie on the other side of the material world, it is always an intervention in it. To know is to know *how*. To think is to direct our actions intelligently for the sake of realizing appropriate aims. Appropriate aims are neither any old goal we happen to have in mind, nor the goals an oppressive world imposes on us. They are goals the realization of which make valued contributions to the world within which one acts and apart from which one would be nothing.

In its critical relationship with social reality, education is thus a form of intellectual and experiential growth: not just getting “smarter,” but the development of more comprehensive, inclusive, and deeper understanding of what socially valuable actions demands.

That which socially valuable action demands is not— contra administrators, governments, and business leaders in 1916 and 2020— “job ready” graduates, but people who can find their own way towards self-realization. Not only does the former demand reduce education to job training, it treats social self-conscious individuals as programmable functions of economic forces. At the same time, it devalues the present, making it merely “preparation” for the future (of gainful employment). Time spent in the classroom, or reading, or studying, or writing has no value in itself, but only for the future (monetary) reward it will bring. Life is thus always led in the future tense: the student is encouraged to think of what their education will one day allow them to do. The process of becoming educated- a process that is all-pervasive and life-long, according to Dewey— is reduced to class time, and class time a burden that must be borne for the sake of the future.

Dewey argues against this rigid separation of the future and present and shows how they are mediated by our activity. Education is not a separate realm, a period of apprenticeship before we get to the main event of living. It *is* living: with reflection, intelligence, responsiveness, and responsible engagement with the multiple dimensions of natural and social reality. The future is not a thing we will someday attain. It is the on-going unfolding of the consequences of our activity. If we sacrifice the present to a reified conception of the future, we cheapen the value of that which we are doing right now. If we want to live intelligently, every moment of activity should be fully engaging of our attention.

This conception of education as learning how to be fully engaged and intelligently active has political significance. On the one hand, people who are fully engaged as social self-conscious subjects will take their responsibilities as citizens seriously. They will not be spectators but agents willing and capable of participating in the public affairs that shape their individual lives.

On the other hand, educated people will not tolerate the entrenched class divisions that marked pre-modern societies but demand and find ways to achieve wider and deeper equality between citizens. A well-funded public education system was the most important social institution for promoting equality, according to Dewey, because it created encounters between individuals of different classes in a shared space where wealth distinctions would not matter. Children who encountered each other as co-learners in a space where thinking and not money mattered would go on to become co-citizens who prized democratic equality and understood social progress as the breaking down of hierarchical barriers to self-realization and valued contribution.

Dewey's political arguments sound naive today, and they were naive even in the more hopeful age in which he wrote them. Not only were they naive, they were blind to the structural impediments to the realization of the values that defined his conception of democratic education. He does criticise lingering aristocratic attitudes (philosophy for the rich, welding classes for the workers) and attributes them to the persistence of class difference. But he has no explanation of the causes of the persistence of class structure. More glaringly, he had little to say about racist structures in American society, said almost nothing about the status of women in education, and regarded Native Americans as an anachronistic hold-over from human pre-history fated to be assimilated.

Nevertheless, I think that these problems are problems of consistency of application of the values of democratic education, and not the values themselves. In order to correct value problems, we need different values. In order to correct problems of application, we need to demand structural changes to social institutions so that the values can be comprehensively realized. In the case of Dewey's philosophy of education, the problem is not the values but the limitations of his social criticism. In other words, Dewey fails to see that his values could only be fully realized in a society that had overcome the structural barriers that capitalism places in the way of the full and free realization of human creative capacities. He does not see, therefore, the contradiction between democracy— a society that “repudiates the principle of external authority”— and capitalism— a society that subordinates human activity to the external authority of capital accumulation.(p.238) If that contradiction were resolved in favour of democratic society, then an education system could be built that is also free from service to external authorities and the goal of cultivating social self-conscious agency be fully realized.

In short, education for Dewey is a practice of cognitive freedom which produces people who can practice cognitive freedom in all of their relationships with self, world, and others. Cognitive freedom does not mean that teachers teach whatever they want to students who then go on to think whatever they want. On the contrary, freedom and constraint have to be thought together: teaching as a practice of cognitive freedom means finding ways to engage students in the subject-matter so that they learn how to work through the problems that it sets on their own. Education is not the assimilation of facts or rules to follow, but learning how to think through and respond to different sorts of problems. The cognitively free person, therefore, is the one who knows how to connect with and respond to the novel problems a dynamic world throws up.

Freedom is not abstract autonomy: the individual is the social being for Dewey as much as for Marx. Few problems can be solved by individual effort alone. Cognitively free individuals think for themselves, but not alone: they are also free in the sense of being free from the pernicious

effects of treating the mind as abstract ego set against the world of things and other people. Education, he concludes, “is not means to living” but is “identical with the operation of living [with the] process of living itself.” (240) As such, it is “ultimately a moral question [which concerns] the richness of experience.” (248)

If we allow education to be reduced to “preparation” for the so-called “real world,” we thus not only commit the category mistake of treating it as something separate from intelligent living, we also fail in our duty to students (and everyone, including ourselves, as members of a democratic society). Dewey concludes that education is ultimately a moral problem. Moral problems in a democratic society are not solved by imposing the external authority of abstract rules of right or wrong on ourselves, but by knowing how to respond to and live with others in the natural and social worlds. The person who can think for themselves, therefore, is not the person who thinks only of their own interests, but how their interest fit with the interests of others and the demands and constraints the natural and social worlds impose as frames on our self-activity. “There is an old saying that it is not enough for a man to be good: he must be good for something. The something for which a man must be good is capacity to live as a social member so that what he gets from living with others balances with what he contributes.” (p.359) The solution to the apparent contradiction between self and worlds is to understand activity as contribution to the good of those worlds: they are not realities apart, but the enabling contexts of our own activity.

## Lessons From History IX: Frances Fox Piven: “Globalizing Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics” (Socialist Register, 1995)

Posted on August 5, 2019

Perhaps the biggest political mistake that Marx made was his prediction (in *The Communist Manifesto*) that capitalist development would progressively simplify social identities. He believed that societies would become more homogeneous as modernizing forces destroyed “ancient prejudices,” that class structure would become increasingly polarized, and that class consciousness would subsume other forms of social identity as the unique basis of political struggle. On all counts, the world has proven him wrong. There is a global capitalist market and it has homogenized societies in crucially important dimensions of economic life, but in a myriad of other ways it has created the conditions for cultural and political pluralism.

As ancient forms of life are threatened by capitalist modernization, indigenous groups have fought for their survival. As people have been displaced from their homelands, they have brought their cuisines, their music, their stories, and their cultural mores to their new homes. These form the basis of organic solidarity amongst immigrant communities, but also function as elements of a vibrant, exciting, and attractive (even if commodified) urban life. Multiculturalism, not ethnic uniformity, is the norm almost everywhere.

Within liberal societies, civil and political rights pried open the suffocating moralism of more organic forms of traditional society and created social space for minority sexualities, new forms of familial and romantic relationship, atheism, free thinking, non-conforming “experiments in living” (J.S. Mill), and unbridled artistic exploration.

The homogenizing forces Marx identified were and are real. What he did not understand (because he did not really pay attention to inner, psychic-affective life) was the strength of people’s allegiance to cultural identity, the way struggles for self-assertion and self-definition would involve non-class demands, and the creativity of human beings when given the space to invent subcultures whose protection assumes paramount political importance for their members. The working class has not disappeared—on the contrary. But class consciousness has not become the dominant form of political identity uniting the immense majority against a fractional ruling class.

On the one hand, this unexpected result is due to the fact that the working class, globally, and within nations, has become much more internally complex than Marx could have imagined, given the centralizing tendencies of industrialization which formed his experiential horizon. This internal complexity has posed organizational problems that neither unions nor socialist parties have been able to solve. On the other hand, the failures of the labour and socialist movement to adequately comprehend and respond to problems experienced concretely by colonized indigenous populations, women, racialised peoples, sexual and gender minorities, immigrants,

and any sub-group experiencing demonization, exclusion, and violence meant that these groups had to organise separately from unions and socialist parties.

This background is necessary to understand the emergence and importance (and, ultimately, the limitations) of identity politics. Their centripetal political force has (and not without reason) proven worrisome to those of us committed to universalist normative and political values. At the same time, these concerns have not attenuated the appeal of identity politics to oppressed groups. Perhaps, then, universalists are wrong to be worried?

I do not agree that there is nothing worrisome in some versions of identity politics. As is often the case, a generic name (“identity politics”) masks an internal complexity that critics need to tease out and understand if they are to criticise effectively the right problems. Piven’s article, written in 1995 brings this complexity to light.

Piven begins by acknowledging the failure of Marx’s predictions about the effects of capitalist modernity: “Capitalism has indeed penetrated societies and spanned the globe. In this sense, it is homogenizing social life. But instead of universalizing popular politics, capitalist expansion is weakening and conceivably destroying working class politics.” (102) Already in 1995 what we now call “neo-liberalism” was undermining the power of unions and working class political parties as it reconfigured the competitive dynamics of global capitalism. Today, we appear to be in a period of nationalist retrenchment directed against the movement towards freer trade that characterised the 1990s (the World Trade Organization was formed in 1995, the same year as her article was published). A newly assertive nationalism has not revived organized labour’s fortunes. What it has done is give a new lease on life to the most dangerous aspect of identity politics: xenophobic conflict between nations led by authoritarian leaders who see the world in terms of pure ethnic types locked into life or death struggles. Trump is a paradigm case, but the problem is not confined to the Global North. Modi’s fundamentalist Hinduism in India is as dangerous to India’s Muslims as Trump’s racism is to Latin American migrants.

Piven is aware of the dangers. Her most critical remarks are reserved for nationalist movements which, on the one hand, played a vital role against imperialism, but also gave rise to the most violent and destructive warfare human beings have witnessed: “Identity politics fosters lateral cleavages which are unlikely to reflect fundamental conflicts over social power and resources ... This fatal flaw at the very heart of popular politics based on identity is regularly exploited by elites. We can see it dramatically, for example, in the genocidal tribal massacres in Rwanda...” (104-5) Once identity is constructed around a shared ethnic identity, elites encourage everyone to believe that they have to stick with their brothers and sisters come what may. The “we” depends upon the construction of a threatening “they.” The evidence for the madness of these forms of politicised identification is all around us, from the grim persistence of allied and German soldiers to keep killing each other in the trenches of WWI to the racist motivations behind the El Paso mass murderer today. What Piven wrote in 1995 remains sadly true: “The contemporary world seems to be engulfed by particularistic conflicts of rising intensity and destructiveness in a pattern reminiscent of the rising tide of nationalist furies of the late 19th c.”(108)

Right wing nationalism is identity politics at its most destructive. At the same time as she exposes the dark side of ethnic identity movements, Piven is careful to try to understand the

reasons why people mobilise around particular identities. She argues that the roots of identity politics lie in human psychology, and in particular, the individual need to feel like a secure member of a sheltering group. There are not many Esperanto speakers, because it is not organically connected to a way of life that people feel intimately and intensely connected. If it is the case that identity politics follows from an associative need for belonging, then they are not, at root, pathological, but necessary: "Identity politics is almost certainly inevitable, because it is a way of thinking that reflects something very elemental about human experience ... rooted quite simply in attachments to the group, attachments that are common to humankind, and that probably reflect primordial needs that are satisfied by the group, for material survival in a predatory world." (103) If this claim is true, it does not follow that humans are incapable of universal identification, but that the ways we can construct shared identities are multiple.

Islam and Christianity, for example, each link over a billion people who belong to vastly different cultures. Feminism is rooted in the shared experience of women in differently organized patriarchal societies. These are all forms of universal identification: belonging based on identification with a property shared by a set of particular people. If, for example, Indonesians and Pakistani's can identify as "Muslim," then their identities are not shaped by immediately local contexts. This fact proves that it is possible (as Norman Geras demonstrates in a brilliant critique of Rorty's ethnocentrism in *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*) to extend our identifications to more and more universal forms: from one's family, clan, or tribe, all the way up to "humanity." All politics, we can see, is in a sense identity politics, because all politics is rooted in *identification* with a set of principles, values, and goals. The problem is not therefore to eliminate identity politics, but rather to embed different struggles in a shared normative and programmatic framework.

Once we root identity politics in a universally *human* capacity to identify with ways of life that are valued for the needs that they satisfy, we are in a better position to understand the reasons why social movements continue to generate forms of politics rooted in the shared experiences of definite groups. Modern societies are pluralistic, and part of pluralism is conservative opposition to the self-assertion of historically oppressed groups. People's needs are universal, but concretely shaped by unique historical structures of experience. Whites and blacks both need education, and in the same subjects, but historically whites have deprived blacks of complete education and justified this deprivation on the basis of racist claims about black's (lack of) intelligence. Hence black people face a history of exclusion from education that white people have not experienced (or experienced but not for the same reason). Hence blacks had to contend with racist lies in ways that whites never had to, and found themselves having to organize on their own. So long as there are attacks on defined groups of people, justified by demonizing some aspects of their identity, the demonized group will have to fight back, and part of the fight back will involve affirming what their enemies demonize.

Piven understands and explains the progressive implications of these forms of identity politics. "Identity politics can also be a potentially liberating force ... it may well be that identity politics is especially necessary to lower status peoples, to those who are more insecure, and who are more likely to be deprived of recognition" (106) I probably would not have agreed with her in 1995, but I have come to see that the struggles of subaltern groups to protect and freely express their identity are not only inevitable and necessary, but also good: the concrete reality of



pluralism and free self-creation that the modern separation of morality from legality has made possible. Marx, as I noted above, completely failed to see this side of modernity. Hence, he had little of substance to say about the value of overcoming traditional social roles. He assumed that the socialist revolution would create the conditions for new forms of social relationship, but failed to see how modernization itself created room for valuable role transformation within liberal-capitalist society.

The problem with identity politics of this progressive sort is not that it insists that every group speak in its own voice. Rather, it is that, all too often, instead of seeking out the depth structural grounds of all different forms of oppression and organizing together to change them, practitioners of identity politics turn on other identities as the ultimate problem: white privilege as the cause of racism, male privilege of sexism, and thus white or men in the abstract as the enemy. But “white” and “black,” “men” and “women” are abstractions which, while they do denote social realities, also mask a great deal of variation, different degrees of power, and ideological and ethical dispositions. One cannot infer anything about any individual’s actual politics simply by reference to some marker of identity.

One could make the same argument about class membership. If the scourge of right-wing nationalism and populism teaches us anything, it is that class consciousness is not mechanically produced by social crisis. Workers can turn themselves into a reactionary movement against contrived foreign threats just as much as they can turn to each other as a force of fundamental social transformation. Again, Piven was prescient when she argued that “The imagery which gave the working class its elan, that the future belonged to the workers, and that workers acted for all mankind, has collapsed. The universalising myth now belongs to a capitalist class on the move.” (110). Except that the capitalist class is really only another particular interest. To protect its guiding interest: exploitation of the natural world and human labour for profit, it is almost everywhere today drawing on the most dangerous psycho-social demands for exclusionary uniformity. The task of everyone who can see the danger is not to retreat to more particular identities, but to recover and build human solidarity on a real universal basis.

The universal basis of identification that we need to ensure actual social progress is deeper than class, gender, ethnic, racial, or sexual identity. It too has been demonized by (as we would have said in 1995), “postmodern” critics. That criticism notwithstanding, it is the only identity that necessarily embraces all that others: humanity. As embodied, social self-conscious beings, all humans share natural and social life-interests. These life-interests bind us to nature, as the ultimate source of the resources that we need to survive, and society, as the institutional context of fully human (socially self-conscious, creative) life. When the values and institutions of society contradict those life-interests, they need to be changed, in the name of better satisfying the life-interest of everyone. If some groups stand opposed to those life-interests, then *they* are the problem, because their particular interests threaten the interests of the whole.

Humans do not speak “human,” of course. They speak in different voices, but unless they are alive, they cannot make any sound whatsoever. Different problems require different sorts of solutions, but nothing is a progressive solution that does not increase the “inclusive coherence” (John McMurtry) of social life. That means, concretely, that society must be organized so that everyone’s basic needs are comprehensively satisfied *so that* we can differentiate ourselves in

ways that are personally satisfying, socially valuable, and actually valued. Particular identities are real, but not ultimately real: they grow up from the soil of life-productive labour and can change as social life changes. Identities that are threatened and oppressed in given periods can and should protect themselves, but for the sake of an open and freer future. The socially self-creative capacities of human beings cannot be exhausted or confined within any given shape of identity.

# Interventions



# Plague, Politics, Panic

Posted on March 13, 2020

Given the rapidity with which the unexpected happens in life, one would hope that our social institutions would not be continually caught off guard. Every year the flu pandemic sweeps across the world; the SARS crisis is not much more than a decade old; widespread threats to public health are real and political authorities must know, in the abstract, that our health institutions could be called upon to have to deal at a moment's notice with large scale acute illness. No one can predict that a novel disease will emerge at any particular time, but no public authority can be excused or forgiven for not being generally prepared when called upon to act.

Panic is a function of not being prepared, and many of the blanket bans being imposed on movement in wake of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic have the smell of panic about them. That judgement is not my scientifically uninformed position, but the conclusion of Canada's Chief medical officer of Health [Theresa Tam](#). In response to Trump's ban on all European travel to the US, she insisted that focused quarantines based on precise local knowledge are the best way to combat the spread of the virus: "You can't sort of blanket a whole geographic area without really paying attention to the details on the ground," she said. "The key is at the local level, they need to understand the epidemiological situation, if you like, and then act according to that data." This principle would certainly justify banning large gatherings of people in areas where the virus is active and spreading, but would speak against complete shutdowns such as the one Trump just imposed.

Of course, the explanation for Trump's ban lies not in science but in politics. His attempt to label the virus "foreign," while scientifically nonsensical, makes perfect sense to his one-track political mind. If blame for the virus can be projected onto China, Europe, and international trade, then the woeful state of public health in the US can be ignored (along with his own gross ignorance and stupidity). His motives are easy to understand, as are the self-undermining implications of the decision.

Designed to ease panic, this move and others like it are sure to increase it. The problem with panic is that it is self-ramifying and forces even the most rational-minded to quickly give in to it. In a stampede, the correct thing to do is for everyone to stop. The person who stands their ground and waves their arms shouting "Stop, stop!" is doing the rational thing. Nevertheless, they will be run down by the people stampeding, because even if they want to stop, they will be pushed by those behind who cannot hear the rational person's warning. I have no reason at present to stock up on supplies, but if I see market shelves emptying, I have no choice but to rush to the store, and then my neighbour has to follow suit. Each concession to panic feeds more panic: the rational becomes irrational and the irrational rational.

The crisis does indeed emphasise the truth of the title of William Connolly's book *The Fragility of Things*. But it also emphasises, in the way that crises tend to do, our essentially social nature. Every crisis is a test of the social institutions we have built: are they capable of co-ordinating action in a way that solves the crisis, or are they found wanting? If they are found wanting, what

limitations were exposed, and if they worked, what strengths? Right now, it would appear that those countries that were able to rapidly coordinate a response through centralized public health care systems are doing a better job containing the outbreak than those— the United States- with patchwork private systems. The lesson is that social institutions ought to promote the shared life-interests of citizens, not safeguard the pecuniary interests of the wealthy. This crisis will not be solved by prayer, magic, or technology, but by people working together in shared commitment to collective and individual well-being.

Those with the resources will try to absent themselves from the crisis. There are stories of the [super rich fleeing to bunkers](#). Let them flee: they cannot escape the decisions that the rest of us take. Either we solve the problem collectively, or they will have to stay in their holes forever. Their flight just shows what selfish, cowardly free-riders they are. Let us remember this fact when they eventually crawl out like the rats they are: their wealth comes from collective labour, and it is time to take it back to fund the health services we all depend upon but which their preferred tax policies have hollowed out, even in the world's wealthiest countries.

*Things Fall Apart*, says the title of Chinua Achebe's tragic story of colonialism. But when they fall apart they can also be rebuilt, and better, by those who learn the lessons. Marxism may not, as [Frida Kahlo](#) thought, heal the sick, but coordinated social investment in public institutions which recognise and respond to our shared needs is the foundation of any sane society. If more people raise their hands and say "Stop, Stop" the stampede to gut our life-protective infrastructure may yet be halted.

# Blues for Coronavirus-19

Posted on March 18, 2020

...it's like when I am flying, and it hits me, I am *flying*, 10 000 meters above the Atlantic, and I am overwhelmed by a sense of vulnerability ... or like after a loved one has died, and I am going about my day, when the feeling of their total absence forever hits me, and the weight of the incomprehensibility of that presses hard on my chest ... or like a dream, and I wake up: "Thank Christ that was just a dream," but it isn't, and as that truth dawns going on with the day seems pointless ... or like I am standing beside myself, reassuring myself that the worst might yet be avoided, and watching my thoughts run so far off in the opposite direction, ... or like *deja vu*, when the worst that I could imagine becomes real, hourly, ... or like terror and reason are two physical things, lodged contiguously in my brain, and the one pressing, pressing, pressing, and the other trying to keep it confined, but the tension keeps rising: when should I give in?

And I feel like Tantalus, and I feel that others feel like Tantalus, and all of us, like the galaxies, are speeding away from each other, and we are reaching out, our arms stretching and stretching, but we are being pulled away faster and faster, voices of reason/unreason relentlessly urging the distance to grow, and no one can say how it will stop, or how the most vital bonds will not soon be snapped.

In the void, darker thoughts must grow: if we can be kept alive in prison, why would we ever be let out? Worse, maybe no one will ask to be let out, because no one will ask: when does the cure become worse than the disease?

The people who have ruined the world now present themselves as its saviours, and people want salvation, they want a security that mortals cannot have, and so they comply rather than demand change. Silently, people do as they are told by the people who said: "You can eat comparative advantage and tertiary industries. We have ships and planes and trucks. We have the internet. Free people don't build things: the world is liquid, de-materialized, digitized, baby, so why grow food nearby, or worry about real wages, or safety nets, or public savings, or public health care, or pensions, or elder care, or .... anything? Magic will take care of it: the market, technology, and trucks. Those trucks that will soon be the only things crossing our bridge. I will look to the west and see them from my balcony, crawling towards Customs, while I stand, trapped, last beer in my hand. I will shout to my neighbors: "How is the lockdown economy working for you?" But they will be too far away to hear.



## Notes From Exile 1: Back to the Magic Mountain

Posted on April 3, 2020



Empty Ambassador Bridge (North America's Busiest Commercial Border Crossing), Windsor-Detroit, March 31, 2020

Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* has perhaps never been as relevant a cautionary tale as it is right now, and not because there are analogies to be drawn between tuberculosis and Covid-19. The book is not really about tuberculosis, but the way in which human character is destroyed by addiction to comfortable routine and superficial luxury. There is a particularly telling scene towards the end of the book. Hans, who initially planned to visit his cousin in the sanitarium for a few weeks but ends up being admitted, gradually loses any desire to leave. He confides in Settembrini, a humanist at war with the lulling and dulling effects of the paradoxical hedonism of the institution (today it is a luxury hotel in Davos, Switzerland). Hans admits that he has wonderfully lost all sense of time and concern for the outside world. Settembrini explodes and admonishes him with the words (I am working from memory: "No! No! You cannot let go of the reins like that." Humanity, Settembrini implies, requires the feeling of tension between self and world, requires the need to feel compelled to act. The richly appointed sanitarium takes care of every need and scripts every moment of life: within its walls no one need do anything: the "resting" cure for tuberculosis was meant literally. Settembrini refuses to be seduced, even though it ultimately costs him his life.

