THINKINGS 3

COLLECTED INTERVENTIONS, READINGS, EVOCATIONS

2013-2014

JEFF NOONAN

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I: Interventions

Teaching Loads and Research Outputs of Ontario University Faculty Members: Implications for Productivity and Differentiation: A Critique

Originally Published 20 March, 2014

On March 11th, 2014 the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) published a report authored by Linda Jonker and Martin Hicks. The report, *Teaching Loads and Research Outputs of Ontario University Faculty Members: Implications for Productivity and Differentiation,* purports to be an objective study of the teaching loads and research output of faculty in three disciplines at ten Ontario universities. A close reading soon proves, however, that the document is less objective social science and more tendentious support for the province's recently announced *Differentiation Strategy for Higher Education.* (I have criticized that paper in an earlier post). The paper's own oft-acknowledged methodological shortcomings, combined with selective use of the information it was able to compile, misleading aggregate values, and a conception of "productivity" that is completely inappropriate to the purposes and outcomes of higher education leaves one with little alternative but to reject the findings as a political attempt to rouse the mainstream media and Ontario public against academics.

The paper focuses on full-time tenured and tenure track faculty in three departments (Economics, Chemistry, and Philosophy) at 10 Ontario Universities. The universities are (appropriately) divided into 4 "clusters." The University of Toronto was considered on its own, McMaster, Ottawa, Queen's, and Western formed a "research-intensive cluster," Carleton and Windsor formed a cluster of comprehensive teaching and research universities, while Brock, Lakehead, and Wilfred Laurier formed a cluster primarily devoted to undergraduate teaching. The sample of departments the paper considers is sound. It includes natural scientific, social scientific, and humanistic research and teaching, which together form the historical disciplinary core of the modern university. These "clusters" will also be familiar to readers of the annual MacLean's rankings of Canadian universities. While the construction of the sample is defensible, the report's major conclusions are not. Let us begin with the unsupported premise from which the paper proceeds, namely, that there is some a quantitative measure of productivity that can usefully inform discussions about the future development of university teaching and research.

Prof. Kate Lawson, executive director of the Ontario Confederation of Faculty Associations identifies the basic problem with this premise. Writing in *The Globe and Mail* one day after the release of the report, Lawson argued that "Productivity – a term more at home in a factory than in education – is about squeezing more outputs from the same pool of resources. This is great if you're making cars or widgets. The concept is less useful in higher education, where students and parents understandably prefer to look at a university degree in more human terms." Lawson is correct that productivity is an attempt to measure the ratio of output to input, the more output for the same or less input, the more productive a process is. She is also correct to reject

its usefulness as a measure of the quality of university education and research. She is wrong, however, to conclude that its unqualified use in systems of material production is "great." For unless we ask what the overall social and ecological impact of any productive process might be, the ever increasing levels of output of those systems can spell ultimate disaster. As John McMurtry points out (private communication) "productivity without discrimination [as to what is produced] is, well, insane. It could be and now is producing most of what is destroying human and natural life systems on the planet." In the context of education, increasing "productivity" will not produce toxins and waste that will destroy the plant, but the damage it can cause is no less real. If accepted without challenge, this idea of productivity will encourage the adoption of a set of institutional priorities that threaten the educational mission of universities.

Lawson's "human terms" can be cashed out as the principle that students are not objectified products of an educational factory which takes "uneducated" raw materials in and spits out, at the other end of the academic assembly line, "educated" products. Whatever else education is, it is a process that involves students and teachers in dynamic interactions through which everyone's imaginative and cognitive capacities are deepened and broadened. Unlike a car factory, which is "productive" if it is producing as many cars as possible at the lowest possible cost all of which conform to design specifications, a university is not simply concerned with graduating as many students as possible who all conform to some abstract set of outcomes. To be educated means, (whatever else it means), to be able to think independently, to put one's cognitive and imaginative capacities to unexpected and unpredictable uses, and to be able to intervene creatively and critically in objective social process in unexpected and unpredictable (and hopefully,) constructive ways. There are thus no design parameters to which graduates *could* conform– anyone who graduates from a university who is able to do nothing but that which is expected of him or her has not learned anything. In other words, to identify quality teaching with the sheer output of universities is to ignore the "quality" of the education– that which it enables educated individuals to do that they would not have been able to do had they not become educated. Producing more graduates or raising the number of courses individual academics teach does not improve the quality of the education students receive. It may, however, diminish or destroy that quality if it forces academics to adopt more generic and mechanical teaching methods that disengage rather than challenge students just so that the university can "make quota."

Let us turn now to a more detailed examination of the report. The way in which any report is received by the public and the press (the real audience of this document, for reasons I will examine below) is shaped by its Executive Summary. In this case the Executive Summary is preceded by a set of five key take-away points stated in simple sentences and enclosed in boxes to capture attention (and metaphorically, confine one's thinking) to what is here listed. One can be safe in assuming that many people in the media or the public, whose lives and livelihoods are only tangentially connected to the problem of "productivity' in higher education, will read no further than these five key points and the Executive Summary, making their tone and content crucial to the rhetorical aims of the authors. Here, the two essential goals are clear: the authors want Ontarians to believe that academics will only work if they are more stringently supervised by external authority, and that they are not doing enough work as it is.

The first boxed point states "the more "we understand about how faculty members discharge the obligations expected of them, the more we can do to create the conditions and practices that permit faculty members to do their best work." (p.3). This undefined subject "we" appears again later in the text, where the author's assert that there is a "growing interest in how faculty members allocate their time." The "we" whose interest in growing is purportedly responding to a "a general public concern about the productivity of univesrities." The report does not tell us who it is exactly that is growing more interested, and no evidence at all is cited to support the claim that there is a general public concern with the "productivity" of the universities (which is hard to believe, given the technical complexities of the idea of "productivity" in use in the report).

Generic subjects with undefined identities and unsubstantiated claims are hallmarks of shoddy argumentation, but not, alas, government propaganda to mobilise *ex post facto* support for policy decisions already made behind closed doors. If the report said what is actually the case, the political agenda it serves would be clear. However, "the more the Liberal Government of Ontario knows" has very different implications from "the more we know." "We" connotes a general and non-partisan interest in an objective state of affairs; "the Liberal government of Ontario," a particular political interest. By hiding the particular in the abstract and undefined "we" the statement encourages readers to think that the main problem in universities is that no one knows what academics are doing with their time (and public money).

Academics are continually treated as if they were mere functions of institutional obligations the undefined "we" aims to ensure they are discharging. Of course, we do in fact have obligations: to our discipline, to our students, to our colleagues, to our communities and the wider world). Reading the report it is easy to fear that it is not these obligations that are at issue, but rather obligations to acquiesce to the agenda