Amongst the many aspects of the current crisis that worry me, the long-term implications on people whose income is not (yet) affected by the pandemic "letting go of the reins" and adapting to 'physical' (nee, social) distancing is paramount. I am not questioning the need to stay in doors for the moment: the rapidity with which the virus spreads if no distancing precautions are taken, and the threat it poses, especially to the elderly or immuno-compromised, is proven all too starkly by the statistics from countries where early measures to stop the spread were not taken. However, philosophy is useless if it must be silent in times of crisis: anything of human value is most valuable in a crisis. The human value of philosophy is its capacity to expose hidden presuppositions, uncover

unapparent contradictions, and warn of unanticipated outcomes of ways of thinking and acting which sell themselves as normal.

These times are anything but normal, but people are highly adaptable (more adaptable than revolutionary, I think. I will return to this point below). How long will it take before, like Hans, those of us who can afford to stay inside start to lose the desire to gather in public space? How long before we start to content ourselves with nothing but two-dimensional (sound and sight) virtual relationships and stop feeling the need to do the things we used to do in shared physical space? How long before a critical mass of people treat self-isolation as the new normal? Adaptation means that we conform ourselves and expectations to a changed environment. Right now, those adaptations are forced on us by a compelling epidemiological necessity, exacerbated by fear, fed by frankly lurid and sensationalist journalism.

[Let us pause here for a moment to comment on the role of the media. Do we really need real time case and death counts? Do we really need Chris Cuomo's insipid, saccharine, self-absorbed video record of his plague year? But more seriously, we need to start critically exposing deep problems with media reporting. The biggest problem is the aggregated way in which the numbers are reported. If one does not pay very close attention, one would think that over one million people actually have the virus. In fact, over one million people have contracted it, and most recover. But the number of recovered victims is not subtracted from the total number of victims, which gives the impression that the numbers continue to rise without anyone ever getting over the disease: once a victim, always a victim].

To convey an accurate picture of the pandemic, the numbers need to be analysed into more informative units: total number of cases minus those who have recovered, percentages of people who experience mild, medium, or severe symptoms, the number of people who have died who had underlying conditions as opposed to those for whom Covid-19 was the unique cause of death. Too many people in the media have positioned themselves (as they tend to do in every sort of crisis these days) as crusading saviours of humanity. However, if useful numbers are not reported, (and if it treats [probabilistic mathematical models](#) as "SCIENTIFIC TRUTH!!", without noting that models are rooted in dubitable and corrigible assumptions), media figures do more to spread fear than insight. Fear is a rational response to an immediate threat. However, I worry that a threat like Covid-19, unseeable to the naked eye, could last long enough that fear becomes our normal disposition to the other people and the outside world. If that were to happen, then not only would self-isolation and virtual contact become normalized, it would become *preferable* to risky encounters in shared physical-social space, just as the all-embracing luxury and total programming of lifetime on the "magic mountain" became preferable to the "guests" of the sanitarium. One never can really know whether Hans had become infected with tuberculosis or not. The medical director claimed that he had, but he was equal parts medical doctor and Maitre D'Hotel. The scariest thing is not that commerce and medicine coincided, but that Hans never shows the least concern with whether he had or had not contracted a potentially fatal illness: he just wanted a reason to stay. Another way of expressing this fear is that people will internalise the dominant narrative being spun by politicians: our behaviour is now responsible for the solution to the crisis. This line is a guilt trip limned by police state possibilities that masks where the ultimate social responsibility lies: decades of neo-liberal cutbacks to the public services that John McMurtry calls the "social immune system." (The Cancer Stage of Capitalism, 2nd edition, pp. 147-181) McMurtry's understanding of the social immune system has never been more relevant. Public health institutions are central, but the



social immune system goes beyond health care in the narrow sense to include all institutions that ensure comprehensive need-satisfaction, including the political institutions which are supposed to—in a democratic society—allow citizens to deliberate and decide as a collective whole how their society’s resources and wealth can best be employed to that end.

In a society like Canada, the social immune system should be healthy enough to respond to an unexpected crisis caused by a virus that is highly contagious but not acute or fatal for most sufferers. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, our capacity to respond has been compromised by all-party attacks on health care and other social immune system institutions. Thus, we are left with moralistic admonishing to stay indoors and threats of police repression if we refuse to comply.

I am not arguing that we should be cavalier about the threat the virus poses, or adopt a right-wing libertarian selfishness and simply disobey the calls for physical distancing. My point, rather, is to set this crisis in social, political, and economic context: over the past forty years of attacks on public spending on public goods and democratic government, the social immune system institutions we need right now to overcome this pandemic are in crisis. *This* crisis has not been caused by Covid-19, but by politicians, under pressure from capitalist market forces, and unthinkingly doing what they were told by right-wing think tanks and academic economists, deciding to defund crucial, life-serving and saving institutions for the sake of private capital.

Now these same politicians appear in their priest robes to ask everyone to forget their sermons on austerity. Now they sing a new song unto the Lord: the gospel of open-ended self-sacrifice. In Canada, of course, the sermons are sanctimonious and communitarian, but elsewhere the darker side of a looming reality is not concealed. In Hungary, the pandemic has given the totalitarian racist Viktor Orban the final excuse he has needed to complete the gutting of Hungarian democracy. Internationally, the Trump regime continues its embargoes against Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela, cutting off medical supplies at a time of acute crisis. Where is the genocide industry now, Iranians must be asking, and why is it so silent about American crimes against humanity which they would be railing against were it the Iranians depriving their own citizens of medical care? These problems are cautionary notes which we best heed: the last time the world faced a social and economic crisis this severe, the “solution” was global fascism and the Second World War.

Which brings me back to my starting point. Moments of crisis are no times to let our critical faculties slumber. They are no time to be terrified into silence and inaction. Being born comes with one guarantee: we will all die. No government can secure us permanently against all forms of harm: we have to continue to preserve the felt need and drive to accept the risks of real life. We have to have the courage of teasing out hidden agendas and long term dangers: Obama did not repeal the Patriot Act or close Guantanamo: loss of democratic freedoms tend to be permanent. People adapt, as I said, to “new normals” and carry on as if nothing has been lost.

I think that the responsible decision at the moment is to physically distance ourselves. However, this decision must be freely taken, out of commitment to one another as vulnerable mortal beings. It should not be a mute reaction to commands from politicians. And it must be accompanied by demands for more nuanced, creative, flexible, and adaptive solutions to the immediate health crisis. An open-ended, blanket ban on public life-activity has to soon become intolerable. If Covid-19 is now part of the web of life, then we will have to live with it, as we do with thousands of other (in many cases, much more deadly) viruses. No politician can protect against every threat, and we have

to prevent their crusading language from preventing us from demanding better solutions than “stay inside forever,” until the last string of Covid-19 RNA has been eradicated.

We have to treat this problem as a problem of adaptation on the one hand, and the need for profound social and economic change on the other. If we start to demand total security, we will never touch each other again. Instead, we have to emerge with a clear understanding of the social, political, and economic dimensions of this crisis. And we need to organize ourselves to demand and create concrete change. The pandemic has exposed the two key weaknesses of capitalist globalization: it makes local populations dependent upon global supply chains that are extremely sensitive to spatial disruption, and there are no effective, legitimate, and democratic international institutions capable of coordinating responses across borders. The rapidity with which nation states reverted to older forms of closed sovereignty was breathtaking.

Breathtaking, but also instructive. No one should fetishize the nation state, but it remains the dominant form of political society and, when it chooses to, it can marshal the power to override capitalist market forces. The dependence of human life on market forces has been suspended in large parts of the world during this crisis. The state has effectively taken over the direction of economic activity and positioned itself as the guarantor of people’s income. We have been re-acquainted with a truth that capitalism works hard to suppress: our lives depend upon collective labour and nature, not market forces. This truth has to become the basis for post-pandemic reconstruction.

As powerful as capital is, it has proven no match for the virus, on the one hand, and state power, on the other. The danger, of course, is that the state is currently acting under emergency powers, but will revert to its standard function of enframing and protecting capital, *if we let it*. The alternative is to use this crisis as a basis of legitimacy for the state—under the control of democratic political forces acting in our shared life-interest—to assume control over the productive basis of society and re-orient production to serving life-needs. Nationalization can prefigure democratic socialization, and democratic socialization can re-focus economic life on collective work to provide each and all that which we really need, and freeing our time for the—real-life, multidimensional—experiences, actions, and interactions that make life worth fighting for, protecting, and living.

# Notes From Exile 2: Exploiting the Crisis

Posted on [April 16, 2020](#)

In my previous post, I argued that while it would appear that social responsibility leaves no other option *at the moment* than to practice physical distancing, the depth of the crisis and the need to hold politicians to account for past decisions also requires us to keep our critical faculties engaged. We should make it clear that physical distancing is a choice that we make *because we care about each other*, not because we accept that politicians have a right to totally command our lives. A rational evaluation of the evidence suggests that if left unchecked, Covid-19 spreads rapidly and exacts a huge toll on elderly and impoverished people. Thus, we need to take the advice of public health officials seriously. At the same time, we also have to insist on democratic freedoms and the social power to ultimately decide how we will live: we are not ruled by doctors, and we elect politicians. To be sure, democracies can become materially irrational and undermine themselves, (hence the need to continue the physical distancing for the time being), but they are also inconsistent with passive citizens who simply do what they are told without question.

Still, in the absence of a fully worked out alternative strategy to contain the spread of the virus, criticism, for the time being, is limited to questioning the past, present, and future of the official response. The first set of questions should be directed to the past: how have decades of austerity undermined or compromised public health institutions and exacerbated the crisis? I discussed this issue in my previous post and there is an abundance of [empirical work](#) circulating that fills in the details.

Let us therefore focus on the present and the future. The key question for the present is: how might the politicians whose policies have caused the social and economic crisis exploit the situation to reinforce rather than overcome those degenerate trends? The answer is that the need for extraordinary responses to Covid-19 will be seized upon as reasons for more austerity, for making workers pay, and for continuing the assault upon those elements of existing public institutions that satisfy real needs and enable our life-capacities. The details will vary between different countries and regions. I will focus on the Canadian context.

This week, the government of Jason Kenney in Alberta made a decision that is a paradigm example of how governments might exploit the danger. Kenney's Education Minister, Adriana LaGrange announced that \$128-million of K-12 education funding would be cut and "redirected" to the province's COVID-19 response. [Ms. LaGrange said](#) "COVID-19 has changed both how we provide student learning, and the operational needs of the education system." The now unemployed educational workers have been told to seek emergency benefits from the federal government.

Lagrange's announcement is worrisome beyond its Alberta context, and it contains in embryo all the political dangers of the present moment. First, it continues the decades long trend of counter-posing different dimensions of human need against each other. The tactic is to make different elements of the public fight each other for ever more scarce resources, taking the focus off of the

business-government austerity agenda. Kenney's announcement is not the first time health and education have been put in competition with each other. Covid-19 seems to provide a knock-down argument against criticism: teachers are not in the classroom, so it only makes sense to redirect funds to containment strategies.

The necessary response to this argument has to be that human needs form an organic whole and a democratic society must allocate appropriate resources to satisfy them all as its fundamental goal. "Health" in the abstract is not opposed to "education" in the abstract; "physical" needs cannot be opposed in general to "spiritual" needs. Human beings are embodied, social-self-conscious beings. Good lives cannot be understood like cuts of meat in a butcher's display case: life is the living, self-realizing, organic whole, which requires healthy bodies, alert, active, perceptive, interpreting, evaluating, reasoning, communicating, criticizing minds *unified* within individually meaningful, and socially valuable and valued projects which contribute to the well-being of others. "Life" is not metabolic activity, it is meaningful self-activity in social interaction and interconnection with others and the natural world. All needs must be satisfied if life in this sense is to be fully and freely led. Therefore, we cannot allow different need-satisfying institutions to be set against each other, even in a crisis. The hope, of course, is that the crisis impedes our desire to think critically, and the tactic succeeds without challenge.

This response leads me to the second general danger implicit in this particular announcement: that the centrality of education to a meaningful and free human life is being lost. Pay close attention to the Minister's words: she treats education as if it is only a matter of "delivery," like a package. In this view, education is all about content, and it does not matter if the package is delivered by UPS or the Post office. Obviously, education is partly about the content, but if that were all, then we would not need teachers or schools but only content delivery vehicles. The right wing has been fantasising for decades about preserving education while abolishing teachers (and their unions) and we cannot let Covid-19 become an excuse that helps them succeed. The fact of the matter is that education is in essence a social relationship that demands face to face presence. Why? Because education is by and large about framing the problem under consideration in ways that what students learn is not this or that fact (that content can easily be delivered in a book or a website), but that their mind, their intelligence, is an active force in the order of things.

When we question, interpret, evaluate, construct an argument, what we are doing is not "applying a skill" but rather revealing to ourselves that the world is not simply there—take it or leave it—but that it results from our interventions over time. Teaching that deeper truth requires social interaction in a [shared physical space](#), so that people can challenge the problem and each other. This interaction can be simulated in virtual classrooms, but not replicated: being physically present with each other deepens attention (when the class works well, and not every class works well) and draws out the desire to question and contribute that most students want to keep hidden in favour of being told what to do. The role of the teacher here is to draw out (not call out) the desire to contribute that is latent but difficult to express. And to do that, the teacher has to be able to see and feel when someone has something to say and gently find a way to make them feel it is not only okay, but essential, that they say it. Of course, education also involves skill-acquisition and content, but skill-acquisition and content in the absence of everyone feeling

and exercising their powers as intelligent subjects, as critical agents, is little more than animal training.

There should be general alarm, therefore, that primary and secondary education has suddenly ceased to be regarded as essential. Unless things change unexpectedly, K-12 students will not be going back to class this term and no one seems overly fussed. Apparently, parents and websites can replace teachers. With all due respect to parents, teaching is not supervising children and adolescents while they master skills or memorize factoids. It is framing and drawing out, and that is far easier said than done. It is a practice which, like any other practice, requires experience (and knowledge of the subject matter, of course, but the life of education is in the practice of framing and drawing out, not in information transmission).

I have dwelt at length on the example of education not only because it is part of my work as a professor. I do want to defend the dignity of the teaching profession, and also remind university colleagues that we will not long be immune from the dangers that K-12 teachers are experiencing. Already, 3 UK universities have cancelled all [contract academic staff contracts](#) and it would be miraculous if the crisis is not used as cover to intensify attacks on the “useless” disciplines— even though nothing is more useful in a life or death crisis such as we are in than philosophy. So there is a degree of rational self-interest involved in my argument, but it should not be reduced to that dimension.

More deeply— and this point expresses the third ‘clear and present danger’ we are facing— is that the medical threat is going to be used to de-legitimate any demands for democratic accountability, structural changes that address the social causes of the crisis, and preservation and development of the deeper purpose and value of human life. Hence the third way in which this crisis might be exploited by the ruling class is that they draw a general conclusion: people “fear freedom” (Erich Fromm) and will simply comply with whatever repressive orders are asserted as necessary, for an unlimited time, and without resistance. The parallels to the between Covid-19 and many a dystopian science fiction movie are obvious, and soon other parallels to political Sci-Fi dystopias will abound as well.

In the coming weeks, the economic pressure to return to work will prove overwhelming. I can easily imagine a situation where emergency funds are withdrawn, people are forced back to work, but then herded home immediately afterwards by the police. The goal will be to turn workers into a perfect drone class that silently marches off to work displaying their Covid-19-free Scarlet Letters, immediately goes home, and consumes the product of labour by on-line purchase— a total negation of the vibrant sociality that makes life living, but sold and bought on the premise that it is indispensable to “save lives.”

This point brings me to the problem of the future. Here the question that must be asked is: how do we move from the past (which caused the social dimension of the crisis), and the present repressive reality, to a future in which the negative and positive lessons that the crisis is teaching have been learned and institutionalised? There will be a need for political movement building (no existing parties have shown the least understanding of the lessons being taught or the least capacity to articulate alternatives). I want to conclude, however, on the deepest question, and that is: what is it that makes life worth preserving and living? [Dr. Theresa Tam](#), who has done an

admirable job making sane arguments in an insane situation, argued last week that we cannot save every life, but we must save every life that we can. What she fails to ask, even though the question must be answered if we are going to emerge from the crisis having learned its important lessons is: why? Why must we save every life that we can?

The answer is that each life is an unrepeatable centre of social self-conscious life-value. But the ground of this social self-conscious life-value is not abstract metabolic functioning or respiration: a near corpse can be inflated and deflated almost forever, but no one except the most dogmatic and one-sided physician would call that a life worth living. Life-value, therefore, is grounded in the realization of our capacities for experience, interconnection, communication, creative self-realization, service to others, all united in the general capacity for sensuous enjoyment of the worlds of creatures, landscapes, the stars, things, and other people. We simply cannot accept the virtual simulacra of the objects of experience as just as good, because “the new normal.” The “new normal” we are being groomed to accept is an even more repressive version of the total domination of experience, activity, and interaction by conjoined state and capital and cemented in our consciousness by fear of each other. We cannot fear each other and we cannot fear freedom if we want to live well. We do have to organize societies to “save as many lives as we can,” but not at the cost of lives worth living. How to do that is the deepest question we must be posing to ourselves and each other, preparing the day— and it has to come soon— where we re-emerge to gaze freely and fully into “the enchanting Theatre of the Universe.” (La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, p. 33).

# Notes From Exile 3: The Importance of Space

Posted on April 29, 2020

The sudden and extraordinary limits that Covid-19 has imposed on personal mobility has re-awakened in me a deep feeling for the importance of space, movement, and co-presence in human life. This re-awakened desire for the joy of unencumbered moving about is at odds with the traditional philosophical understanding of the relative importance of space and time.

Together, space and time form the matrix off all human experience, but from Parmenides to Heidegger, time has always taken the place of first importance in Western philosophy. Time has taken priority because it is purportedly the more universal of the two: outer intuitions are spatial, Kant argued, but all intuitions, whether of the world or of ourselves as minds reflecting on our experience of the world, take place in time. His point was that space is not relevant to thinking: what matters for thought is logical ordering. At root, logical ordering is the unification of our ideas in temporal sequence.

But try thinking of yourself as occupying no space. Can you anymore think of yourself not existing anywhere at all than you can think without thinking first one thought and then another, holding the sequence together in a single unified consciousness? Even the formulation of the challenge is self-contradictory, for “occupying” implies a space occupied: to imagine yourself occupying no space is meaningless.

But beneath the contradiction is a more important truth. I am — we are— bodies, and bodies occupy space. The space-time matrix can be prised open only at the cost of dividing minds and bodies. Classical metaphysicians were happy to do so. Bodies were our messy animal side, condemned to be pushed and pulled this way and that by our desires. Minds, as pure rationality, rose above the madness of bodies pressing together in space to come to rest in serene contemplation of unchanging divine truths. But no one, not even the most idealist of philosophers, has ever *lived* as a mind. Whatever they wrote or argued, when they lived, they were embodied social-self conscious agents living in a unified space-time continuum.

Think all you want, human beings need to move about in space. This need to move worms its way into even the most diamond-pure expressions of classical metaphysics. Aristotle understands the divine as an “Unmoved Mover” reflecting on its own perfection. Nevertheless, this unmoved mover inspires everything else in nature *to move* in emulation of its perfection. Aristotle defined the best life as contemplation of the divine principle, but he himself could not sit still. He and his followers were called “peripatetics” because of his habit of pacing around as he lectured.

The teaching of philosophy has always been very much bound up with teacher and students gathering together in shared physical space. Socrates roamed about Athens looking for people to cross-examine. Confucius wandered around in discussion with his students and disciples. “Upanisads,” the writings that unpack the main themes of classical Indian philosophy translates to “sit down close.”(Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy, p.37). Students would gather around a teacher as he expounded the holy truths. Renaissance scholars would perform public

disputations. Still today— until March 13th, in any case— I gathered together with my students in classrooms to explore what needs to be explored and try to understand what needs to be understood.

I think that this history shows that philosophical thought, even when it wants to escape from the material world and embodied human being, rides on the kinetic energy of material co-presence. If that metaphor is too vague for you, if you need to kill spontaneity by insisting on generic rules; if you are the type of person who thinks everything can be reduced to a paint by numbers sequence, do not bother asking me what I mean. I cannot explain it further and I do not care if you do not understand. *Practitioners, those with the requisite experience*, will get it, and that is all that matters to me.

I will speak only for myself to others who have felt what I feel: when my classes are really thinking about a problem together there is an electricity, an intensity that moves everyone. It draws the shiest student into the fray: it makes thinking and saying a visceral need.

I cannot bear the thought of not ever being able to feel that intensity again. I hate sitting in front of a computer screen pretending that what we are doing is teaching, or philosophising together, or sharing one another's company, or communicating, or having a drink together. That there is greater expressed urgency to restarting the NHL or baseball seasons rather than finding creative ways to get students and teachers together again tells us just about everything that is wrong and needs changing in the world.

Here is a literal truth: we are not together when we stare into screen at video images of each other. We best not lose our grip on that truth. I am not just mind, eyes, and ears; I— and all of you too— are bodies that need to be together on a park path, or on a street, or in someone's living room, or in a bar, or a classroom. Perhaps the age of footloose cosmopolitanism is over, at least for the foreseeable future. That might prove a good thing on any number of levels: less pollution, less desecration of people's living spaces by mass tourism, more attention to what is close to hand yet ignored when the 'exotic' was a cheap plane ride away.

However, we have to fight to ensure that the age of simply being together in shared space is not over. One feels keenly that which one formerly ignored when one is deprived of it. I miss the joyous dance of aimless wandering on streets with other aimless wanderers; I miss the proximity of strangers who are not afraid of me and I am not afraid of them; I miss just moving my legs when I want to move them for as long as I want and then stop for a drink when I am tired, and I miss being able to teach the only way I know how and the only way that I feel is worthwhile: together, in a room, with others who were interested enough to come share space with me and the problems that bring us together.

Who knows what new indignities will be heaped on air travellers once the pandemic has passed— temperature readings pre- and post-boarding? digital proof of vaccination or immunity? Nothing will be surprising, and nothing will be effectively resisted. The bigger worry will be what happens to our (wherever you are) shared public spaces. Will younger people lose the craving I feel for full dimensional co-presence and contact? Or will they learn to value it all the more? And will we be cowed into mutual fear and suspicion of each other as silent potential carriers, or



will we re-occupy our local life-spaces and find sufficiency and fulfillment in just being together within them?

# Notes From Exile 4: Education is Essential

Posted on May 13, 2020

I was speaking with an old friend of mine yesterday, an elementary school teacher in Toronto. I remarked that I was worried about the seeming lack of urgency around the problem of finding creative and safe ways of returning students to the classroom. He agreed, adding that he had been working upwards of 60 hours a week re-designing and delivering course materials on line.

We have heard a great deal— as we should- about front line health care workers. Grocery store workers, warehouse personnel, and truckers have received their due— as they should. By contrast, there has been relative silence until the last few days about the importance of returning students to the classroom. Indeed, there has been more discussion between the leaders of professional sports leagues and the Canadian and American governments about how they will return to play than between governments and educators about how in person classes can eventually resume. As much as I like hockey and baseball, neither satisfy an essential social need. Why has education— whose nature and value are normally the subject of endless political controversy— been so marginalized in the present crisis?

I think that there are at least three reasons that explain the relative lack of attention to the logistics of returning students to classrooms. Two of these are legitimate. First: no one wants to force students back to classes and risk infections spreading throughout schools, colleges, and universities. Second, since classrooms are closely packed spaces, there seems little practical possibility of returning students to them without violating the physical distancing rules that are necessary to impede the spread of the virus. Put one and two together, and the unavoidable conclusion seems to be: there is no way to hold in person classes until there is an effective treatment or vaccine.

That conclusion might be final for the time being, but will it still hold in September. I would not suggest that anyone should be cavalier about students, teachers, or educational workers and support staff's health. At the same time, are there not creative ways to at least partially re-open classrooms by September. Could students rotate one day on one day off? Would that allow class sizes to be reduced and taught in larger classrooms? How about holding classes outside? A growing number of experts are noting that outside is safer than inside. I have not become a mad Trumpian demanding that things open up come what may, but am following the thoughts of medical professionals who realize that we cannot stay cooped up forever. The following quotation is from the New York Times briefing that I receive every morning: "Experts are arguing that it's time to think about how to move more activities outdoors — including socializing, eating, shopping, attending school and holding work meetings. "The choice between staying home indefinitely and returning to business as usual now is a false one," [Julia Marcus of Harvard Medical School wrote in The Atlantic](#)." Creative thinking is not the same as irresponsible denial of epidemiological realities.

I do not have all the answers, and I do not think anyone has all the answers at the moment. I also think it not unreasonable to open a free public conversation that can generate ideas that will

allow a (phased) return to schools, colleges, and universities over the next few months. Right now, the main problem seems to be how to ensure the circulation of money while controlling the circulation of people (the nightmare scenario I discussed in the previous post). We should be putting as much energy into exploring how to restore educational institutions to their full vitality. Of course, if there is no way to open schools safely in the short or medium term then we will have to continue to adapt. But we cannot determine that there is no way to safely re-open schools if politicians, administrators, teachers, and students do not try to imagine how that could happen.

Thus, I return to the question I posed above. Why has it taken so long to start exploring how that could happen? There is more to it, I think, than the dangers of school-based outbreaks of Covid-19.

This third reason that explains the relative silence about schools is not, unlike the first two, politically neutral, but goes to the heart of debates over the nature and value of education. If one assumes that the value of education is purely instrumental (as most politicians do) and teaching to be content transmission from teacher to student, then the classroom seems extraneous to the value of education and the practice of teaching. If on the other hand one assumes that the value of education is intrinsic, and the practice of teaching to be the framing of problems in ways that promote open inquiry, exploration, discussion, and argument, then the classroom (or an analogous shared space) is not extraneous.

These interpretations of education have been in conflict since the creation of contemporary school institutions in the nineteenth century. School reforms during that period reflected a growing social and economic need for literate and numerate workers who could better meet the demands of the industrial economy. Formal education was democratized, but the goal was not to deepen the intellectual powers and expand the cognitive freedom of citizens, but to manufacture better workers. However, no matter how instrumental the approach to education, *any* development of people's cognitive capacities enables them to think for themselves beyond whatever limitations politicians, business leaders, and school administrators want to impose. Once you can read, there are no principled limits to which books you consult; once you can do basic mathematics, there are in principle no calculations you cannot perform. Education, even of the most narrow sort, is thus always freeing from the prison of immediate experience and intrinsically valuable as such.

The instrumental approach to education reduces teaching to content transmission. Good teaching can be evaluated according to how efficiently pre-specified benchmarks ("learning outcomes," in today's educratic jargon) are met. The shorter amount of time that it takes to "deposit" (in the words of Paolo Freire) this content in the passive student, the better the education system and the educator is performing. Initially, on-line education was conceived and supported precisely because of its superior 'efficiency': without professors meandering in the gardens of their own esoteric interests, content could be efficiently transmitted to an unlimited number of students all working on their own schedule. Behind the usual pieties about widening the reach of education, on-line environments were conceived as ways of replacing living teachers *and the costs associated with paying them*. In an important [policy paper](#) published in 1998 Massy and Zemsky argued that on-line education was analogous to the factory system. The industrial revolution destroyed handicraft labour because it could not compete with standardized factory labour.

Likewise, handicraft educational labour (dedicated faculty in a dedicated facility) would not be able to compete, so they hoped, with “more productive” on-line content-dissemination. Traditional education (especially at the university level) was attacked for employing (in the words of John Sperling, founder of the on-line University of Phoenix) “capital-intensive input standards and operationally inefficient structures.” (quoted in Slaughter and Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism*, p.4). In other words, universities are too costly because they have buildings and faculty. The initial dream of on-line education was to simply to disseminate content via the internet without faculty or physical infrastructure.

The problem with that initial model was that students found it alienating and one-dimensional. The dream of reducing education to accessing on-line data bases died because it did not work as education. Nevertheless, educators at all levels would be inexcusably naive if we are not suspicious about government motives. Governments such as Doug Ford’s in Ontario were embroiled in tense contract negotiations with elementary and secondary school teachers just as the pandemic hit. Crises are always opportunities to push a political agenda, and the Ford government’s agenda was anti-teacher. On one level, the crisis has proven effective at increasing teachers’ workloads. My elementary teacher friend is facing 60 hour weeks. At my university, one department head told the Faculty Association that their department considered course caps to be a function of room size: with no room, professors were expected to enroll an unlimited number of students.

Considerations about workload are essential, but they are not the most important reason why we need to insist on a return to the classroom as soon as it is safe and practicable to do so. The even more important reason follows from understanding the practice of teaching as the art of framing collective problem exploration. Teaching that frees the intelligence from the prison of immediate experience requires dialogue, and dialogue requires co-presence. Teaching is not about filling the head with facts and mastering skills. The former anyone can do on one’s own, and the latter is of the nature of training, not teaching. Teaching is essentially the art of cultivating the desire to explore, question, challenge, argue, listen to counter-argument, and work towards ever more comprehensive understanding in anyone who takes the time to join the dialogue. A data base is a fixed set: it can be disseminated, but assimilating its content does not educate. Education requires teachers, not because the teacher is the authority who knows everything, but because it requires someone to provoke and frame the conversation. But the conversation— the argument— never ends: all education is thus directed “inefficiently” towards a horizon of complete comprehensive understanding that will never finally arrive.

But why do we need to gather in shared physical space together to pursue this open-ended inquiry into socially significant problems that draw us together? On-line teaching and learning is no longer static: there are virtual classrooms and real time interfaces that let people discuss just as they would if they were together in a classroom, or a field, a living room, or a pub. The best description of the freedom of exploratory dialogue that I know of is in Plato’s *Theaetetus*. “The free man always has time at his disposal to converse in peace ... He will pass ... from one argument to another ... which strikes his fancy more, and does not care how long or short the discussion may be, if only it attains the truth.” (172d0e). The possibility of finding the truth in any discipline depends upon freely walking the road of collective dialogical inquiry. I agree that emerging technologies permit genuine conversation and dialogue, and therefore allow education

in the true sense to continue even when gathering together is impossible. Nevertheless, I still believe that web-based interaction misses something essential to live co-presence.

What it lacks is the productive tension that sparks the most intense and focused forms of conversation and argument. As a professor I experience this tension in two distinct but related ways. Before every class, I always feel anxious because I do not know whether the framework for our discussion that I have thought out before hand will work. Will there be dead eyes and scrolling through phones, or will there be a spark that ignites interest and lights a fire throughout most of the class. But I need that moment of anxiety to be ready for the real work of teaching: changing the frame if the initial plan does not work. And then changing it again if that does not work. Usually, something will emerge that generates the co-exploration of the problem. Then the second productive tension arises: when to stop and gather the particular thoughts that have emerged together in a provisional synthesis. Too soon, and you will kill the desire in the students to keep pushing, thinking, and challenging me and each other, too late and the conceptual thread that leads to deeper systematic understanding is lost. the and m and being with people who have expectations of me.

I feel neither form of productive tension when I am talking on line: the screen mediates the conversation such that I just do not feel as engaged. I lose the feel for conversation: I do not know when to talk and when to stay silent; my timing is off, and I feel bored and distracted. The social pressure to stay alert and engaged that is generated simply by co-presence in a shared space is reduced in on-line conversations, and this fact makes them more stilted, each intervention a staccato point that does not build towards an organic unity of insight.

I have made the point before in earlier Notes From Exile but it bears repeating: the physical distancing imposed by the pandemic has emphasised that human beings are more than eyes and ears: we are embodied, multi-sensory social self-conscious agents and the full value of what we do can only be realised together in social space. Yes, we can simulate social space more or less effectively on line, but we cannot replace it. Hence the need to start letting administrators and politicians know that education is more important than shopping and baseball, there can be no curbside delivery of lessons, and we need to collectively work out how we will get back to our classrooms and labs as soon as safely possible.

# Notes From Exile 5: Blinded Me With Science

Posted on May 29, 2020

Four hundred years of natural scientific research have allowed us to create technologies whose power and effects on social life are so pervasive that generalized skepticism about the truth of natural scientific knowledge is untenable. Unless we want to believe in magic or cosmic accident, our ability to design and build things that work as predicted points to the reality of the elements, forces, and law-like regularities explained in the different branches of physical science. What my colleague Ralph Johnson used to call the “dialectical obligations” of arguers rules out the soundness of arguments from magic or cosmic accident, independently of whether one understands all of natural science or not. Measured against the demonstrable link between scientific theory and technological practice, the skeptic simply would be reduced to pointing to piecemeal examples of the failure of scientific claims, while the supporter can point to a four hundred year history of science correcting its own mistakes and proving the truth of its theories in technological practice.

Yet, skepticism persists, and often in ways that shock the human intelligence. People doubt the well-founded conclusions of climate science, even as the seas rise and ice caps melt. Right wing populists are currently advancing the illusion that the Covid-19 pandemic is either a hoax, or not as serious as epidemiologists are warning us. From a rational perspective, skepticism seems the very definition of irrationality. Indeed, it is irrational, from the perspective of empirical reality, to doubt that Covid-19 is a deadly new disease that we have to take seriously or that the ice caps are not melting because of rising greenhouse gas levels. So why, if it is so obviously irrational, is skepticism about science so pervasive?

This is no abstract philosophical question but is of vital importance given the fact that the number of skeptics holding political power. From a scientific perspective it seems impossible that a Trump or a Bolsinaro is taken seriously as the body count rises. yet, they are taken seriously, by millions of people. In order to understand how people with functioning brains can believe a leader they admire rather than the evidence we have to understand the difference between the logic of political argument and the logic of scientific inquiry. We will then be able to understand a mistake that scientists and defenders of scientific knowledge make which encourages the irrational skepticism that drives bad policy decisions.

Let us begin by talking briefly about the nature of scientific knowledge. Science is not classical metaphysics: it does not peer into the mind of god to see reality as it really and eternally is. Indeed, that is why natural science succeeded where classical metaphysics failed. The success of natural science is due to its method. Someday, perhaps at the end of time, scientists might have laid bare the absolute truth, but up until now scientists have solved one problem and discovered a deeper set of unanswered questions. Science has thus been an on-going empirical inquiry that generates different fallible interpretation of the results of particular experiments. The truth is that which survives the criticisms of other scientific teams. No conclusion is ever settled once for all,

but every theoretical generalization conclusions is open to objection in light of new evidence or a more comprehensive theory. Scientific truth is historical, dynamic, and develops towards an open horizon.

That is not to say that there are no questions that are more or less settled, no statistical regularities so uniform that there is no reason (yet) to not call them laws. It is to say that what we take as settled rests on a field of that which is unsettled. Science unsettles the settled, and a new synthesis in one dimensions might unsettle other aspects of the evolving natural scientific picture of the world.

Scientists typically understand the difference between their work and classical metaphysics. They tend to be pragmatists about scientific method and remind people who want to absolutise scientific knowledge that it is actually an open, fallible mode of inquiry that contingently pieces together an evolving understanding of the physical universe. However, when scientists or their supporters (typically in the media) treat science as laying bear the mind of god, the door is opened to a pernicious form of skepticism. if we treat science as providing humanity with a final and settled understanding of everything, we treat it as competent not only to explain how the universe works, but also how we should live in it. It is this prescriptive dimension that arouses the partisan skeptic.

Let us take the Covid-19 pandemic as an example. Understanding the bio-chemistry and spread dynamics of Covid-19 is a real time research project. The various responses to it, from refusing to close most businesses and institutions (as in Sweden) to complete, police enforced lockdowns (in Western Europe) are real time social experiments. The latter model was adopted by countries who accepted epidemiological models that predicted overwhelming numbers of cases unless physical distancing was strictly enforced. The correct way to defend the strategy is to argue that it was it chosen according to the best available knowledge combined with uncertainty about how the virus spread. The wrong way to defend the policy is to present *models* as divine writ and assert that catastrophe will *necessarily* ensue if the lockdown is relaxed before all traces of the virus are eliminated from earth.

Why is the later approach wrong? It is wrong because absolute claims are easy fodder for skeptical objection. If one claims that catastrophe will ensue, the skeptic can interpret catastrophe as complete social collapse. if society does not completely collapse, they will use this evidence as the thin edge of the wedge to reject any evidence or recommendation that does not conform to their presupposed political conclusions. They will move on to assert that the scientists have a partisan agenda. The skeptic appears as a bold social critic exposing the objectivity of science as smokescreen hiding a political agenda. The political effects of these sorts of argument can be all too real (armed militia members marching on the Michigan state capital, people ignoring physical distancing measures, etc). .

The partisan skeptic proceeds via selective framing, cherry picking evidence, and hyperbole to call into question conclusions that differ from their political preferences. But is there not some truth to the claim that scientific objectivity is itself political? Have not generations of Marxists, critical theorists, feminists, and anti-colonial activists made exactly the same claims, just from a different political perspective? If science is nothing but a patriarchal construction designed to

destroy indigenous knowledge systems and justify the global domination of the white man, why should we start listening to scientists now?

It is true that one can find those sorts of absolutist criticisms and rejections of science, but if one really pays attention, one will discover that the best of these arguments do not reject the possibility of discovering objective truths about nature, but warn that one cannot neatly separate the institution of science from its methodology. That means that while the methodology might yield real insights into nature, it is inextricably bound up with prevailing structures of social power. However, it does not follow that we therefore reject every conclusion as nothing but partisan self-interest of the powerful, but work to change the social institutions in which science is embedded so that certain perspectives and voices are not ruled out from the get-go (as mere ‘folk’ knowledge) but are listened to and taken seriously. That is in keeping with the historical logic of scientific advance. The real advance is towards more comprehensive understanding, which is impossible if much of the world is silenced by institutional fiat.

Hence the critical approach to science is distinct from the partisan skeptical rejection of conclusions that contradict one’s political position. Scientists and their supporters can help isolate the skeptic by not pretending that they are clairvoyants capable of determining how human life should be led forevermore. Their projections are based on models, and the information a model yields depends on the values of the variables. If you assume that an infected person will spread it to one infected person you will get one possible future. If you assume that each infected person will infect 2 people, then you will get a conclusion in which far more people get infected far more quickly. The values of the variables can only be assigned on the basis of historical information. But of course trying to predict the future of a dynamic system which is constantly affected by the decisions that real people make moment to moment is impossible. Most media outlets are beating the drum of warning about an “inevitable second wave.” [Dr. Fauci](#), on the other hand, has argued recently that a second wave is not inevitable.

The media does not like estimates, they want certainty, preferably frightening certainties that draw viewers. Most scientists have been cautious in their public remarks and remind people that they are working with models and estimates. A few have not been able to resist the limelight, and the limelight does not shine on people who speak in measured and qualified tones. The architect of the British lockdown, [Neil Ferguson](#), repeatedly warned of doom unless strict physical distancing was enforced— and then carried on an affair. I could care less about his sex life. However, the behaviour does raise the question of how seriously he took his own worst case scenario. Last week, [Dr. Rick Bright](#) testified in front of the U.S. Congress that unless states remained lockdown, a winter of misery *unlike anything the United States had seen* was in store. Perhaps. But also: perhaps not. And if not, he will encourage all manner of conspiracy theorists and pro-Trump skeptics.

To object that the skeptical argument is irrational is to miss the point. Of course it is irrational, but if it proves convincing to many people, rational critics must ask why it is convincing, rather than simply dismiss it as irrational. Irrational arguments prove convincing because they obey a different logic than that according to which science operates. Political argument is *eristic*, concerned with one’s side winning. Eristic arguments are not exactly indifferent to truth; they consider as true that which advances one’s cause. Now it is certainly the case that that which



advances one's cause can rest on claims that are untrue. In a rational world, political argument would defer to scientific knowledge when claims about material reality are at issue (as for example, in matters concerning climate change, or epidemiology). We do not live in that world.

It does not follow that we ought to give up trying to ground public policy in the best knowledge of material reality available when knowledge of material reality is relevant to public policy. It *does* follow that scientists need to understand the logic of political argument, and take care not to fan the flames of irrational partisanship by acting as prophets, priests, or philosophers. Scientific knowledge tells us what is the case so far as research has been able to piece it together, not how we ought to live, collectively or individually. How we live, collectively and individually, must *ultimately* follow from deliberations and reflections that incorporate value considerations that are beyond the purview of natural science.

The role of philosophical criticism (as opposed to partisan skepticism) is to help comprehensive views emerge. Philosophical criticism does not enter into the scientific debate as such, but exposes the process by which science becomes a political weapon. Criticism is concerned with the truth, not with protecting a space for one's preferred conclusion. The critic demands *reasonable* evidence, and is open to the same demand from their opponents. When it comes to science, the critic confronts science with that which it is: a socio-historical practice subject to the pernicious influences of existing power imbalances, self-interest, and economic motives. It makes these arguments not to provide reasons to reject scientific knowledge, but so that scientific conclusions can gradually free themselves from those pernicious influences. We need to consider impartially the best information that scientists can provide, but we also need to view this information through the wider lens of the society we want to inhabit, the values we want it to preserve and protect, and considerations about what makes human lives worth living.

Those are not scientific questions, but philosophical, and we all have a right to weigh in on them. They are not decidable by a data set and are not the province of experts. Science should be part of the conversation, reminding us that if we want a life worth living we have to be alive. Nevertheless, the possibility of arriving at rational decisions is harmed when one side of an unsettled scientific inquiry is presented as an absolute truth that mechanically determines one and only one policy response. Knowledge should free our decisions from mechanical reaction by laying out a range of options and probable outcomes. The course that we take then must be up to us as a body of citizens, acting rationally, one hopes.

# Left-Wing Moralism: An Infantile Disorder:

## Part One: To Be or Not to Be: The Formation and Transformation of Values

Posted on December 5, 2019

Lenin, reflecting on the lessons of the Russian Revolution for Western Communists, warned them of the danger of ultra-leftism. He defined ultra-leftists as people who elevated purity of principle over effective political practice. They refused all compromise with reformist workers or reformist workers' associations like trade unions.

Lenin was scathing in his criticisms:

"The conclusion is clear: to reject compromises "on principle" ... no matter of what kind, is childishness." (21)

"We cannot but regard as equally ridiculous and childish nonsense the pompous, very learned, and frightfully revolutionary dispositions of the German Lefts to the effect that Communists cannot and should not work in reactionary trade unions ... that it is necessary to ... create a brand new and immaculate "workers' Union" invented by very pleasant (and probably, for the most part, very youthful) Communists." (33)

Lenin thus distinguishes between sounding revolutionary and being able to build a movement that can actually overcome the existing state of affairs. While typically dismissed as a blood-thirsty autocrat, Lenin actually understood as clearly as any deliberative democratic that politics is about argument with people who might not only disagree, but might start from positions that are diametrically opposed to revolutionary demands. What mattered for Lenin was not what individuals workers believed, but the underlying interests that they shared with all workers. The goal of political argument was to uncover this common ground. Political argument proceeds by accepting what *is* the case; ultra-leftists from what they think workers *ought* to believe. "We can (and must) build socialism, not with abstract human material, or with human material specially prepared by us, but with the human material bequeathed to us by capitalism. True, it is no easy matter, but no other approach to this task is serious enough to warrant discussion." (34)

We do not inhabit the same political universe as Lenin. The political problem of our time is not the construction of a vanguard party out of raw working class material. That way has been tried, and failed. At the same time, Lenin's arguments against ultra-leftism can help us understand the political problems caused by what I call "left-wing moralism." Left-wing moralism is found in the pages of liberal newspapers like the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Toronto Star*, across the twitter-verse, and in the more earnest sections of student activists and the academic left. The main problem with left-wing moralism, as I see it, is that it fails to adopt a properly social-philosophical, historical, and dialectical understanding of the development and internalisation of human values. Instead of examining how the values that circulate in society are

produced, and whose interest they serve, and how groups whose interests they do not serve nevertheless internalise them and act as if those values do serve their interests, left-wing moralists tend to condemn in one breath and proclaim their own political purity with the next. They see polar opposition instead of contradiction. Since contradictions— in social institutions and individual consciousness— are the space that makes change possible, ignoring them in favour of self-righteous condemnation of the politically incorrect impedes the solution of the problems to which the moralist rightly objects.

Left moralists treat both individual moral character and cultures as fixed wholes divided by a Manichean opposition of good and bad. I will examine the dimension of individual character here, and the cultural dimension in Part Two.

I realise that I am constructing an ideal-typical definition, but by abstracting from the details of specific examples the core practical problem can be isolated for analysis. The actual nuances and complexities of particular expressions of left-wing moralism can only be properly addressed in real political arguments. I also want to add right at the outset that I am not claiming that political argument can be a substitute for political struggle. If far-right racists are mobilising and marching, we must mobilise, march, and deny them access to public space. I am also not so naive to believe that the leadership of these movements of mainstream political parties are ever likely to yield simply to political and philosophical criticism. Nevertheless, no political victory of any sort can be achieved without building numbers through argument, and political argument will inevitably bring critics into contact with people who espouse views that are ill-informed, ignorant, and offensive. Not everyone lives their lives in a universe of intense political engagement. Many people unreflectively internalise the easy-answers that the right-wing demagogues spread. The question is: how do we understand that problem? Is it a problem of the ideas that the person espouses, to be addressed by argument, or is it the person themselves, to be addressed by shaming and shunning?

The left-wing moralist tends to adopt the latter strategy., demonizing as the enemy anyone who in anyway expresses less than perfectly politically correct attitudes, dispositions, and values. They think that the secret to change is to make people feel guilty about the values they identify with and the choices they make. However, by focusing on guilt, values, and choices in abstraction from the way in which established structures of power influence and shape peoples' values and choices, they ignore the decisive issue: how people come to be the people that they are, believing in these values and not those, and make choices that they find reasonable. Simply condemning people who, in a given moment, identify with conservative social values or make individual choices which contribute to patterns of destructive behaviour does nothing to help build the social movements the solution of those problems will require. Instead of abstract critiques of character, left-wing activists have to engage people on their own turf and work towards the discovery of common ground.

How can one discover common ground with climate deniers, or racists, or sexists? Perhaps one cannot. Some people deeply committed to a violent, oppressive value-system sometimes will not give it up no matter how much evidence of the wrongness of their view one marshals. However, even in those cases, there really is common ground there to be found. Everyone alive must breath, appropriate resources from nature, have accesses to potable water, shelter from the

elements, and find care when sick. There is thus a basis to argue with climate deniers and supporters of private health care systems about the self-undermining and unjust implications of their commitments. The collapse of natural life-support systems will kill climate deniers and supporters of private health care that cannot pay the bills deprive themselves of what they might one day need. From a social perspective, the plasticity of the human brain and the creativity of the whole being mean that everyone requires education and opportunities to creatively contribute to the world. Racists and sexists who insist on deep natural differences that make white men superior to everyone else simply ignore the histories of achievement of people who have freed themselves from different forms of oppression. The manifest capacities of the purportedly inferior thus offer an objective basis for argument against racism, sexism, and all oppressive value systems. Every argument is a risk, but the common ground really is there. Effective argument uncovers it and thus produces a deep normative change in the former opponent.

The moralist does not see the false value system and the ruling class which uses it to perpetuate its rule as the key problem, but rather the assumed values that mechanically attach to being white, or male, or heterosexual. But people are not white, or male, or heterosexual by arbitrary free choice, but by birth and history. One cannot just wish away one's genome, family, upbringing, culture, or the relative statuses that attach to them. No one chooses the world into which one is born or the values with which one is raised. To be sure, these markers of identity are not absolutely fixed, as in the case of gender, which some people do decide to change, or in terms of their social effects, which can be altered by political and social struggles to attenuate privilege on the one hand, and increase the scope for free activity of the historically subaltern on the other. Nevertheless, we are shaped before we learn to shape, and this fact has important political implications.

When people hear arguments that sound as though they are asserting that everything a person is and identifies with is morally wrong, they will not typically be moved to change, but to dig in their heels. A white working class Trump voter in Arkansas or an ex-Newfoundlander working in the oil sands have reasons for choosing what they have chosen. Effective political argument has to start with inquiring about those reasons, not with a lecture about why they are wrong. The Trump voter might well have racist beliefs, but maybe they are mixed with a sense of betrayal by past Democratic governments and motivated by real concern for the future of his family and community. The Newfoundlander might not like working in the oil sands, and he might well understand the environmental damage caused by their exploitation. But he might be there because the cod fishery collapsed thirty years ago, and now he has built a life, and sees no other options. One cannot job shame him and expect him to change, just as one cannot attribute the Arkansas voter's racism to some unchanging essence of racism deep in the heart of Southern US whites. We have to do better than *ad hominem* Twitter wars between left-wing moralists and right-wing bigots. Instead, conflict has to become an opportunity to provoke critical reflection on problematic expressions of dominant identities.

On the other side, self-righteous posturing about one's own purity can almost be guaranteed to produce backlash effects. No matter how loudly educated, well-paid white men acknowledge their privilege, the historical forces that created the institutions and structures that produced that privilege are completely unaffected— and therefore privilege remains through all declamations about how guilty one feels at enjoying its benefits. The right-wing will always happily point this

fact out. The solution is not to reject the benefits, which is impossible, in practice, for the most part, but to build movements to changes the institutions that confer unequal and unjust benefits on some. The goal is a future state in which everyone's natural and social needs are comprehensively satisfied so that they can become the people that they want to become. That which is past cannot now be changed.

Does this argument let individual bigots off the hook? After all, racism, sexism, and other invidious forms of domination are not simply structures that exist apart from peoples' beliefs but live on in and through them. I do not think that it does. Individuals must be challenged for their beliefs and actions, but they must be challenged in ways that do not make the individual persons, or abstractions like "white culture," the enemy. There is nothing intrinsically racist about white people, any more than there is anything intrinsically misogynist about gay men. There is no more a uniform "white culture" than there is a uniform "black culture." Being a woman does not preclude one from being a violent imperialist; being straight does nor preclude one from accepting all manner of alternative sexualities and gender identities. Making sure every imaginable difference is represented in proportion to their average distribution in the population will not solve the major structural problems of the world. Changing the identity of the rulers without changing the structure of control over resources or the drivers of the global economy will not solve any fundamental problems. Left wing moralism takes the enemy to be individual character and not the structures of power that allow the ruling class to rule.

The power of the ruling class grows up out of their control over natural resources, territory, and labouring bodies. Therefore, effective change requires that these structures be changed. Control over territory was established through the enclosure of common lands and colonial expropriation of indigenous territory. Control over bodies was direct, as in the case of the slave trade and the patriarchal domination of women, and indirect, as in the case of legally free labourers who had no real choice but to accept paid work in emerging capitalist industries. The modern histories of capitalism, racism, and sexism are thus inextricably intertwined (but the experiential contours of the experience of racial or sexist domination are unique and irreducible to objective structural economic forces).

Politically, therefore, progressive social change requires everyone to identify with the properly human good that anti-racist—indeed, all struggles against all forms of oppression—serve. That good is general and not the property of any particular group. All forms of oppression are systematic ways of depriving demonized groups of the full set of natural and social resources that they require in order to develop their creative, sentient, cognitive, and relational capacities. All ways of realizing these capacities are good if they are: individually meaningful, socially valuable and valued, and consistent with the carrying capacity of the natural world. When we think of the human good in this general way, and different concrete historical groups of people as struggling to realize it in their own chosen forms, then political argument is an attempt to bring out the shared humanity at the root of different identities and ways of living.

Arguments that are effective in helping people change their value commitments must start from accepting the humanity of the people who hold positions that might sound or be offensive. Everyone alive wants in some way to survive and flourish. Along the way, anyone can be seduced by false arguments about the best way to ensure that common goal. Instead of shaming

people who hold false beliefs, anyone genuinely concerned with social change (rather than their own beautiful soul) has to work with people to and trace the internalization of false beliefs back to their social and political causes. That work involves helping people to see that what they want for themselves does not depend upon taking it from others who have the same shared goals in life. Achieving their goals depends upon changing the rapacious social system and ruling class that despoils the earth, exploits the labour of people of all cultures, races, sexes, genders, and ranges of ability (or wrongly excludes them from the labour market and renders their life precarious), *and then blames the victim*. Once shared needs have been identified, the process of shedding the old and exclusionary value system can begin.

Like everything important in life there is no guarantee that political argument will work. However, to not argue with individuals (as opposed to organized far-right movements) whose positions one finds offensive assumes that no one can ever change their values or politics. If that is the case, then (to focus on the American example) the working class members of the set of 59 million Americans who voted for Trump seem to be a lost cause. If they are, then the future of America seems to be political stasis (where neither side can attract such overwhelming numbers to push forward decisive change). However, we are in the midst of intensifying social and environmental crisis. Standing still in the midst of unfolding catastrophe ensures that it will only get worse. Unless the left learns how to argue with the “deplorables,” it is hard to see how a movement of the “immense majority” (as Marxists like to say) can be built. Unless that movement is built, not only will the right-wing forces that support Trump not be defeated (even if he is), but the left will also fail to start realising the anti-capitalist agenda gaining currency in the Democratic party.

Human beings share a life-interest in living in societies that utilise natural and social wealth to satisfy real needs. I take this lesson to be taught by all struggles of subaltern groups over across millennia of struggle against domination, deprivation, and oppression. When societies are organized so that our needs are satisfied because they are human needs, then our capacities to create, relate, feel, and act in individually meaningful and socially valuable ways are enabled. When these capacities are enabled, groups and individuals can freely create themselves through sharing their stories, imagining new ones, cooking, singing, dancing, and loving as they choose. They can invite others in, ask to keep some space for themselves, or anything in between. New forms of expression can be invented and new ways of making collectively binding decisions enacted. Differences then become the free product of a capacity for self-creative activity shared by all human beings.

Left-wing politics in the most general sense aims to overcome the commodification of nature and labour, the life-threatening damage to the natural life-support system, and gross material inequalities the exploitation of labour causes. It must reject all the invidious ideologies that have exacerbated, reinforced, and justified capitalist society. Still, if society can be changed, it is only because the people decide to change themselves (individuals are social beings, as Marx argued). There is little evidence to support the belief that people can be changed by shaming or shunning them. The only alternative is to engage their practical intelligence through sharp political arguments aimed at locating the common ground from which solidarity can be built.

# Left-Wing Moralism: An Infantile Disorder: Part Two: The Fraught Fields of Culture and the Political Priority of the Future Over the Past

Posted on December 20, 2019

In my previous post I examined the politics of treating individual character as a fixed and unalterable abstraction. If we do not examine the complex processes by which individual character and dispositions are formed, we cannot engage intelligently with each other but simply look for agreement and disagreement. Politics then becomes a matter of bonding with like against unlike, instead of a process of arguing towards a more comprehensively inclusive social movement against underlying structures of deprivation, domination, and destruction. Rather than assuming that conservative and bigoted attitudes are fixed and final, political engagement starts from where the other is and tries to convince them that it is in their own deepest interests to change. It argues; it does not name call, shame, hector, or ally with existing power structures to exclude and punish.

In Part Two I want to look at the other side, the cultures within which these dispositions and attitudes are forged, and make a similar argument. Culture, like character, is not a fixed abstraction, not self-contained and univocal but develops historically, contains contradictory elements, and can be changed. There is value to the preservation of certain cultural forms, but this defensible desire for preservation can become conservative and dangerous. On the other hand, demands that conservative cultures simply transform themselves by shedding what is objectionable and offensive, while correct in the abstract, can fail in the concrete if they are pronounced moralistically from on high and the outside. When that happens, just as in the case of individual character, reactive hardening and not progressive opening results. I want to explore these difficult problems through the example of the recent British election.

## Labour Catastrophe 2019

However one understands the causes of Labour's defeat, their loss is a spectacular failure of political argument. Labour's [Manifesto](#) challenged the legitimacy and necessity of the capitalist status quo, arguing that it was failing to satisfy fundamental human needs while also producing the social wealth necessary to do so. The problem was not scarcity of resources but their use: instead of being used to free people's time from alienated labour and better satisfy their fundamental natural and social needs, social wealth is appropriated by a ruling class growing so wealthy it lives in a different social universe. Labour promised to nationalise key industries, re-invest in public services, and address climate change in a systematic way.

The Manifesto thus did everything that I have long argued the Left needs to do. It criticised capitalism on the grounds that it systematically fails to satisfy fundamental human needs, destroys the biosphere, depends on organized violence to perpetuate itself. And it articulated a

realizable vision whose implementation can begin today, through the forceful use of existing democratic power. And it failed spectacularly.

Across Northern England, in the traditional heartlands of the Labour party, a program that ought to have appealed to a population suffering most from austerity and de-industrialization was rejected in [historically unprecedented numbers](#). Two general explanations have been advanced for the failure. Both touch on the culture of the Northern English working class. On the one hand, the explanation [favoured by the Left](#) is that [Labour's vacillations](#) around Brexit turned off Northern working class voters who had supported Leave. Analysis of the voting numbers bears this conclusion out (in constituencies which voted Leave, Labour's vote declined by more than 10%).

On the right (of the Labour Party), the explanation focused on [Corbyn](#) (and, to a lesser extent, [the Manifesto](#)). The evidence for this view is more anecdotal, and perhaps selectively chosen to demonise Corbyn in order to expedite his removal as leader. These arguments confine their definition of working class to older, white, industrial working men and women: a rather nineteenth century conception of the proletariat which cannot explain to which class precariously or unemployed young, ethnically diverse people belong. Let us set aside the sociological issues this caricature of the working class raises in order to focus on the culture to which Corbyn was purportedly alien. The same argument is used to produce two opposed conclusions.

On the one hand, the strongest critics of Corbyn focused on the most conservative elements of Northern working class culture. Corbyn, the pacifist from North London could not communicate his message within the strong regional identity of working class towns and the purported traditional hearth, home, and soil values that caused them to vote Leave. Thus, the most vociferous criticisms of Corbyn asserted that he could never win the vote of Northern workers because he is out of touch with their values. These critics report that voters continually denounced Corbyn as disloyal, anti-military, and unpatriotic. He was viewed as an out-of-touch Londoner captured by a Southern urban constituency with lots of bright and unrealizable ideas as befits academic dreamers. The argument is thus that there was an unbridgeable cultural chasm between Corbyn and the Northern working class as the standard bearers of ancient virtues which London elites ignore at their peril.

On the other side, some older left-wing supporters of Corbyn equally dismayed by the result but not wanting to lose the hard won left turn in the party that Corbyn supported looked in the other direction for an explanation. They claimed that the problem was not that the Northern working class did not understand its own interests, but that the London-centric leadership, and especially its younger cadres, did not understand how Northern working people understand their own interests. They remained incredulous that working people could vote Leave, and chalked it up to reactionary nationalistic values when in fact it had more to do with the failure of European elites to address any of their local concerns.

[Ursula Huws](#), with her characteristic eye for both detail and underlying structural conflicts, provides an excellent account of this dimension of the problem:



Wherever they came from, ideas of tolerance and equality of opportunity serve as common taken-for-granted values for a high proportion of the British population, especially the young, many of whom, in the current jargon, regard themselves as ‘woke’. The difficulty is that the very creation of the category ‘woke’ sets up the counter-category of the ‘unwoke’. People who do not share the ‘woke’ values are likely to be characterised as racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic. Not only are they considered stupid and unenlightened; they may even be demonised as proto-fascist ground troops, vulnerable to any siren call from the far right that is directed toward them. And therein lies the problem. Nobody likes to be labelled stupid or ignorant. Or to see their culture demonised.

As I did in Part One, I think that Huws is painting an ideal-type picture in order to exemplify one-side of a practical problem that she knows is more complex. The problem is that so long as people glare at each other across a cultural divide that they take to be fixed and unalterable, political argument will degenerate towards mutual moralistic recrimination. When the older white working class are sneered at as backward xenophobes and racists, they shout back between sips of ale about out of touch kids.

Huws continues:

What these people emphatically do not want is to be sneered at, patronised, preached to or told what to think by people who (they suspect) see themselves as morally and socially superior: people who, for all their sentimentalisation of working class life, are essential voyeuristic. Rightly or wrongly, they regard the ‘woke’ as superficial and manipulative: survivors who have managed to be nimble enough to negotiate the shifting terrain of the neoliberal labour market to gain themselves a foothold in it, whether in the media or in politics; shifty manipulators of public opinion; or, at best, naïve kids who do not understand their own privilege.

Fair enough. However, the problem, whichever way we look, is that both explanations, although containing some truth, fall victim to the moralistic illusion that cultures are singular, uniform entities that mechanically determine their members outlook on life.

### **Culture, Values, and Universal Interests**

The moralistic approach to politics revives the deeply problematic arguments of Richard Rorty from the 1990’s. He maintained that every truth is a function of a particular ethnocentric way of life. A is good in your culture, not-A in mine; I am ok, you are ok (or not), but that is only from my (or your) perspective. We are all locked into those perspectives; there can be no progress towards more comprehensive shared truths. Truth does not touch the objective world but only describes the way things are done around here. There is little point, therefore, to arguing, because that which counts as evidence in one culture does not count in another.

When Rorty made these arguments in the 1990’s they were part of the initial post-modernist “deconstruction” of the purportedly oppressive, Eurocentric, racist, sexist, etc., heritage of the Enlightenment. Today, they are more likely to be the stock in trade of right-wing populists like Donald Trump and his allies: the partisans of alternative facts and truths that are not true. But they also underlie the arguments of left-wing moralists.

The left-wing moralist rejects the content of the truths that right-wing populists affirm, but accepts the more general point that all truths are functions of cultural identity and political position. The beliefs that define my group are right and the beliefs that define opposed groups are wrong. There is no tension within value sets and no room to move. One is either on the side of the good or one is evil. Evil cannot be changed, only destroyed. If Johnston is for Brexit, then Brexit is wrong.

Let us take a look at what the discussion in England looks like if we treat cultures as uniform wholes. If white working class people voted for Brexit, they are xenophobes and racists, because Brexit is a ruling class strategy rooted in nostalgia for the Empire and white supremacy. The same is true from the other side. When older white workers who have seen their way of life collapse look at today's activists and sneer at their platitudes they are acting no less moralistically. So long as neither opens their intelligence towards the other and thinks the matter through from the other perspective, there is no way for arguments to access deeper, objective truths. Such ideas and assumptions ensure that mutual incomprehension and conflict are permanent.

But are cultures really uniform wholes, and are people really mechanically programmed by the culture into who they are born and grow up? They can be treated this way, and people have dominant influences in their lives. But do we really only belong to one culture? More basically, what is like and what is unlike in our own identity? As Norman Geras demonstrated in a brilliant critique of Rorty, (*Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*), the latter's ethnocentrism presupposes the very capacity for universal identification he denies. If 350 million very different people can identify as "Americans" or over one billion very different people identify as "Christians," or the same number as "Muslims," then this proves that cultures are not reified wholes that program values, but functions of how people evaluate sameness and difference. From one perspective, I am a Windsorite, from another, an Ontarian, from another a Canadian, from still others a philosopher or hockey fan. So why not also, Geras argues, "human being?" When I identify with any group, I recognise some common element. But what that common element is does not exclude me from broadening or narrowing my identity in other respects. What I am and believe and take myself to be is not therefore a function of the group programming and determining my identity, but what I regard as important in this or that context. My identity is complex, probably contradictory; it overlaps with some others in one way and in different ways with others.

Underlying all these different ways of identifying and producing symbolic value in life, I would argue, are the needs which our on-going existence as living and world and self-interpreting beings demands be regularly satisfied. Mutual understanding across differences depends upon working down to the universality of these needs, and seeing how different political responses are functions of people's judgements about how they can best be satisfied. These judgements can be wrong, but if we see them as responses to unmet needs, then we can understand why people make the decisions they make, and argue that there may be a better way of securing that which they require but are deprived by social structures and dynamics driven by profit, not need satisfaction. My focus on needs does not deny or abstract from species or cultural differences, but explains them. Species life-activity and cultural systems grow up out of the soil of needs: the way a bear lives is largely a function of the needs that it experiences, the environment that it

lives in, and the organic tools its body provides for their satisfaction. Different species of bears are similar in regards to their physiology. The differences are functions of adaptations to different environments.

Human cultures are analogous. No society and no culture that does not enable people to satisfy their basic needs can survive. All self-creative human activity therefore, no matter how far it soars into realms traditionally called spiritual, can ever cut itself off completely from the earth. That is not to say that spiritual needs (which I would define as meaningful relationships with each other, the world of living and non-living things, and the universe or Being as a whole) are illusory. On the contrary, they are important elements of a good life. My point, rather, is that they are not free-floating realities but are felt because of the sorts of being that we are: embodied, social self-conscious intelligences that depend on nature, are inter-dependent with each other, are language-users not tied down to the immediate local context but can think and wonder about ultimate questions, and provide answers through art, spirituality, and philosophy.

If this argument is true, then while it is certain that we all belong to different cultures, we might belong to some in virtue of one set of identifications and others through others. Some of the people from whom we are distinguished by one identity we are the same as from another perspective. Identities crisscross and overlap. Moreover, they are subject to change. They can be narrowed, they can be broadened, but they are only fixed and ultimate if we close ourselves off to paying attention to counter-evidence, different perspectives, social complexity, history, our multiform experiences and complex interconnections with others.

### **Back to the Concrete**

What does this abstract argument have to do with political debates across differences?

Let us return to the particular example of England. From either side of the divide a picture was painted of an unbridgeable chasm between north and south, old and young, industrial and post-industrial working classes. But the working class (as Huws goes on to argue, and as she has detailed in her academic work) includes woke young people barely eking out a living in London as well as unemployed lads drinking beer outside the Ladbrokes in Preston. If it were true that Corbyn was universally offensive to every older worker in the North, then none would have voted for him. But some did, so not everyone was repulsed by his politics. The key to changing political positions is to find the right argument, not to conclude that everyone was mechanically turned off by his past and principles. Likewise, not every young volunteer who flooded into the party to propel Corbyn to the leadership could possibly have denigrated Labour's traditional constituencies as dinosaurs. Corbyn's campaign— and the Manifesto on which this election was fought— were in large part *returns* to classical social democratic demands and policies, not precious, politically correct contortions to include all and give offence to none.

Is there no real problem then? No, there is a problem, but it lies at least as much in the assumptions of commentators and critics as it does in people's consciousness. Uniformity of outlook and complete mutual misunderstanding are as much products of commentators and critics with a definite political agenda as they are definitive of how concrete individuals view the world. If one looks for stereotypes, one can find them, because they are rooted in real but one-

sided experiences of some set of actual people. One could certainly find xenophobic white working class Brexit supporters, and one could certainly find tiresomely trendy woke students twisting themselves in knots trying to list every marginalised group to ensure that everyone's unique perspective is reflected in every general policy.

The left wing moralist stops there and has nothing more to do with the caricature with whom they disagree. Now, caricatures also start from one's real face, but they exaggerate it. One is supposed to laugh, not think: "Oh my God, I am hideous." So too when we encounter an almost pure type of someone with whom we politically disagree. We have to refuse to say: "Oh my God, I knew that they were all..." and instead talk to them and argue. Human nature, as Hegel said, only fully exists in an achieved community of minds.

The most important word there is "achieved." Hegel does not deny that there are vast differences in the way people live; what he believes is that if we really examine those ways of living we can see that they are all different ways of expressing certain human values and satisfying human needs. They are not human or inhuman, but one-sided: human in different ways. Hence the achieved community of minds is one that exists in a future society which has understood the differences as different expressions of different sides of a comprehensive humanity. We can disagree with the way in which Hegel excludes non-Europeans from history, but his dialectical understanding of history as the working through and overcoming of one-sided contradictions remains essential even if his own reconstructions of the pathway must be rejected.

To bring it back to the concrete example: when one encounters someone with whom one disagrees, the questions one should ask oneself are: "what problems are they facing that might have encouraged them to adopt this view as a way of solving them?" What is the context in which this view was formed? How does that context frame their experiences of other groups who are different from them in some important way? The young gay man might look suspiciously at men from an older generation because he grew up in a small town where homophobia was impossible to escape and he had to hide his desires for fear of violence. To him, the city offers liberation not because there is no homophobia but because there is a community with whom he can be himself. Instead of mocking the values of inclusiveness he supports older, more conservative people have to be brought around to understanding the problem that inclusion tries to solve, and to understand that his way of living and loving, though different, are no threat to theirs.

Likewise, the young Labour campaigner who hears a retired miner cursing the Polish bar tender has to stop and ask whether this view is the result of deep-seated racism, or worries about the lack of employment opportunities in town. If that is the root cause, then there is an opening for a conversation about what creates and what destroys jobs. The answer will turn out to be that it is not Polish bar tenders who destroy jobs, but market forces (which also explain why the bartender left Poland for the UK). Now there is common ground and a re-focusing on problems that unite across differences. When we ask and inquire, we learn where other people are coming from. Understanding has to be the goal of every political encounter across differences.

Huws, commenting again on the means of resolving the divides in Labour that were so glaringly exposed by the election concludes in a similar vein.

...perhaps, lurking under the surface, at least for some of the older people, [was] the demand that they know in their hearts cannot be met, “take me back to the safety of the world I grew up in. Please.” Of course we know that this is wishful thinking. But we ignore at our peril the emotional place it is coming from. In the longer term we will have to start the patient work of building a new movement, based not on simplistic notions like ‘the many’ but on a recognition of the specificities of the positions that different groups of workers occupy in the global division of labour, their cultures and the real conflicts of interest that exist between them. This is heavy work, requiring a lot of careful listening and building from the bottom up.

Nothing is easily resolved, of course, but unless some such strategy is adopted, the Left will, I fear, continue to retreat into self-enclosed identity silos which, like Leibniz’s monads, have no windows in or out. In every encounter, in every experience, the aim should not be to find what is wrong with the other, but to learn where they are coming from and why they believe that which they believe. People are not tokens of pure type cultures, and cultural creations are not pure type functions of political outlooks or principles. People and their creations are messy, ambivalent, complex, and contradictory. There can be no political progress without fraught encounters across differences. And beyond the political, life needs irony, humour, and free explorations of our darker drives and motivations. Art, like interesting people, pulls us in different directions at once (or sometimes it disorients us).

Condemning people and works outright narrows and cheapens life; expanding our horizons demands that we accept the risk of confrontation with the unknown and the different and even the apparently offensive. We cannot ban and silence and cancel our way to power, firing instead of educating people is the worst sort of reactionary vindictiveness that only elevates the power of the bosses. Intelligent engagement and argument is the only way to change people’s minds and produce more comprehensive understanding. It is not only that bad ideas do not go away because people who disagree shout and stomp their feet rather than patiently prove the opponent wrong, it is that, in all but the most overt cases of oppressive thinking, one cannot tell what is good and bad, true and untrue, in an idea until one hears it explained and thinks it through. We cannot know whether what we are disagreeing with is worth disagreeing with if we do not hear the other side. Purity and self-righteousness will not build the size of the movement we need to change society.

# Trump Throws Down the Gauntlet

Posted on June 3, 2020

By calling in Military Police and threatening to invoke the Insurrection Act, Trump has thrown down the gauntlet, not only to those continuing to demonstrate against the murder of Floyd George, but his Democratic Party challengers. Throughout his regime, Trump has relied on one political move against opposition: rhetorically escalate the crisis and unevenly follow through in practice. The strategy has tended to work in the domestic context. The “Muslim ban” was approved by the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh now sits on it, and his diversion of funds from the military to the border wall went through. Internationally, he has proven less successful: he has bullied trading partners to the table, but the changes he has won have been minimal. He has perhaps proven less successful internationally because his opponents have more leverage and are less politically compromised than the Democratic opposition at home. The later point is highly relevant for evaluating the emerging struggle around police brutality and systematic racism.

Let me begin by stating the obvious: the anger and intensity of the protests are justified. Beyond that, I am reticent to say more about strengths and weaknesses of still spontaneous demonstrations. I can hear the police helicopters across the river in Detroit, but I am not directly involved in the movement. As I said during the wave of indigenous blockades in February in Canada, valuing the self-determination means staying quiet as oppressed groups work out the strategy and tactics their struggle will follow. I agree with David Roediger that solidarity should be “uneasy.” (*Class, Race, and Marxism*, pp.157-188). Solidarity is necessary, but it has to follow from calls from the oppressed for support, be rooted in mutually acknowledged shared interests, and ensure that the voices of the oppressed group are not submerged in well-meaning professions of support that take up too much political oxygen. No amount of good will and confessions of privilege on the part of white people is going to transform the deep structures of race-class inequality. As Asad Haider rightly noted, white privilege is not a knapsack that individual white people can take on and take off but a structural position within a social system whose inequalities are grounded in private control over universally required resources. (*Mistaken Identity*, p.46). Unless those structures are changed, white privilege will continue regardless of what individual white people say or think. Individuals should certainly reflect critically upon their values and conduct, but that alone is not going to solve the deeper problems the emerging struggle is trying to address.

The bigger question therefore is how to build a unified political movement against those structural problems that the protests highlight. Those problems are not only police violence against black Americans, (although that is obviously an essential problem), but more deeply, the structural racism of capitalist society. In order for there to be police violence, there must be police, and in order for there to be police, they must serve a social function that the ruling class finds worth funding. The police do indeed serve and protect, but mostly they serve and protect the ruling class from any group that they deem a threat. In a racist society, the racially subaltern group will appear as a double threat: to the property of the ruling class, and its physical security. Racist ideology amplifies the threat, and is the underlying explanation for the systemic violence police direct against members of the demonized group.

Here is where the political problem becomes acute. Surely we have reached peak hypocrisy when corporations who super-exploit labourers from the Global South call for “racial justice.” Justice, like charity, begins at home: if they care about racial justice, turn the factories over to local worker’s control. Or is peak hypocrisy [George W. Bush](#), son of the George H.W. Bush who parlayed the [fear-of-the-black-criminal](#) card into victory in the 1988 Presidential election, and architect of the War on Terror that has destroyed millions of Arab and African lives, proclaiming how heartbroken he is at the murder of another unarmed black man.

Or, on the other hand, has it been reached when the mainstream of the Democratic Party starts pontificating about it finally being time for racial equality and an end to anti-Black violence. Who amongst them has any legitimacy when it comes to race relations? Biden has supported every “[get tough on crime bill](#)” that came through the Senate on his watch. Every “get tough on crime bill” has overt or covert racial over or undertones. The Democratic governors and mayors now decrying Trump’s bully boy act have also imposed curfews and brought in the National Guard. (indeed, Minnesota Governor has [fully mobilized](#) the National Guard and asked the Pentagon for help with “signals intelligence” i.e., spying on demonstrators communications). Is there really more than a symbolic difference between the National Guard and the regular army? Tens of thousands of Guard troops have fought in the Middle East. They have the same training and weaponry. What is the material difference?

When Trump does something that Democrats do, it is loudly denounced, but without practical effect, because the Democratic Party no less than the Republican is fully immersed in the structural racism of the United States. That is not to say that almost everything Trump has decided during his four years in power should be loudly decried, *but not because Trump did it*. It should be decried because it harms people: caging migrants, closing the border on racialized grounds, tax cuts for the rich, walking away from the Iran treaty and imposing sanctions which are, in effect, murderous, starting a new cold war with China, and on and on are all bad policies. They are also policies that have, in somewhat different forms, been supported by mainstream Democrats. Subservience to police unions and the law and order agenda, and all of its racist implications, is no different. (For a more detailed history see my friend and colleague [Jamey’s Essex’s](#) recent blog post).

Political movements develop their own momentum or they lose it and die out. If the protests are allowed to be swallowed completely by the goal of electing Biden and nothing else, the momentum will be lost. If they focus in the short term on meaningful structural reforms, they will have achieved a plateau from which a new phase of the struggles against structural inequality can be waged. That plateau can be the staging ground from which a new American political organization can begin. The challenges are daunting. For more than 50 years the American left has failed to consolidate the energy of social movements into a viable radical alternative the Democrats. It is too early to say if this time will be different.





# One Million More Reasons to Mobilise Against Ford

Posted on June 6, 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.

# Do What I Say, Not What I Do

Posted on July 23, 2019

Meeting in [Bandung, Indonesia](#) in 1955, newly de-colonised nations from Asia and Africa reminded the world that global peace ultimately depends upon the equality of peoples and nations. Their final declaration asserted:

Freedom and peace are interdependent. The right of self-determination must be enjoyed by all peoples, and freedom and independence must be granted, with the least possible delay, to those who are still dependent peoples. Indeed, all nations should have the right freely to choose their own political and economic systems and their own way of life, in conformity with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Two years previously, in 1953, the right of self-determination had been brutally denied to Iranians. Their democratically elected leader, [Mossadegh](#), was overthrown in a CIA backed coup because he wanted to nationalise the oil industry. Like other third world development-nationalists in the post-WWII era, Mossadegh was guilty of the crime of believing that the national resources of Third World countries should be used to improve the lives of citizens, not enrich First World corporations.

The political economy of colonialism treats the earth's resources as the rightful property of capitalist corporations and colonised people as nothing more than super-exploitable workers. Historically, this system has caused grave material harm to its victims. I suspect, however, that as bad as these material harms have been, even worse is the spiritual harm of having to suffer the arrogance at the heart of colonial domination. This arrogance is expressed not only in the idea that the colonial power knows better than the indigenous population how to run their affairs, but in the principle that underlies that idea: the colonised people are themselves to blame for what has befallen them.

There is a brilliant scene in *The Maltese Falcon* that illustrates my point to perfection. Bogart's character, Sam Spade, has the flunky of the main villain, played by Peter Lorre, in a room and is trying to extract information. He backhands Lorre's character across the face. Lorre's character whines and pleads, and Bogart responds: "When you're slapped, you will take it and like it!"

Colonised people have been being slapped and told to like it for centuries. Unlike Lorre's character, they have not taken it. Bandung was their first collective response to the history of domination inflicted on them. Five years later, in 1960, The United Nations passed the [Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#). Article 4 reads:

All armed action or repressive measures of all kinds directed against dependent peoples shall cease in order to enable them to exercise peacefully and freely their right to complete independence, and the integrity of their national territory shall be respected.

Let us consider the current crisis in the Middle East involving Iran, the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (which, as usual, pleads platitudes and does nothing constructive to live up to its principles and commitments). Iran is being accused of escalating the situation, of “very bad behaviour” (in Trump’s preferred child-idiom), of not behaving like a normal nation (Mike Pompeo). Let’s test the claims against reality and the principle of the Declaration on Granting of Independence.

Did Iran sign the treaty limiting its nuclear activities? Yes. Did it abide by those terms? Yes. Did they do anything to provoke or cause Trump to withdraw from the treaty? No. Do normal nations abide by their treaties? Yes. Do normal nations unilaterally withdraw from treaties and then blame the other side for violations that are demonstrably false? No. Did the United States withdraw from the treaty for demonstrably false reasons? Yes. Who is the abnormal nation? The United States.

More generally: Does complete independence include the right to decide how to generate power for the country? Of course it does. Does it include the right to determine the political system according to which the country shall govern itself? Of course it does. Does it include the need to please former colonial powers in the choice of national institutions? Of course, it does not.

If we take seriously the principle of self-determination, then it is impossible not to side with Iran in the current crisis. Iran has the right to develop nuclear power for civilian purposes. It has the right to govern itself according to institutions and principles of its own choosing. If its interests are attacked (as they were, when its tanker was seized by British commandos acting at the behest of the United States) it has the right to defend those interests (by seizing the British flagged tanker in turn). Iran’s legitimacy as a nation is not dependent upon its pleasing the US and the UK.

We should not forget that the current political system was the product of an anti-colonial revolution. In 1979, the Shah was finally overthrown. The revolutionary movement was split between a worker and communist movement and an Islamist side. (The generally ignored story of the communist and worker’s movement is told in Asaf Bayat, *Workers and Revolution in Iran*). In the event, the Islamist wing proved stronger. Whatever criticisms might be made of its principles and practices, it nevertheless emerged from an organic movement of millions of Iranians in reaction against colonial domination. The right of self-determination means the right to create institutions, and it means the right to change them, if the people decide that the existing structures are no longer just or adequate to their goals. It is not for the US or the UK to decide how Iran should be governed, but Iranians.

The real crime of Iran in the eyes of the US is not that it has nuclear reactors, supports Hezbollah, or menaces Israel. Its real crime is that it does not take slaps and like them. It’s defiance thus sets a very bad example for other small nations subjected to economic blackmail and military threat. The political courage it took to seize a British tanker after the British submitted to US pressure to seize the Iranian ship off Gibraltar is considerable. But the courage is not what concerns Western powers.

What really rankles them is that they have been hoist on their own petard of false pretext and hypocrisy. Only Western powers are allowed to invert reality: break treaties and blame the other side, escalate tensions and blame the other side, destroy economies and blame the other side. When the other side plays the Western game, calls their bluff and exposes their bullshit, the world drowns in a cascade of platitudes.

As with most international conflicts, this one too is easy enough to solve in principle. Both sides release the ships they are holding, the US returns to the nuclear agreement signed by Obama, *real* sanctions relief for Iran is forthcoming, diplomatic relations between the US and Iran are gradually normalised. Beyond that, it is the right and duty of all citizens of all countries to organise themselves to solve their own problems. Sixty four years after the Bandung conference the arguments of Third World people's have still not been heard. The arrogance of Western unreason still prevails. And because it still prevails, it is almost impossible to believe that this conflict will be resolved without war.

# The Tragedy of National Dignity

Posted on July 4, 2019

Kant famously distinguished between dignity and price. The value of rational beings, he argued, was their dignity, and that of non-rational beings their price. The implication is that anything that has dignity cannot have a price. Trying to buy dignity is the highest order of moral category mistake and possible only at the cost of complete de-humanization. To try to “buy off” people fighting to have their dignity recognised means treating them as mere things, objects whose interests can be bought and sold.

Dignified beings are always subjects and never objects because they are defined by their capacity to govern their own lives. They do not need instruction from their supposed “betters.” Dignity is the basis of self-respect and, in the political sphere, that which *forces* people to struggle for their freedom. While he did not consistently extend this principle to all human beings, Kant’s philosophy is rooted in the principle that we are all essentially free and capable of self-government:

I cannot admit the expression used even by intelligent men: A certain people ...is not ripe for freedom...According to such a presupposition freedom will never arrive; for we cannot *ripen* to this freedom unless we are already set free— we must be free in order to be able to use our faculties purposively in freedom, and we never ripen for reason except through our own efforts. (Quoted in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, p. 48).

I do not know if Kant would have classed Jared Kushner in the set of intelligent men. But [Kushner’s comment](#) that he doubted whether the Palestinians were ready for self-government exemplifies the degrading attitude towards oppressed people that Kant criticises. To deny that a people is capable of self-government is in essence to deny that they are human beings. This denial is the hallmark of the ideological justification of domination of all sorts. Men long denied that women were capable of self-rule. The greatest of Greek philosophers, Aristotle, thought that many human beings were nothing more than “natural” slaves, mere “tools that could use tools.” The greatest of British liberals, sanctified defender of individuality and freedom of thought and action, J.S. Mill, thought that Britain was entitled to rule India because (despite thousands of years of cultural development) he thought it still its “nonage.” Practicing the principle that charity begins at home, he also argued that the votes of people with property should count for more than workers’ votes, because he thought that workers were too uneducated to have any sense for national goals and purposes. The goal here is to mask the harm that patronizing domination causes: if some people really are not capable of self-government, there is no harm in treating them as objects of rule.

So there is nothing original in Kushner’s racist dehumanization of the Palestinian people. Nor is it overcome by his embarrassing, rightly and roundly denounced plan to “invest” 50 billion dollars in infrastructure if only Palestinians will give up their struggle for national self-determination. Underdeveloped infrastructure is an attractive target for capital, and one can be sure that American corporations and Gulf Oil money see Palestine as a profitable opportunity.

One only needs local allies (such as are always easy to find in any so-called “business community”) and political stability to work.

Most Palestinians easily saw through the ruse and— as they have done for seventy years, through some of the worst possible political and social circumstances, loudly insisted that their humanity is not for sale. [Aya al Ghawazzi reminds](#) everyone that the Palestinian cause is the cause of all oppressed people: to control their own lives by controlling the institutions that govern them.

This conference, in fact, is one step in the continual dehumanization of the Palestinian people. It says that the [Palestinian cause costs as much as 50 billion dollars](#) as distributed to Palestine (\$28 billion) and surrounding countries like Egypt (\$12 billion), Jordan (\$7 billion) and Lebanon (\$6 billion) within the next 10 years. It says that the blood of the Palestinian martyrs and the people’s long suffering can be bargained upon. That money can make up to Palestinians for the ongoing ethnic cleansing which began in 1948. That the incremental genocide inflicted by Israel on Palestinians can be forgotten for crumbs of bread and a trivial sum of money. And most importantly, that the unquestionable right of Palestinians to return to their usurped homelands and compensation as guaranteed in Resolution 94 can be alienated.

Morally, legally, politically, the Palestinians have right and justice on their side. But what does global reality care about right and justice? To the world’s real power brokers, they are either meaningless slogans or synonyms for: “do what we say and you shall be free!” They turn the world completely upside down: break treaties, and accuse the other side of breaking the treaty; starve people into submission, and proclaim how much they love the people they are starving, aid and abet colonial domination and violence, and blame the victims for not being capable of self-government.

So the struggle will continue, but it is, I fear, a tragic struggle. Dignified people cannot rest until their dignity is affirmed by achieving self-determination. But where is the alignment of forces that can make the goal real? The Palestinians have fought for seventy years, mostly without allies, and they have survived, but their hope for their own state, the right of return guaranteed by international law, and the return of their historical lands is daily undermined by on-going settlements and the practical silence of America, the European Union, and the Arab world. Israel is criticised for this or that disproportionate assault on Gaza, but the underlying principle and mundane practice of occupation is never mentioned. (One might think, if one were cynical, and I am, that outrages in Gaza are used by Israel to attract criticism of the spectacle all the while distract attention from the substantive reality of colonial domination).

The tragedy is thus that the struggle cannot but continue, because the Palestinians are human beings and their dignity demands nothing less than their national freedom. But it will continue, I fear, largely without effective allies and in a global situation that will continue to lionize Israel as “the only democracy” in the region. Sad indeed that democracy— a system whose core principle is collective self-determination- continues to be attached to systems that manifestly destroy it, but such is, as I noted, the morally inverted world in which we live.

Al Ghawazzi pins some hopes on popular mobilisations in the West (around the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions movement in particular) to lend crucial support, but I fear that these hopes will be



dashed. It is true that the success of BDS, especially on university campuses, has provoked a backlash of attempts to demonize it as anti-Semitic and to make [it illegal](#). Yet, that response— so completely opposite to the analogous movement against apartheid in the 1980's— just shows how little government's feel compelled to change their policy towards Israel. Anti-Semitism remains an ace in the hole for governments to play to get out of having to confront the realities of Israeli colonialism. This point was brought home forcefully when the US member of the House of Representatives [Ilhan Omar](#) was vilified as an anti-Semite and received death threats for making easily empirically verifiably true claims about the outsized influence of the Israel lobby on US government policy.

As for “the people” of the West. There are many groups and individuals who have stood and continue to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, but the overwhelming majority do not consistently care. To speak only of the Canadian context: on the day a report was issued that Canadian society is built on an [on-going genocide](#) against indigenous peoples, the country's attention was fixed on the Toronto Raptor's basketball team's pursuit of the NBA championship. More than 10 million people (about one third of all Canadians) watched the final game later the same week. Suffice it to say that ten million people have not read the report on missing and murdered indigenous women. If almost no one cares about our own history of colonial violence, it is fantasy to believe they will disrupt their summer to seriously support the cause of a heroic people thousands of kilometers away.

I am not being moralistic or criticising people for living their lives. People will live their lives as they decide whether I criticise them or not (and I am no different). The problem here, I think, is wider and deeper, and involves the inability of any political issue to generate a movement that has traction and staying power. Take the Yellow Vests (please). I [worried last year](#) that their refusal to develop a leadership, a program, and a project to take power would lead to the weakening of the movement into predictable Saturday spectacle. I think I have been proven correct. One cannot build a movement around outrage and a kaleidoscope of issues. We need to do the hard work of analysing particular problems into their underlying systematic causes, and then work together, from whatever particular perspective we are coming from, to formulate specific policies that can make a positive difference in the short term to those who are suffering most, and generate a counter-dynamic that can produce longer term, deeper, structural changes. People's empathy and emotions are too easily distracted. Political poetry is elevating, but right now we need some prose.

# Fatal Distractions

Posted on September 1, 2019

It is not that the liberal media is full of fake news, as authoritarians like Trump wish it were, but that it focuses on superficial dimensions of fundamental problems. Real problems: right-wing populism, inaction on climate change, migration and immigration issues, and global war and peace are explained in terms of names that serve as metonyms for the problems. While the names: Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini matter, and their cavalier rejection of old norms of political civility offend polite, educated sensibilities, if our criticism extends no further than the demand to change the names, our understanding of deeper causes is impeded. The strategy is perhaps not self-conscious, but its effect is to prevent exploration of alternatives whose requirements might negatively affect the social position of many who lend their voices to the daily chorus of outrage.

Some uncomfortable truths: every single problem which liberals connect with the *name* of a right-wing populist (including right-wing populism) pre-existed the current historical conjuncture. Donald Trump did not cause the racism at the heart of so much conflict in America, nor did he write the Second Amendment. Bolsonaro did not set the Amazon ablaze. Boris Johnson did not personally generate animosity towards the EU amongst many working class English who live and try to survive outside the City of London, and Maxime Bernier is not the first to stoke fears of “mass immigration” in Canada.

Internationally, the United States has been bitterly hostile to Iran since 1979, when Iranians overthrew the Shah, the American’s puppet. The US Congress undermined the sanctions relief Kerry and Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran promised before the ink had dried. Tens of thousands of government workers— not ‘the deplorables’ who voted for Trump but graduates of the self-proclaimed greatest universities on earth- depend upon maintaining Cold War fears of the Russian menace, 30 years after it ceased to be a meaningful threat and ideological enemy of the West. China is certainly a threat to Uighurs, Tibetans, and Hong Kong democracy advocates, but it is hardly an expansionary imperialist threat on the order of nineteenth century England or twentieth and twenty-first century America.

Opposition to superficiality is easy: a tweet, an internet flash mob to remove offending signage, a virtual shaming circle to extract an apology work their magic at the level of appearances, but tend to leave the structure intact. Too often criticism is conducted in the name of nostalgia for the ‘rule-based order’ purportedly undermined by Trump and his ilk. Let us date this order from the end of World War Two. It witnessed the birth of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but also NATO, the Cold War, vicious hot wars in defence of imperialist client states like South Viet Nam, the economic undermining of post-colonial regimes in Africa, and the global intensification of the economic system that has brought us climate change and the extinction crisis.

The rule book of that ‘rules based order’ thus permitted the exploitation of the Global South and created a trading regime that made it impossible for them to compete on terms that could create viable national economies. It allowed the invasion of countries across the Middle East, North

Africa, and Central Asia. It encouraged sky rocketing inequality and depended upon the global hegemony of the United States. It exercised that hegemony as an exclusive licence to appropriate the resources and labour of the Global South at bargain basement rates no matter what the consequences for local populations. It gave itself and its allies *carte blanche* to dominate, oppress, and neo-colonise. It was indifferent to genocide where no economic or geo-strategic interests were at stake, and happily waged war to militarily destroy societies whose leaders had the temerity to oppose the rules.

The nostalgia is easy to understand: globalisation and its cosmopolitan liberal ideology worked well for one faction of the Western ruling class. Its moralising universal justifications made everyone feel good as they shopped the world's cultures for interesting trinkets and cuisines. But at ground level reality this regime was just imperialism by other means: the Global South was expected to sell its natural resources at starvation rates, to grow avocados for our toast rather than grains to feed their people. It intensified competition between national working classes to help destroy the power of labour movements and was used as a source of just enough labour (legal or illegal) to force wages down in the metropolitan countries at the centre of liberal-capitalism. If the nations of the Global South served this function without complaint, then the 'best and brightest' amongst them would be admitted to the finest universities so they could one day return home to teach their people how to sing the praises of this beneficent world order.

If anyone wants to understand why right wing populists are in power across increasing swaths of the world, part of the explanation has to be what the old world did to the lives of millions upon millions of people. It completely undermined their ability to make a living: village cultures and traditional agriculture was destroyed by agri-business (Vandana Shiva has charted its murderous wrath on Indian farmers in chilling detail). In the Middle East, decades of American imperialism constrained native energies and intelligence and fueled an atavistic reaction with which America is still at war almost 20 years after 9/11. In the West, unions have been destroyed, social democracy co-opted by the liberal-capitalist austerity consensus, and workers left at the mercy of ever more quickly shifting economic-technological forces and their children gobbling anti-depressants while shuddering in anxiety over a future that is equally unpredictable and terrifying.

A second part of the explanation has to be the failure of the Left (as widely as one wants to construe this term) to find a political idiom, a set of values, and an organizational form capable of mobilising and directing a more complex and diverse working class to fight for structural social and economic changes. It is easy to do what I am doing here: criticise at a very abstract and general level without providing any concrete policy alternatives that can be enacted in the short term to actually counteract some of the structural problems and thus weaken the appeal of right-wing populist sloganeering. We do need policy, not just counter-slogans. A "ruthless criticism of everything that exists" (Marx) sounds radical, but accomplishes nothing if not connected to on-the-ground changes.

At the same time, a purely pragmatic approach to structural problems will fail. Let us take the next American election and Brexit as examples. If, as seems likely, Democratic primary voters fall prey to Joe Biden's argument that he should win because he is "electable" they will simply be voting for more of the same policy with less obnoxious bravado selling it. Biden has not signed off on the Green New Deal, single payer health care, rational and peaceful relationships

with the rest of world (especially China, Russia, and Iran), or committed to anything, really, aside from not being Donald Trump. In the UK, people were right to mobilise against the unelected Boris Johnson's request to the hereditary monarch to prorogue parliament as an undemocratic ploy to force through Brexit on his terms. But the idea that "British democracy" is at stake here misses the deeper point that British democracy, like all liberal-democracies, is a deeply contradictory political society.

It is not just that it is a "democracy" with an unelected upper chamber and a hereditary Head of State, but more seriously that the resources that all need to live and thrive are controlled by a ruling class and exploited for the sake of profits appropriated by that class. Brexit has become a fight between two factions of that ruling class as much as anything else. While it certainly shows the stupidity of allowing frighteningly complex issues to be decided by a one off, yes or no simplistic question by a simple majority, the debacle which has been the past two years also shows how contemptuous policy elites are about the reasons why some working class voters chose Brexit. They could see what the EU did to Greek workers, they could see in their own communities on going social decay and economic stagnation, and they blamed the EU. Brexit will not solve their problems, but let us not forget that the austerity route chosen by the Tories and Blairites before them had the full support of the EU Central Bank and Brussels policy-makers.

Solutions to these problems cannot be institutionalised overnight. At the same time, they will never be institutionalised unless people break, in mind and in deed, from the old rules. Let us not forget that 'nostalgia' is an ailment: home *sickness*.

# Fatal Distractions: The Sequel

Posted on September 29, 2019

Just like Hollywood, where sequels seem to appear faster than the original, so too in politics. Only a month ago I warned about the way issues of style, wrongly inflated to matters of substance, become distractions from real problems. There are innumerable reasons to resist Donald Trump, but opponents have to keep one principle firmly in mind: defeating the person does not mean that you have defeated the politics.

Fortunately, I am a small man from a small town living in a small city, so I am used to being ignored. Hence, I was not overly bothered last week, when, mixed with the toxic exhaust from Zug Island, news wafted across the Detroit River that the Democrats would launch an impeachment investigation of Trump.

Although I resisted, I started to think ...

Would you call me a conspiracy theorist if I suggested— just suggested, mind you, not argued—that the move to launch an impeachment investigation of Trump was tactical. I mean, just when it becomes clear that the mainstream of the Democratic Party has no alternative to his policies on the crucial issues of the day: Iran, Syria, Russia, Palestine, climate crisis, the future of the economy, and the democratization of social institutions, they finally launch an impeachment investigation. Could it not be that Pelosi et. al. are worried that they are losing the Party narrative to an insurgent Left, whom they hope will now be brought to heel back at the political centre?

Is it impossible to imagine Democratic power brokers squirreled away in an oak-paneled back room of some hoity-toity DC restaurant, saying to each other, “The candidate debates are straying too far across the line towards discussion of things that sound like real alternatives to austerity and naked class power. Plus, with the election drama in Israel, we don’t want Tlaib, Omar, and Ocasio-Cortez squaking on about annexation and Palestinian rights. This phone call business gives us the cover we need to launch the ultimate distraction: impeachment.”

That could not really happen, could it?

I claim no expertise in American constitutional law, but I am pretty skilled at reading between the lines. Reading the transcript of the Trump’s phone [call with Zelensky](#) (who, I have to remark, proves himself a spineless, supine, sycophant), I cannot clearly see where Trump actually threatens to [withhold aid](#). Others, with more knowledge of American history and law than I have, and whose opinions I respect, do see a smoking gun here: an implied *quid pro quo*: aid in exchange for an investigation of Biden’s son. But even if there is such an implied deal, is Trump’s approach really substantively different from his boorish, clumsy, property-developer-from-Queen’s style of international diplomacy: look for a weakness, point it out loudly to the person on the other side of the table, threaten, and then .... not do very much.?

The substantive issue seems to me to be American foreign policy generally. On this matter, no one can seriously believe that the world's most powerful country has not *constantly* tied aid to doing America's bidding. I mean, no one is that naive, are they? Trump gave a very much more overt example of the same approach just a few months ago, when he openly threatened to [cut off aid](#) to Guatemala and Honduras and to impose tariffs on Mexico unless they 'staunched the flow' of migrants. A subtler mind than mine needs to explain to me why the Ukraine phone call is different in kind than that threat.

Is it that Trump's request concerned a political rival? Why should that fact make a difference? Trump did not launch the initial investigation; if a new investigation would benefit him in the election, I again ask: "so what?" That is just normal dirty-pool politics. Who would not want dirt on a rival? [Sanctity of elections](#)? I mean, come on, how can serious people think that elections are holy rites? They are mostly spectacles in which muck-raking and dirt-digging are the main entertainment.

I am not defending Trump in the least. Rather, I have reached peak exasperation with the mythical America the Good that orthodox Democrats and a few "conservatives of conscience" — yes, that term has really been used with a straight face— keep trying to sell. Either Slavery, the Indian Wars, the Spanish-American War, the Monroe Doctrine, centuries of murderous intervention in Central and South America, Viet Nam, Iraq 1 and 2 etc.,etc., and so forth never happened (because Trump did not cause them, and Trump alone is the cause of all evil in the universe). Or, they are not what they seem to be—racist warfare— because, again, America, in this pablum-history, is by definition a force for good. The "indispensable nation" according to Ste. Madelaine Albright, as she justified the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children as a result of Clinton era sanctions.

It is an existential injustice of the highest order that there is no god to pass ultimate judgement on these misanthropic hypocrites.

The leaders of the Democratic Party and their weepy, ever-outraged-enablers in the liberal media have let their ire towards Trump make them so blind to reason that they have: opposed peace in Afghanistan— after 18 years of futile, mostly civilian-killing warfare; attacked his decision to pull troops from Syria; and are anxious to flood Ukraine with more weapons— weapons which will only stoke the now simmering embers of civil war. They could not admit publicly that Trump made the right decision in firing Cold War psychopath John Bolton. They have said nothing critical about Netanyahu, whose anti-Palestinian racism long, long predates Trump. They decry his decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but have aided and abetted Israeli colonialism from the beginning. When some amongst them call bullshit on America's unwavering support for "the Middle East's only democracy" (yes, that too is said with a straight face and without irony, as if the right of Israeli citizens to vote cleanses the blood of Palestinian children their army daily sheds), they join Republicans in denouncing them as anti-Semitic.

Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!

The real problem that the left has to face (and I mean everyone on the left, wherever they live) is that we are responsible for the tide of right-wing authoritarian populism. Right-wing populism

can only succeed where the left fails: fails to make convincing arguments, fails to address the unmet needs of working class communities, fails to make the links between different forms of oppression and exploitation, fails to win votes, fails to win elections, and fails to use power boldly when it does win. Case in point: Even after as shambolic a week as can be imagined in politics, Boris Johnson's Conservatives are still [12 points up](#) on Corbyn's Labour Party. If that does not wake us up, what will?

(Although right-wing populism has not (yet?) taken hold of Canadian politics at the federal level, it is not because the Liberals, NDP, or Greens have offered up anything in the way of inspiring and transformative policies in this country's on-going election campaign. While I have no illusions that the seeming re-birth of social democracy in the United States is going to solve the deep structural problems the world faces, at least people like Sanders, Warren, and (on foreign policy, Tulsi Gabbard) publicly call out the actual class forces behind critical social problems. That is a big step forward in American politics. The NDP should pay attention and expose the real drivers of climate change and soaring inequality, and present a credible plan to start addressing them at the structural level where they have to be tackled).

There are signs that a new left is not only stirring in the United States, but that it is going to put forward policies that would cut into the power of finance capital (public health care and free tuition would end the power of insurance companies and banks over people's lives and education). Although it is hard to hear over the noise of the spectacle, there are also real criticisms of the recent history of American foreign policy (Tulsi Gabbard, along with Tlaib, Omar, and Ocasio-Cortez). These are the arguments that must be built upon and converted into a winning election platform and then implemented, forced through no matter what the resistance of the financiers.

Right-wing success feeds off of left-wing failure. Clintonism and "Third Way" social democracy spectacularly failed working class people in all of their real complexity and diversity and in all dimensions of their lives. Their policies benefited big finance and the *nouveau riche* "creative capitalist" hucksters of the World Wide Web. Trade deals de-industrialized large swatches of North America and Europe. The real beneficiaries were not workers in the Global South, who work in mostly militarized conditions without unions, benefits, or any real job security, but Western corporations, which repatriate the spectacular profits they make from state-enforced exploitation of labour. Instead of choosing a moderate but nevertheless real alternative to this tide of destruction, the Democrats decided to play it safe and run Clinton 2.0 against Trump. They lost.

Now seems the worst time for an impeachment distraction. It will do wonders for CNN's ratings, but it will bracket all the important arguments that Democrats and the wider American Left have been having and which will need to be sharpened over the next twelve months. Class structure, the subordination of human needs to profits, reduction of all of natural and human wealth to an object of exploitation, greed as the defining human good, and major powers who will kill rather than compromise are the real problem, not the Donald. His policies have been exposed as incapable of bettering the lives of American workers. Mainstream democrats may regret distracting their nation from the need to work out a convincing alternative.

# Meanwhile, at the End of the Road...

Posted on September 5, 2019

... some people have had enough. They have chosen to win, or go down fighting. Sick of another corporate betrayal and appropriation of public money under false pretexts, over one hundred members of Unifor Local 200 have erected barricades in front of the Nemak aluminum casting plant. The company announced recently that despite commitments made in the most recent the collective agreement, [the plant would be closed in 2020](#) and the production shifted to Mexico.

End of the road? Or the beginning? The 401, the MacDonald Cartier Freeway, starts, (or ends), just around the corner. Kilometer one to us, for the power-brokers of Toronto it is the end of the road, the end of the line, a dead end. And it sure looks like it. The country's greatest freeway stops abruptly at the Ojibway Parkway. As you wait at the light your sight is dominated by the apocalyptic flares of Zug Island, the massive steel plant across the river in Detroit. The air is heavy with the smell of sewage from Windsor's main water treatment facility. And across the street from that is the Unifor barricade.

End of the road? With unsmiling hypocrisy, the company, after taking millions in tax payer dollars, after signing a collective agreement that committed to keeping production running until 2022, has argued that the workers are engaging in an illegal strike. And with complete predictability, a judge has issued an injunction ordering the workers back to work. Talking with the workers while visiting the barricades on Sept. 5th, I was impressed with their political savvy. They knew the law would not be their friend. They knew they would be ordered back to work. But they were prepared for the result, and [they have defied it](#).

We are a country of the rule of law! And it sure is, for the bosses. Workers think: "Our collective agreements are law." And so in good faith they agreed to wage concessions in return for work in the last collective agreement. But that is not law, not the type of law that really rules. That is a convenience that lasts as long as the bosses want it to last, which is to say, so long as it serves their interests.

The law for the workers is the boot of force, of economic power, explained by the chorus of boss and judge, who shout: "Work when we tell you to work. Go home when you are told to go home!"

This is the law of reality, we are told, and reality changes. When reality changes, well, what can you do? It is not personal, it is just that conditions have changed. It is no one's fault. We all have to accept changed realities, don't we?

Beginning of the road? No, we don't have to merely accept reality. Humans are not inert things, but social self-conscious agents. We can organize, protest, demand changes to reality. But reality, it is true, is stubborn. It does change, but not always for the better. And justice is rarely in the drivers seat.



But sometimes you have to fight and if you lose, you go down swinging.

But how easy it would be to organise things so people did not have to swing and lose. But that happy outcome would require us to understand reality differently, according to a logic of good and bad for human beings, not profit and loss for bosses who forget that they too are human beings.

It would mean thinking of reality not as one or another dead end— good for me, bad for you— but as an open road that is enjoyable for everyone to stroll at their leisure. It would require that we understand that “reality” is always a frozen moment of a deeper truth: ultimately, we inhabit the world we create. If the world as we know it is not working— and, really, who can seriously maintain that it is working?— we can change it.

Beginning of the road? Sanelly shared out, there is enough for everyone. We do not have to suffer from the ruling zero sum game in which people’s livelihoods depend upon profit rates set by unthinking and uncaring forces. Life as shuddering anxiety about when the clock will run out on the job that you need.

If we planned production and worked for the sake of satisfying the needs that must be met, then we could share the work that needs doing, and the rest would be up to us. Life as time to explore, interact, think, feel, create.

End of one road, beginning of another.

# Time and Political Struggle

Posted on September 18, 2019

On the evening of September 15th, after holding out against two weeks of company threats and a contempt of court finding, Unifor Local 200 workers [ended their blockade](#) of the Nemak plant in Windsor. They have taken down the barricades in exchange for negotiations and an arbitrated settlement of the union's disputed position that the decision to close the plant violates the existing collective agreement. It would be easy to be disappointed with this outcome, as it seems almost certain that the company will get their way and close the plant next year. It seems to prove once again that so long as workers' fight on the bosses' terms (the courts and arbitrators), for a shrinking share of the capitalist pie (jobs) they will lose (and even if they win, they win alienating and exploitative jobs, not a future free from alienation and exploitation). From an abstract theoretical perch these arguments are correct, but they miss the most salient points thrown up by this fight.

The first and most important point is that struggles for deeper social changes might start with failures, but there is a difference between a failure to fight, and a failure to win. A working class with no confidence at all will not even bother to fight; a working class beginning to wake up after decades of quiescence has to rebuild its strength. It does that by not taking threats to work and working conditions lying down. Even though the Nemak workers are going back to work, and even though it is almost certain that the arbitrator will ultimately rule against them, they stood, defiant, for 13 days against an injunction, and thus set an excellent example for every other worker in the country. They said, in effect: "it is time to stand up. We do not have to take dictation from the bosses. At the very, very least they have to answer to us when they violate agreements that we entered into in good faith. There is a higher law than the courts: the law of doing what one needs to protect one's interests, to survive in a cut throat world, to show everyone that workers are human beings and cannot be treated like expendable things."

At the same time, the inability to sustain the fightback points to a deep and difficult social contradiction that workers, and anyone fighting for fundamental social changes, is going to run up against. This is a contradiction between the immediate demands of survival and the open ended time it would take to build an alternative social system. Working people are dependent on their wages for survival (or social benefits, which are paid for by taxes on wages and profits, and so ultimately still depend on the health of the capitalist economy) People who live in cold climates typically rely on fossil fuels to heat their homes. These forms of immediate dependence explain attitude that, from an abstract perspective, sound so maddening: workers who criticise the boss but fight to maintain their jobs; people who are concerned about the climate crisis but continue to burn natural gas. In the short term, there is no choice but to stick with the systems upon which your life depends. Over the long, unfortunately, life and better lives might depend on fundamental changes.

As regards work, structural dependence on paid employment is what makes people working class. This structural dependence is what, above all, democratic socialism would overcome. However, it cannot be ended overnight, but until it is ended workers' short term struggles are

always in danger of becoming victims of wars of attrition. The capitalists, with the law typically on their side, can wait workers out or bleed their resources dry (Unifor was facing fines of 25 000 dollars a day and individual officers 1000 dollars per day). Overcoming the dependence requires long term struggle, but dependence means that your ability to survive without the work you are refusing to do is time-sensitive in the extreme.

Social contradictions are not like logical contradictions. From a logical contradiction, all conclusions follow: if my conclusion affirms a and not-a, then it is true that if a is an apple, it is also an orange (since an orange is not-a and a is a and not-a at the same time and in the same respect). The apple is equally anything else you could list, because everything else in the universe is not-a. As we can see, truth gets confusing with logical contradictions, so they are best avoided by careful reasoning. Social contradictions cannot be avoided, because they are not formed by pairs of conceptual opposites, but result from collisions between different social groups with different interests, both of which are capable of modifying their behaviour and goals. Collisions of social opposites do not lead to annihilation or logical absurdities, but social changes.

There are three general sorts of changes. On the one hand, there are concessions which are made in order to return the situation to normal. This sort of concessions appears to be all that Nemak has offered. At the other extreme, there are revolutionary changes which would create completely new social institutions. It is easy to find abstract arguments that contend that no major social contradiction can be resolved without revolutionary changes. It is much more difficult to find concrete arguments that are powerful enough to actually mobilise revolutionary forces. The key problem here is that no one can say with any certainty how a new society would work (beyond general assurances that it would solve everything because it would be the opposite of this society). Moreover, the most recent examples of revolutions that we can point to: Libya, Syria, have not turned out well. Instead of a new and better society they have devolved into murderous civil wars fueled by the intervention of major foreign powers.

If concessions do not address the problem and a progressive revolution is not in the offing in the foreseeable future, hope must be invested in a third possibility: smaller scale structural changes that create space and time for deeper and wider changes in an unfolding process of transformative social change. How is that to happen if workers cannot survive outside of paid employment (or its social benefit equivalent) for long enough to survive for the long-term? The answer is to struggle for changes to the nature of employment. The Nemak crisis, and the analogous crisis in Oshawa offer opportunities for just these sorts of demands.

GM Workers in Oshawa are being subjected to the same loss of their factory as Nemak workers in Windsor. Like Nemak workers, the GM workers did not meekly accept the GM decision, but instead fought back. They have won a concession (which is nevertheless a victory and another good lesson): the company will consider using a small fraction of the space and workforce to produce parts. But there are other ideas which, while bold, are not impossible within existing institutions. However, if they were realised they would point beyond existing institutions towards new models of public ownership and workers' control incompatible with the logic of capitalism. At the same time, since they are realizable here and now they do not depend upon a "revolutionary break" for which the required social and political forces do not exist.

In response to the Oshawa closing, [Sam Gindin](#) urged the CAW leadership to go beyond negotiations to work on the transformation of the plant into a publicly owned and worker-controlled facility for the production of electric vehicles. Markets would be initially guaranteed by government contract. Financing and start up costs would also require [government support](#) that is impossible to imagine with a capitalist party in power, but not impossible to imagine with a worker friendly government (an NDP radicalised by the threat of a election drubbing?) Instead of treating capitalism as a fixed and final reality that workers must either accept today or overthrow tomorrow, it works in the spaces created by democratic institutions and norms to find means of inserting an anti-capitalist principle and practice into the heart of the system. It shows that there are real alternatives to survival and creative activity than capitalist labour markets that can be realised right now, creating the time we need to fundamentally transform society by expanding non-capitalist employment spaces. Short term dependence on paid *capitalist* employment is reduced by people putting themselves to work in a non-capitalist firm. The system is not transformed, but a living alternative is created that serves as a real, not text book example, that another world is possible.

# Perpetual Peace, Not

Posted on October 18, 2019

An under-appreciated problem of normative political philosophy is that it tries to evaluate and change historical processes according to principles which are framed by minds who stand apart from the contradictions of political reality. Case in point: Syria. One is tempted to argue that the solution to the conflict in Syria is “self-determination for the Syrian people.” The principle of self-determination has been the defining value of anti-imperialist struggle for more than a century, and the problems that the “Syrian people” are grappling with are problems that derive from the history of imperial intervention (Ottoman, British, French, American, Soviet) in the region.

But who are “the Syrian people?” The value: self-determination, is clean and precisely definable. The reality: multifaceted civil war, is messy, complex, and contradictory. If the principle of self-determination is the solution, then does it follow that every component part of the Syrian people should determine its own future on its own? Do the Kurds, Sunnis, Alawites, etc. carve up the existing state into their own independent countries? Is some sort of federal arrangement possible? And who decides?

That last question is really the crucial one, and helping to answer it is perhaps the only useful contribution that normative political philosophy can make to help resolve this and similar conflicts.

The civil war began in the midst of the “Arab Spring” as protests against the authoritarianism of the Assad regime. It almost immediately degenerated into a brutal proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The desire to weaken Iran by toppling their ally Assad turned into a political low pressure system that began sucking in other major powers, as a tornado sucks up everything in its path. Russia, the US and its allies, and Turkey were all drawn into the vortex. A struggle that began as a series of peaceful demonstrations devolved into a full scale, multi-front war that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions. It has become a flashpoint in American and European politics. In the later case the refugee crisis it caused has catalyzed a far right resurgence in Germany and Eastern Europe, where fascist forces have mobilised against resettled Syrian refugees. In the United States, it has united Democrat and Republican in bipartisan support for the on-going presence of American troops.

The politically naive will believe that American troops are there doing the work of angels, protecting “the Syrian people” and the world from ISIS and working to create “democracy and human rights.” The liberal defenders of the “rule-based international system” are silent when asked which rule of international law permits American troops to be in Syria in the first place.

Details, details. Who needs international law when God is on your side?

History tells us that the United States (indeed, no great power) does anything selflessly for any group, cares about international law only when it suits their purposes, and only ever acts in its

own strategic interests. The defining interest in Syria for the United States was never ISIS, but always Iran, and to a lesser extent, Russia. As evidence, consider how peace-and- love-for-the-Kurds-[Democrats](#) are fuming about Trump's decision to withdraw troops as a victory for Putin and Iran. If it is all about the Kurds, (who are not being attacked by either Russia or Iran, but NATO ally Turkey), then who cares about Putin and Rouhani?

The fact of the matter is that if the United States cared about Kurdistan, it could have helped carve out an independent nation for the Kurds at any time over the past century. In reality, no one in America cared at all about the Kurds until Iraq War 1. No one raised a peep in America when Saddam [gassed Kurdish forces](#) during the Iran-Iraq war, because Saddam was then a US ally. Once he became the Satan of Mesopotamia, American policy makers suddenly woke up to the usefulness of the Kurds as proxy fighters against Saddam. Make no mistake: small nations like the Kurds matter to great powers only as bodies or ideological cover. There is no future for any oppressed nation struggling for its independence in hoping that they will be liberated by a great power. They will be *used* by great powers, and abandoned when they are deemed no longer useful.

American liberals can dream all they want about their "indispensability." The reality of the great anti-colonial revolutions of the twentieth century is that they were fought directly against America and/or its European allies. The historical record proves beyond any shadow of reasonable doubt that the primary use of the American military has been to conquer foreign nations (beginning with the indigenous nations of what became the United States). Nothing produces bi-partisan support like a foreign war against smaller countries that can be dressed up as a liberation struggle for some third group that can be sold to the American public as helpless victims in need of salvation.

### [American Military Operations Since 1776](#)

The Kurds are simply the latest actors in the victim-saviour drama with which American imperialism has disguised its real motives for more than a century. The Kurds are not being abandoned by Trump. Their real cause- an independent Kurdistan- has never been embraced by any faction of the American establishment. Has Nancy Pelosi endorsed the program of the Kurdistan Worker's Party? Does she endorse an independent Kurdish homeland carved out of Northern Syria *and southern Turkey*? Of course not, because she and the Democratic party have no interest in Kurdistan.

We have seen America "betray" the Kurds already. Two years ago, when they voted to declare independence from Iraq the [Iraqi army invaded](#), and not a tear was shed in Washington by anyone. Someone should ask Pelosi why there was no hue and cry then.

Philosophy has no solution to these centuries old conflicts. All it can do is to say that the only approach consistent with the principle of self-determination is for the groups directly involved to sit down and find a way to organize their lives that they can all live with in the short term. Perhaps, then, over the longer term, deeper conflicts might give way to new configurations of social space. In the immediate term, nothing good can happen until the killing stops, and the removal of American soldiers is a small step in the *right* direction. Turkey, Iran, Russia, and

Saudi-paid mercenaries need to follow. Then all the groups to the conflict in Syria will have to calculate whether they are strong enough to continue the fight on their own, without foreign backing. Then, when they must “contemplate the real conditions of their lives,” they might be more willing to stop shooting and start figuring out how to live together again.





# Addendum: Did You Hear The One About Canada Being a “Rule of Law” Country...

Posted on November 17, 2019

No sooner had my plane touched down in London last weekend than news arrived of the [coup in Bolivia](#). It took a couple of days of what I am sure was intense analysis by Liberal party experts, but to no one's surprise our indefatigable champions of the rule of law have accepted Sen. Jeanine Áñez as the legitimate acting president of the country. Do you remember when Chrystia Freeland lectured everyone on the planet that Canada was a [“rule of law country”](#) in response to criticism that Canada's arrest of Meng Wanzhou showed Canada was nothing more than the spineless servant of Donald Trump's trade war? How does she then explain accepting as legitimate an acting president with no formal legitimacy under the Bolivian constitution? I suppose, on the same basis as her accepting Juan Guaido as the legitimate President of Venezuela, even though he lacks any formal authority. I suppose, on the same basis as her accepting Arseniy Yatsenyuk, late President of Ukraine, who was installed by a [US backed coup](#) (sorry, “colour revolution”) a few years ago.

Connect the dots. See that Canada, like the European Union and other liberals so enamored of the “rules based order” Trump has supposedly smashed, line up with him whenever a left-wing ruler who has had the *cajones* to nationalise industry and redistribute income is illegally overthrown by the rich and right wing in cahoots with the armed forces. (The reason that Guaido is still embarrassingly on the sidelines is because most of the Venezuelan armed forces remained loyal to the revolution, probably out of fealty to Chavez, a former paratrooper).

What is most appalling in the case of Bolivia is the openly anti-indigenous ideology driving the right-wing opposition. How does the Trudeau government square its purported concern for indigenous reconciliation with the overthrow of Morales, the first indigenous president of Bolivia who incorporated indigenous law into the constitution, by [an openly racist religious lunatic](#) who sees her goal as making Bolivia safe for Jesus again by sending the pagan devils back to the mountains where they belong?

Canadian hypocrisy is a disgrace and needs to be widely and loudly shouted from the rooftops.

# The Troubles With Democracy: Book Launch

Posted on November 13, 2019

Tonight the Off the Fence book series, of which my *The Troubles With Democracy* is a part, will be officially launched at Houseman's Books in London. Below is a transcript of the paper that I will deliver.

The Troubles With Democracy:

Off the Fence Series Launch

Houseman's Books

London, UK

November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019

Concerns about the future of liberal democracy have been rising since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. His victory shocked the liberal intelligentsia, which felt certain that his boorishness, his open sexism, his dog whistle racism, and class position would undermine his candidacy. Yet, he prevailed, and he prevailed by carrying four working class states in the US Midwest. True, he carried them by the slimmest of margins, and he might well have lost at least one of them had Sanders been the candidate, but his defeat of Hilary Clinton in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin set off a panic amongst mainstream political scientists to explain why the "white working class" would embrace a silver spoon fed billionaire as their champion. The class basis of Trump's victory was more complex, of course, but let us stick with the official worry by way of introduction to the problem I will explore tonight: the real troubles with democracy.

Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounck provided the most alarmist analysis of the Trump victory. Trump was part of a global wave of rejection of liberal democratic norms, they argued, which confounds the academic wisdom that once democracy becomes consolidated in a country it becomes permanently consolidated. The consensus in mainstream political science is that democratic countries ensure their own stability by providing more voice, wealth, and peace to their citizens than the alternatives, which will never again become attractive in comparison. Yet, from 2016 until the present right-wing populist forces (including the champions of Brexit here) have won victory after victory. "Citizens in a number of supposedly consolidated democracies in North America and Western Europe," they argued, "have not only grown more critical of their political leaders ... they have also become more cynical about the role of democracy as a political system ... and more willing to express support for authoritarian alternatives."[\[1\]](#) The electoral successes of right wing populists are undoubted, but whether that success signifies a crisis of *democracy* is questionable.

Let us look at the problem from the standpoint of the class that is being blamed for the rise of right-wing populists. Foa and Mounck are not sounding the alarm because traditional wealthy backers of the Republican Party voted overwhelmingly for Trump, but because white working class voters whom everyone assumed would back Clinton voted for Trump. They must all be racist, sexist, and authoritarian if they would vote for this bigoted boor, the story runs; they were all, in Hilary Clinton's terms, a "basket of deplorables."<sup>[ii]</sup> There is no doubt that amongst working class and wealthy supporters of Trump there are racists and sexists and deplorables, but does that explain the ability of Trump to flip four solidly working class states? I do not think so.

The now much lamented "rules based international order" that Trump has worked so hard to dismantle did not work so well for everyone. Working classes around the world continued to see their standard of living stagnate, their communities corrode, their young leave for more dynamic cities. Whether in Youngstown Ohio, or Preston UK, or Athens, Greece, they heard politicians preach the need for austerity, patience, the need to get up to the speed of the new economy, to accept present hardship for a future prosperity that, like the water Tantalus tried to drink, kept flowing away from them. The material crisis of the capitalist economy that roiled the world had been their reality for much longer. The re-organization of global capital which gave us the liberal-cosmopolitan "rules-based order" served the interests of a globalist wing of the ruling class, but not working people. The post-war prosperity that was the pride of liberal-democratic capitalism was dependent upon manufacturing industries. Over the past forty years these jobs have steadily disappeared, and along with them, the promise of generational social mobility upon which the American Dream rested.

At the same time as manufacturing economies were being hollowed out in the United States, parts of Canada, the UK, and Western Europe, global capital was exacting a much more brutal price from peasants and working people in the Global South. While the coastal manufacturing cities of China boomed, across much of Africa and Latin America traditional lifeways collapsed under pressure of debt, new trade agreements, and structural adjustment programs. Millions of people were and are forced North simply to survive. These most desperate of people, whose lives were undermined by the "rules-based international order" formed, as the weak always do, the convenient scape goat that Trump and other right-wing populists needed to galvanize enough working class votes to win. Weighed down by their own bleak prospects, enough working class people could be convinced that the cause of their problems was "illegal immigration" and not, as in truth it was, the same global capitalist system that forced the migrants and refugees from their homes.

If we look at the votes for right wing populists from this structural perspective, we get a rather different understanding of the crisis of democracy. If we focus on the *failure* of liberal-democratic institutions to satisfy the legitimate interests of the working class in secure employment, vibrant communities, public services, and a future for their children, then the crisis signified by the election of Trump and other populists is not a crisis of *democracy*, but a crisis of *liberal-capitalist democracy*. This crisis continues, on economic, social and political fronts.

Economically, despite historically low unemployment figures in the United States, the lives of workers, including the white workers that Trump is counting on for re-election, have not

improved under his regime. Richard Wolff explains the “peculiarities” of the current state of the American economy from a working class perspective:

Two particular peculiarities: People who lost jobs — and those are in the millions in 2008, 2009, and 2010 — have now gotten jobs, that’s true, but the jobs they’ve gotten have lower wages, have less security and fewer benefits than the ones they lost ... And the second thing is that large numbers, particularly of white men aged 30-60, have not gone back into the labor force.

They lost their jobs, it’s very hard for them to find new jobs. The jobs they find are so poor that they’re more likely to stay at home, or do something else. So as the economy comes back at least with some jobs, and as they run out of savings, these people are slowly coming back.

So there’s no need for employers to raise wages to attract workers, they can just pull them slowly out of the desperate population of people who haven’t worked for years and have run out of savings ... It’s a real downturn of the quality of life of America, which is why you don’t see the wages going up and why you see the anger and the bitterness, because all of the promises of Obama before, and of Trump now, are not changing that basic situation.[\[iii\]](#)

From this perspective, votes for Trump in 2016 did not so much express a desire for a strongman to throttle liberal elites, but a desperate hope that a figure outside of the political mainstream might actually listen to their concerns. Perhaps the vote was naïve, perhaps it was in many cases tinged with racism and hatred for Hilary Clinton, but it is the job of politically engaged intellectual to understand and explain, not moralistically judge.

I argue that the troubles with democracy are not explicable as a function of the global tide of right-wing populist electoral victories. These victories cannot be reversed and democracy cannot be protected by restricting the franchise, as a growing chorus of neo-aristocratic philosophers have argued. So called “epistocracy,” in which the better educated would have preponderant political power is laughable in the face of the global disaster wrought on the world by policy elites that gave us neo-liberal trading regimes, austerity packages, and endless racist war across the Middle East and North and East Africa.[\[iv\]](#) These policies were spawned in the wealthiest and most elite universities of the Western world. With superior intelligence like that, I will stick with the purported stupidity of the masses.

Like the fool in Lear, these masses see an important truth: the rules based order that Trump has attacked was not built in their interests, was not in the least democratic, but imposed from on high, if not by overt violence, still by the coercive social power of market forces. Their response has been, perhaps, also foolish, but it does not represent a rejection of democracy—power of the people—but was, I contend a democratic repudiation of decades of deception and betrayal. They were wrong to think that right wing populists would solve their problems, but this mistake does not betoken a global crisis of democracy. Instead it exposes the problem of confusing democracy with liberal-democratic capitalist institutions.

As evidence in support of this interpretation, look at the wave of street protests embroiling every region of the world. Not three years after Foa and Mounck’s paper announcing the global crisis of democracy, people are on the streets of Chile, Ecuador, Egypt, Haiti, Hong Kong, Iraq,

and Lebanon. In the United States, 2018 saw the largest wave of strikes of 1000 and more workers (500 000 in total) since 1986. The highlight was a six week strike by more than 60 000 workers at General Motors. Militancy is having an effect on popular opinion of the labour movement: a recent poll put union approval at a fifty year high.[\[v\]](#)

Working class mobilisation and progressive reaction to Trump is also having an effect on the Democratic primaries. The largest field of candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination is debating deeply democratic structural reforms to American society, including a wealth tax, single payer public health care, free public university education, and a transitional program for overcoming dependence on fossil fuels. Demon words like ‘socialism’ are entering the American vocabulary and questions are being posed about the structural causes of massive, substantive inequalities and their anti-democratic implications. The sorts of reforms being debated will not on their own overcome the deep contradiction between capitalism and democracy, but only the most unthinking ultra-leftist cannot appreciate that the struggle it would take to implement any of them would be a step in the right direction.

Why are they a step in the right democratic direction? Because the trouble with democracy today is not, fundamentally, a crisis of liberal-democratic norms— the party system, division of powers, and the rule of law— but the latest coming to a head of a deeper contradiction between the democratic value of collective self-determination and the liberal-capitalist construction of private property rights (individual and corporate) in universally required life-resources. When a minority class is allowed to own and control the natural resources all require to live, the productive apparatus and technology used to transform those products into usable goods, the scientific knowledge required to produce that technology, the transportation systems that distribute the product, the labour time required to produce it, and the media-entertainment complex that still does much to shape peoples’ understanding of their interests, they have control over the general material and intellectual conditions of everyone’s lives. This structure of control means that, while formally and legally free, citizens of even the most developed liberal-democratic-capitalist societies are dependent upon the economic system to ensure access to the goods and services that they to live and develop their capacities in meaningful and socially valuable ways.

Capitalist markets do not distribute goods and resources because peoples’ lives depend on them, but only on condition that employing labour, producing a good, and selling it are profitable. Global competition determines the varying degrees of profitability of different economic choices, and governments, formally democratic or not, respond to, rather than guide, these market forces. Hence the existing configuration of democratic power, hemmed in as it is by the global power of market forces, does not express and secure the satisfaction of peoples’ shared interest in satisfying their needs and developing their life-capacities in meaningful and valuable ways. On the contrary, it typically serves global capital. The various uprisings that are roiling the globe are contesting this structure of control. If we think that a formal separation between the economic system and government, between the so-called free market and the public sphere is a condition of democracy, then these uprisings might seem to fall outside of democratic norms, examples of “mob rule,” or what have you.[\[vi\]](#) But from the standpoint of democracy as I understand it in *[The Troubles With Democracy](#)*, these mass mobilizations are deeply and essentially democratic.

Let me take two examples, Ecuador and Chile, and then come back to the question of how I understand democracy.

In Ecuador, a general strike led by the Indigenous population forced the government of Lenin Moreno to reverse plans to reduce fuel subsidies and impose further austerity measures:

The general strike was called in response to austerity measures taken by the Ecuadorian government as part of conditionalities of signing a \$4.2-billion loan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Government reforms included the removal of subsidies on gasoline prices (Decree 883), that temporary contracts be renewed with a 20% reduction in wages, and public employees be no longer given 30 days of vacation but 15 days. An anti-austerity movement coalesced through the leadership of the CONAIE and brought together student, feminist, environmental justice, and labour movements.[\[vii\]](#)

Two points are of especial significance. First, the general strike was not directed against the person of Lenin Moreno, but against the material damage these reforms would cause to people's lives. The implication of this fact is that democracy, though typically understood by liberal-democrats as a political system, as way of legitimating political power, is better understood as an overall form of life. Historically, and still today, struggles for democracy are not just struggles for political voice, but for collective control over the natural and social conditions of life. Thus, democracy requires more than civil and political rights, it requires control over the resources, the institutions, the technologies, and, most importantly, the labour process that creates goods and social wealth.

The social dimension of democracy is reinforced by the fact that the general strike was led by indigenous people. Like every country in the Americas Ecuador's present is decisively shaped by its colonial history.

The neoliberal project represented in the austerity *paquetazo* is also a colonial project ... Contemporary social stratification is a product of historical processes of organizing society based on racial categories (e.g. white, mestizo, indigenous, black). These processes are still ongoing, but through less explicit mechanisms. During the national general strike, the Ecuadorian government and a section of the white elite and *mestizo* middle class delegitimized the movement through racist discourse. For example, Jaime Nebot, the mayor of Guayaquil, questioned why indigenous people were invading the cities when their place in society were the highlands (*paramo*). The general image in Ecuadorian society was that the "indian," the "savage," had no place in urban civilized life and their presence was an unnecessary inconvenience.

Despite this racism, indigenous-led anti-colonial struggle is essential to the future of the democratic project.[\[viii\]](#) Colonialism was an essential part of what Marx called the primitive accumulation of capital. Understanding it demonstrates in the most obvious way the contradiction between capitalism and democracy. From Tierra del Fuego to Ellesmere Island, colonial powers simply ignored the existence of the indigenous peoples they encountered, expropriated their resources, destroyed their ways of life, and exported the wealth back to Europe. The coalescence of anti-colonial and anti-austerity struggle makes clear that the



underlying common enemy of working people, whether indigenous or descendants of settlers, is the same: a socio-economic system that rests on expropriation of universally required life-resources.

In Chile, an analogous struggle has broken out, also against failed neo-liberal policies, and it has brought together different social groups united by demands that focus on improving the material conditions of life:

A new social bloc that includes trade unions, student, feminist, and environmentalist groupings have proposed a set of demands that is “transversal” (non-sectoral) and extends across the whole nation. In addition to calling for Piñera’s resignation, among the protesters’ demands are a call for pay rises and cheaper basic services, a forty-hour week, the restoration of union rights and sectoral collective bargaining, the nationalization of both public services and strategic energy sectors, student-debt forgiveness, the annulment of the country’s private-sector pension fund, the cancellation of the odious free market “water codes” signed into law by Pinochet in 1981, progressive tax reform, and a new migration policy. Perhaps most dramatically, the demonstrators are calling for a new constitution to be drafted by the Constituent Assembly.[\[ix\]](#)

Here again we see the way in which democracy essentially involves building institutions which ensure the collective control over natural resources, social wealth, necessary services, and labour. However, social control over these fundamental life-conditions is not an end in itself. A community could control all of its natural resources and continue to exploit them in unsustainable ways. Workers control of the oil sands in Northern Alberta would not make them any less environmentally destructive. Democracy—rule of the people—is impossible unless the people control their natural and social conditions of life. It is also impossible if we think of “rule” in legalistic terms, as sovereign power, or functionally terms, as the power to decide between policy options. Unless we think of rule in a normative way, as exercising the power to decide with what I will call life-grounded intelligence, then overcoming the private control over universally required life-resources will not solve the troubles with democracy.[\[x\]](#)

Life-grounded intelligence is easy to understand. Human beings are not minds that deliberate in a material vacuum, we are embodied beings that depend upon connection to the earth and each other. Any society that ignores its dependence on the natural world is materially irrational: the carrying capacity of the earth is limited and thus all of our decisions about what and how to produce must balance our real human needs against the capacity of the earth to supply them. On the other hand, human beings are also interdependent with each other. Social life, even when its manifest forms of activity are competitive, is and must be a cooperative endeavour. Democracy is rooted in and makes explicit the interdependent and cooperative nature of social life.

When we put these two dimensions together, we get the idea of democracy as a form of social life in which political power is consciously exercised in ways that are environmentally sustainable over an open-ended future and non-exploitative in the widest possible sense. A form of social life is non-exploitative in the widest possible sense when everyone’s natural and social needs are comprehensively met regardless of their concrete identities, everyone has an opportunity for individually meaningful contribution to the creation of socially valuable goods,

relationships, services, and practices, and everyone has the space and time to contribute to the deliberations and decisions through which legitimate law and policy are produced.

No doubt people will object that this definition is idealised, and to be sure, it is. It is not, however, an unrealizable utopia. Indeed, the entire history of struggles for democracy proves that when people fight for power, they are fighting for control over the resources, relationships, institutions, and opportunities for creative activity that can satisfy their needs and enable them to realise their talents and potentialities in valuable and meaningful ways. I detail many of those struggles in the book. I do not have time to work through any of the historical examples today. I will conclude with a brief thought on the pressing matter of what is to be done today in the context of the multi-dimensional global crisis in which we find ourselves.

One key problem that the socialist left faces is that while they understand the need to change this structure of dependence, they cannot say, with any degree of precision, how a socialist economy will function. The same structure of dependence that they understand so well means it is highly unlikely that workers will fight for a revolutionary socialist future whose present reality exists only in academic argument and whose past is associated in the popular imagination with totalitarianism and technological backwardness. However, there is another legacy of workers' struggles that is real, not academic, that worked, that still exists, and which can function as a mediation that reduces dependence on labour and commodity markets in the short term while creating time and space for more radically transformative projects over the long term.

That other legacy is the robust set of public institutions and public goods that a century of working class struggle has created. Public health care, education systems, libraries, parks and common green spaces, galleries, cultural centres, and public pensions are all rooted in the principle of distribution according to need, not the ability to pay. It is true that this principle has been eroded by neo-liberal user pay schemes, that these institutions are bureaucratic not democratic, and that their existence owes as much to capitalists' desire to ward off more radical struggles as much as workers' fights for freedom from labour and commodity markets. At the same time, they are *real*, they *work* (imperfectly, but they can be democratised and improved *right now*). As they improve, workers' dependence on market forces decreases and their scope for action correspondingly increases. As their scope for action increases, they are able to fight for more.

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[i] Robert Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 27, No. 3, July, 2016, p.7.

[ii] "Read Hilary Clinton's 'Basket of Deplorables' Remarks about Donald Trump's Supporters," *Time.com*, Sept. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <http://time.com/4486502/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables-transcript/> (accessed, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

[iii] <https://www.truthdig.com/articles/prof-wolff-the-next-economic-crisis-is-coming/>

[iv] See Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 2016.



[v] Sam Gindin, “The GM Strike and Historical Convergence of Possibilities,” <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/11/gm-strike-historical-convergence-of-possibilities/#more> (accessed, November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019).

[vi] The exception might be Hong Kong, where Western liberals are uncritically celebrating what seems to be nothing more than an anti-authoritarian uprising against the Chinese Communist Party). However, as Colin Sparks discovered, there is a class dimension to these struggles, because the Communist party and the business elites of Hong Kong share an interest in maintaining the legal and political status quo.

[vii] <https://socialistproject.ca/2019/10/indigenous-rising-in-ecuador-and-international-solidarity/>

[viii] The indigenous led struggle in Ecuador resonates in Canada, where a vigorous ‘indigenous resurgence’ is underway that is renewing and pursuing historic demands for sovereignty and enforcement of treaty rights. See Glenn Sean Coulthard. *Red Skin, White Masks*.

[ix] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/10/chile-protests-fare-hike-general-strike>

[x] “Life-grounded intelligence” is derived from the idea of the “life-ground of value” first explained by John McMurtry. See *Unequal Freedoms*, (Toronto: Garamond), 1998, p.23.

# The Principle of Hopelessness

Posted on January 12, 2020

Marx distinguished his conception of socialism from previous versions by claiming scientific status for his interpretation of history. Evidence for arguments about possible futures is important, but it can never have the status of predictions in natural science. That is not to say that history is nothing but interpretation, but rather to highlight the fact that future social conditions are not mechanical products of a single state at a fixed time, but the results of interactions between so many factors that no one can be sure they have included everything relevant. Moreover, some of those factors are human decisions which can be creative: people do not always do what we expect; not every problem asserted to be unsolvable is so, because of the adaptive and creative nature of human intelligence.

Marx assumed that capitalism posed insoluble problems which would necessitate a transition to socialism. He may ultimately be proven correct. Nevertheless, even the most committed Marxist must admit that capitalism has found solutions to every crisis it has generated thus far. They might be temporary, they might be stop gaps, and they might never address the deepest structural contradictions of the system, but ways have been found to keep it going.

What, then has kept the socialist movement going? Certainly not scientific evidence in favour of the necessity of socialism. Rather, what has kept it going is old-fashioned and quite unscientific *commitment* to the values of solidarity, substantive equality, the good of meaningful work, and democratic participation in all major social institutions. Commitment, therefore, and also *hope* that a way will ultimately be found to realize those values however many set backs the movement suffers, keeps the struggle going.

Ernst Bloch, one of the more eccentric members of the Frankfurt School, wrote a three volume masterpiece called *The Principle of Hope*. He excavated the history of art, culture, religion, and philosophy in search of any and all signs that human beings can transcend millennia of violence. Whatever the facts, Bloch affirmed the ethical necessity of maintaining a commitment to the ethical idea of socialism. He is one of the few major Marxist philosophers to admit what everyone who keeps the fire burning knows but few often admit: facts are not always on our side, we lose far more often than we win, and the “final” crisis of capitalism has yet to arrive.

I wonder if the moment has now arrived where we need a companion volume to Bloch’s work devoted to hopelessness. It is true that where there is life there is hope, but it is also true that hope can become completely irrational and lead people to keep making the same bad decisions. Sound decisions sometimes require a sober consideration of the evidence and decisive changes of course. If there really is no cure for a mortally ill patient, hoping for a miracle will simply prolong their suffering. Perhaps what we have called the Left has reached that sort of crisis, and persistence of hope in the principle that ultimately a global working class is going to finally achieve unified class consciousness and set us free is now prolonging the agony.

My Principle of Hopelessness does not reject the values of the socialist movement at its best, but would instead be an honest admission that both social democratic and revolutionary roads, in the Global North and the Global South, have not succeeded in creating a fundamental alternative to capitalism. Nor have social movements or identity-based struggles been able to solve the deep causes of the forms of oppression that they fight against. Victories have been won on a number of fronts, but the deep structures remain: a small minority continue to control the world's resources and socially produced wealth and they use that control to enrich themselves at the expense of everyone else, other living beings, and the planet. They prize upon traditional oppositions and oppressions and use them to cement their hold on power. Or, faced with determined opposition, they give ground just enough to normalise a less oppressive arrangement which nevertheless leaves the depth causes unaddressed.

I feel the need for a Principle of Hopelessness most strongly when I think about the international situation. The intensified conflict between Iran and the United States is symptomatic of the absence of an effective international movement against the legacy of imperialism. Instead of the global movement that freed the Third World from direct political control of their former colonial rulers, a movement that was in varying degrees socialist in inspiration (however failed in reality) today's struggle is rooted for the most part in the mirror image of the atavistic nationalism of the populist right in The turning point was the Iranian revolution. Until 1979, the anti-imperialist and anticolonialist movement was rooted in contextual re-interpretations and re-workings of liberal and Marxist ideas of self-determination.

We must not make the mistake of thinking that these ideas were "Western" just because the initial expressions were written down in Europe. these ideas we re universal precisely because they could be developed, adapted, re-worked, applied, and reinvented in many different cultural contexts. They formed the basis for an international anti-imperialist movement. Hopes for just and democratic post-colonial societies were dashed by a number of factors, but that failure should not detract from our judging the twentieth century struggle against colonialism as one of—if not the— greatest acts in the drama of the human struggle for freedom.

Today, the rhetoric of self-determination remains, but the connection between the self-determination of one group of people and freedom for all peoples has been severed. The commitment to universal values that each people can realise in its own way, once it controls the resources that everyone needs to survive and develop, has given way to conservative withdrawal into closed traditions whose value cannot be generalised as the basis of a renewed global movement against imperialism.

Take the recent flare up between the United States and Iran. There is no doubt where the blame for the destruction of the Iranian economy, the death of Suleimani and its impact in Iraq, and the accidental destruction of the Ukrainian 737 lies: at the feet of the United States, and to some extent the impulsive personality of Donald Trump. But the stress has to be on the continuity of imperialist policy across US governments and not Trump personally. Iranians deserve political sympathy and solidarity, but surely no one can imagine a global, progressive, anti-capitalist movement being led by the Supreme Leader. One might just as well imagine a global anti-capitalist movement being led by the Pope. There are socialistic values in some elements of

Christianity just as there are in some aspects of Islam, but both are also wed to suffocating forms of hierarchy, dogmatism, sectarianism, and chauvinism.

If Iranians freely choose to live in their system, then there is no choice but to accept that collective decision as legitimate. There is abundant evidence to suggest that [Iranians want a more open](#), democratic, secular society. We should not forget that the Islamic revolution triumphed over the Shah *and* Iranian communists. While all anti-imperialists have to reject the legitimacy of the long standing US practice of assassinating its enemies, we should also refrain from sanctifying Suleimani as a hero of the anti-imperialist cause: his role was not to liberate people (as past generations of anti-imperialist leaders did), but to suppress popular rebellion in Iran and the region.

The Alliance of Middle Eastern and North African Socialists' [Statement Against War with Iran gets it right](#):

The joy expressed by some at the death of the criminal reactionary Qasem Soleimani is understandable, given his role in repressing revolutionary popular classes in Iran, Syria, Iraq and in expanding Iran's militarism and influence in the region. However, his assassination represents nothing affirmative for the popular uprisings in Iraq and the region.

It represents nothing positive because neither the United States government nor the existing regime (which the assassination initially bolstered) have any solution to the problems working people across the Middle East face. If anti-imperialism is reduced to a struggle of one national-religious identity against other national identities, then neither side can advance a progressive agenda for human beings wherever they live, because neither represents a generalisable form of life the other side can accept. I fear that our world is in for more of what we have been seeing for at least thirty years: on-going conflicts that cannot be resolved on universal and progressive grounds; that is, through the creation of open institutional structures that protect different forms of life by ensuring political participation and comprehensive natural and social need satisfaction.

The United States and Iran are locked in a struggle that neither can decisively win, but only one pays a daily, society wide cost. The face-saving response of the Iranian regime to the American provocation was predictable, but subsequent events were not. Whatever propaganda victory Iran won by portraying itself as the victim of American aggression went up in tragic flames when it shot down the Ukrainian 737.

In response, the Iranian people have shown great humanity in taking to the streets to denounce the macho posturing between their government and the US. They have rejected the senseless loss of life and the endlessness of their conflict with America. Like the protests so brutally suppressed a few weeks ago by the Revolutionary Guards, Iranians are expressing a desire to break free of the stranglehold of Islamic reactionaries on their society. They do not want to become tools and dupes of America, but they are fed up with the suffering that comes with being in the cross hairs of the world's most internationally destructive regime. They simply want to *live*, and enjoy the conditions of life (peace, social security, income) that life presupposes. Across the border in Iraq, the same demands were being made by the months long protest movements there (also attacked by forces that are linked with Suleimani).

So why do these movements not overcome my hopelessness? Remember, by “hopelessness” I do not mean utter despair but an honest political assessment of prospects. As the example of the Yellow Vests in France shows, I do not think leaderless horizontal movements can succeed in advancing a progressive policy agenda. To do that, opposition movements need to win power, and that is proving a tall order for any type of left politics, anywhere.

A complete explanation of the reasons why the left keeps losing would demand detailed examination of each particular case. However, one common thread is that the lines of political conflict are no longer sharply drawn between global ruling and working classes, but have fragmented. As I have argued in many other posts, this fragmentation into identity-based struggles was necessary (given the need for oppressed group to express their own experiences) but it needs to ultimately reconciled itself into a new political synthesis. The left needs to learn again what “humanity” means: not a generic abstraction that supresses differences but a concrete, self-expressive whole of different ways of living life. The key political point is that these ways of living life form a common set of interests that link people across and beneath sex, gender race, etc. differences.

At this moment, however, just when the climate crisis should be waking us up to our shared dependence on the natural world, the left is in tatters. Instead of the growth of a unified political movement, every problem is address from multiple perspectives without anyone recognizing that what everyone is experiencing the same sort of problem in their own way. The solution to problems has to involve more that every group telling everyone else the particularities of their experience and demanding recognition for their unique suffering. It has to involve the discovery of common ground and the construction of a new future together. Isolated and divided, we cannot win. Hence a principle of hopelessness is appropriate not as an excuse for inaction or resignation, but as a basis of honest assessment of forces.

# Squaring Circles

Posted on February 20, 2020

Let us assume that John Horgan and Justin Trudeau are sincere and they really do want to ensure that British Columbian and Canadian law cohere with the [United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#). The on-going conflict over the Coastal Link Pipeline is an occasion to prove their sincerity by siding with the hereditary chiefs of the Wet'suwet'en, ordering a stop be put to it, and the RCMP leave their territory. The relevant Articles of the Declaration leave little room for any other conclusion:

## Article 3

Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

If this article is accepted, then the political authority of the hereditary chiefs must be accepted. The hereditary chiefs are clearly not imposed on the members of the Wet'suwet'en Nation from the outside but hold their power in accordance with Wet'su'weten traditions, history, and law. Any disagreement within the Wet'suwet'en nation are theirs to resolve, in accordance with the principle of self-determination. The governments of BC and Canada have no role to play in deciding debates internal to the Wet'suwet'en nation. It goes without saying that the RCMP has even less a legitimate role to play.

## Article 5

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinct political, legal, economic, social and cultural institutions, while retaining their right to participate fully, if they so choose, in the political, economic, social and cultural life of the State.

Non-indigenous Canadians must be clear that there is no reciprocity between our relationship to indigenous government and indigenous citizens' relationship to the Canadian government. Citizens of Indigenous nations are also citizens of Canada, but non-indigenous citizens of Canada are not likewise members of indigenous nations. What this lack of reciprocity means is that while members of indigenous nations have a say in both Canada and their own nation's affairs, non-indigenous citizens have a say in Canada but not in the affairs of the indigenous nations.

This point holds true even where the sovereign decisions of an indigenous nation have (short term) deleterious effects on non-indigenous Canadians. The lack of reciprocity follows from the colonial history of Canada. Indigenous nations did not ask to be invaded by European powers, but they were, and their nations' histories were forced to intersect with that of the new colonial country. But the formation of Canada did not destroy the First Nations or extinguish their laws and traditions. Where there is a conflict between indigenous sovereignty and self-determination

and Canadian law and policy, it is not the place of non-indigenous Canadians to dictate to indigenous nations how they should conduct their affairs. Our job is to pressure our government to live up to its legal and political responsibilities and take indigenous sovereignty, rights, and interests seriously.

### **Article 18**

Indigenous peoples have the right to participate in decision-making in matters which would affect their rights, through representatives chosen by themselves in accordance with their own procedures, as well as to maintain and develop their own indigenous decision-making institutions.

### **Article 19**

States shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the indigenous peoples concerned through their own representative institutions in order to obtain their free, prior and informed consent before adopting and implementing legislative or administrative measures that may affect them.

Both articles reinforce the point that I made above: accepting the authority of the Declaration entails accepting the authority of the hereditary chiefs, and accepting the authority of the hereditary chiefs entails stopping the pipeline, or at the very least altering its current routing.

However, one could argue that accepting the Declaration would entail far deeper transformations to the values and dynamics of Canadian capitalism currently driving energy policy.

### **Article 25**

Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied and used lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard.

### **Article 26**

Indigenous peoples have the right to the lands, territories and resources which they have traditionally owned, occupied or otherwise used or acquired. 2. Indigenous peoples have the right to own, use, develop and control the lands, territories and resources that they possess by reason of traditional ownership or other traditional occupation or use, as well as those which they have otherwise acquired. 3. States shall give legal recognition and protection to these lands, territories and resources. Such recognition shall be conducted with due respect to the customs, traditions and land tenure systems of the indigenous peoples concerned.

I do not mean that these Articles, or any particular set of indigenous traditions, rules out any sort of economic development. What I mean is that, first, whatever economic development occurs must be the decision of the nation itself, in accordance with its own procedures and traditions. Second, that according to many influential interpretations of particular traditions, the sort of all

out exploitation of natural resources for maximization of money profit contradicts traditional valorizations of the land and patterns of need-based use and development.

Let me cite two examples to explain my claim. Glenn Sean Coulthard, Dene political theorist and activist argues that indigenous communities are organized around a “grounded normativity.” (p. 172, *Red Skin, White Masks*) “Grounded” here means that the organizing values of the community are both foundational to public and private life and, literally, anchored in the relationship between the members of the community and their traditional lands. “Land” is not a fungible commodity, it is the foundation of life in general and the specific support for the lives, lifeways, and self-understanding of particular indigenous nations. The overall character of life in a particular community emerges from their relationships with their traditional lands: if the lands are destroyed, or the community forced off of them, the normative integrity of the community is fatally compromised.

Grounded normativity does not preclude development, according to Coulthard, but it rules out untrammelled capitalist exploitation. Each community has to determine its economic future for itself, but Coulthard sees a general “Indigenous political-economic alternative to the intensification of capitalism” as moving towards “a mix of subsistence-based activities with more contemporary economic ventures.” (p.171). What that mix would be and what degree of development of natural resources is compatible with traditional respect for and care of the land would be determined by each self-governing nation.

Some, even within indigenous nations, might claim that this approach keeps indigenous people locked in the past and that real self-determination requires working with resource companies to fully exploit the natural resources on their territories. To those who make these arguments the recent comments of the Grand Chief of British Columbia, [Stewart Phillip](#) should be instructive. He notes that promises of wealth through “cooperating” with extractive industries have largely proven to be fool’s gold:

Well, again — the company and TMX Kinder Morgan — it’s a very colonial, neo-colonial approach. They enter into a territory of interest, vis-a-vis a large-scale resource development, and they begin a very divisive process of attempting to create the public appearance of support for their projects. And they go far beyond the footprint of the project itself to sign on band councils with offers of money and promises. You do not achieve thorough, meaningful, deep consultation by the divide-and-rule tactics of the corporations.

They’ve made the same mistake time and time again. And that’s why we find ourselves at rail blockades, highway blockades, occupation of federal and provincial government buildings and so on.

Phillip’s comments thus serve as a cautionary tale for indigenous nations, but they also point towards the deeper conflict that all Canadians have an interest in resolving. That conflict is not only between particular indigenous nations and particular pipelines or mines, but between the ultimate incompatibility of capitalist modes of resource extraction and the future of human and planetary life. We have known for years that fossil fuel consumption is a leading cause of Greenhouse gas emissions, and yet, given its centrality to the last 100 years of capitalist



development, it continues to increase, treaties, promises and threats to life be damned. The pipelines that have prompted the current protests are just one part of a more complex global contradiction between capitalist economic forces and values and the life-conditions of human beings.

But there is another side to this contradiction, and it poses a grave short-term danger to these welcome protests. If they are to usher in a more constructive politics that brings indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians together, they are going to have to confront the problem— which Grand Chief Phillip touches upon— of the fact that, through no real fault of their own, hundreds of thousands of people's lives and livelihoods depend upon fossil fuel production and transport.

Let me be clear: it is not the responsibility of indigenous citizens to attenuate their demands for self-determination in light of any difficulties their struggle might impose upon non-indigenous Canadians. In the short term, it is the job of the Canadian government to take serious and concrete steps towards an energy transition policy, including serious and concrete just transition plans for workers in the fossil fuel industry.

In the absence of a concrete plan, the conflicts we are in the midst of now will recur. My concern is that, as with the Yellow Vests in France, purely disruptive tactics will bog down in state repression on the one hand and lack of constructive, forward momentum on the other. Again, my point is not that indigenous people should attenuate their struggles on their lands, but that supporters take into account political and economic realities. Non-indigenous Canadians mechanically repeating slogans about “shutting Canada down” forget that “Canada” is not an abstraction; it is not the Liberal government and business community, it is 37 million people, most of whom are working class and do not have the luxury of choosing their jobs. They are dependent on the capitalist economy through no fault of their own. They cannot simply be left unemployed without any concrete transitional plan.

This argument is not addressed to indigenous people fighting for self-determination, it is addressed to everyone involved in the struggle to not lose sight of the underlying contradictions and the extremely difficult political challenges they pose. Slogans are one thing, building a unified movement for a democratic, socialist, life-valuable economy and society, one in which indigenous sovereignty and self-determination is protected in law and practice, is quite a bit more challenging. It cannot be achieved if the contradiction between long-term life-requirements and short term dependence on job markets is ignored.

So far the struggle has not given rise to the shocking and horrible racist attacks on indigenous people that we saw during the Oka crisis in 1990. The army has not yet been mobilised and there have been incidents like the one at Chateauguay, during the Oka standoff, when a racist mob pelted cars filled with Mohawk women and children with rocks. Still, the calls for forcible intervention are growing. Racist attitudes will be kindled and we would have to be unpardonably naive to think that the right is unwilling and unable to exploit this crisis for its own purposes. If we are to prevent that from happening, the focus has to be on using the short term crisis to build a unified movement for long term change. The first step is to stop the pipeline, but that has to be part and parcel of a clear transitional program that does not blame workers for the sins of capitalist history.

# Impeachment: A Hidden Lesson for the Left

Posted on February 11, 2020

In [“Fatal Distraction: The Sequel”](#) I wondered (only half-jokingly) whether Nancy Pelosi and the Democratic Party establishment launched the impeachment investigation when they did to detract attention from the vigorous policy debate underway between the left and right of the party. I argued that impeachment would be a sideshow that distracted everyone from the deep-seated problems of American society and the wider world that were being explored in the debates. The debacle proved me correct. There was no chance that Trump would be convicted. The trial gave both sides the opportunity to fulminate and pontificate, but about nothing of relevance to the challenges America and the world faces. At the end of the spectacle we are back at where everyone knew we would be: *status quo ante*.

Or are we? Trump has been personally emboldened by his acquittal, and his approval ratings are slightly up. More worrying for Democrats and left opponents of Trump in general is that the trial will consolidate his base. Since American elections are won on the basis of Electoral College votes, and winning electoral college votes is a function of getting your voters out (and, if you are a Republican, suppressing Democratic voters) anything which solidifies and motivates Trump’s base should be of concern. However, there is a deeper message in Trump’s acquittal, not only for the Democratic Party, but the Left in general, in the United States and the rest of the world.

That lesson is: the law is a political tool, so the next time the Left is power, it needs to use it, boldly.

The outcome of the Senate trial was completely predictable, but it nevertheless occasioned charges that Republicans ignored evidence and blindly supported their leader. I am not an expert in American Constitutional law, and so I will not re-try the case. My point is that Democrats are either naive or lying when they decry the politicization of the impeachment process. The impeachment process was, in this case, political from the get go, and it has to be because impeachment, like any legal proceeding, is political from the get go. Clauswitz said war is politics by other means, and so is law. The law does not descend from heaven to earth; it is the creation of people being pushed one way or another by social forces on the one hand and social movements on the other. The form of the law is abstractly universal, which is what gives it the appearance of neutrality. But the content of the law is concretely political. If it were not, no one could explain how at one moment of time a certain set of discriminatory laws are legitimate (for example, Jim Crow segregation) and at another time they are not. If the law were simply inferred from first principles, these radical transformations would be inexplicable, and yet they are ubiquitous in history. Social forces and political movements make the law: the law is, therefore, political through and through.

The application of the law is no different. Which laws are thought to be prosecutable, and how vigorously, is also a political issue. A well-known example is the differential treatment handed out to white and black drug offenders in the United States. This difference is only explicable by

reference to the political history of racism: the law as written is the law, but the reality of the law is its application, and its application is affected by the organization and use of political power.

Thus, there is nothing either novel or unexpected in the way in which the law was applied by the Senate. Both sides behaved predictably, but the Democrats, I would argue, behaved in a politically stupid fashion. They were trying to score a knockout blow on Trump before the election. The ploy was politically stupid, because they should have known that Republican Senators would not break ranks and vote to oust him.

On the one hand, there was a superabundance of cynicism in the Republican performance, but I do not need to add to liberal hand-wringing. The important lesson here is that they remained unified, disciplined, identified a goal, and achieved it without letting anything get in their way. The next time the Left is in power, that is exactly how it needs to behave, but in relation to universally valuable social, economic, and political goals and not just their own personal-political power and survival. That is exactly how it has *not* behaved when in power. In Greece, for example, Syriza, despite having the political power of a referendum against austerity in hand, knuckled under when the European Union openly said that democracy did not matter, and austerity would continue, regardless of the cost. Syriza is now out of power and another right-wing populist government rules Greece.

Trump and the Republicans prove that one cannot have political success without party discipline. For too long on the Left the mantra has been horizontalism and leaderlessness. But what have the *Gilets Jaunes*, for example, achieved after more than year of leaderless protests? Nothing. The much larger and more powerful strikes and protests against Macron's pension reforms— strikes much more likely to succeed- have been led by the labour movement. Unity, discipline, and vertical organization are not opposed to democracy and diversity; they are the conditions of their social realization.

Values mean something in material reality when they change lives. Trump and other right wing populist governments have weathered storm after storm by remaining united in the face of criticism and proceeding with their agenda. There is a time and place for debate as priorities are identified and programs developed. All concerned voices have to participate fully and freely in these debates. A democratic program for social change has to be both general enough to have universal appeal (focus on re-appropriating natural resources and socially produced wealth from private control and their unsustainable exploitation for profit) and nuanced enough to speak to different histories of oppression. But once those arguments have been had and decisions consolidated in a program, then it is time for unity in the face of whatever adversity opponents put in the way.

Whenever the Left is in power they face immediate attacks that declaims that their policies will ruin society. This attack immediately starts the Left worrying, and once they worry, they compromise. But the compromise is always really a concession that ends up undoing the whole program. For forty years, the Left has discredited itself repeatedly because it does not do what it says it will do.

The Trumps of the world teach a lesson that would have been better learned from a less odious source (but in history, as Habermas said, we often only learn from catastrophe). Trump does not worry about “necessity;” he prosecutes his agenda. Moreover, he repeatedly supports that pursuit of his agenda by invoking the authority of legitimate government: he was elected to do the job, and nothing will stop him from doing it. What if Syriza had been as single-minded? They too were the legitimate government of Greece, but they did not capitalize on the political and symbolic power that legitimacy confers on the program of the government. Whatever you think of Trump, his survival proves that legitimacy is a powerful rhetorical card to play, especially when your party unites behind you. Doggedness and adherence to principle are not goods in themselves, but only if the ends they serve are good. Nevertheless, we can and should and must learn the lesson: discipline and unity are essential for political change. If the Left fails to heed the lesson, we will condemn ourselves to four more years of Trump, and who knows what beyond.





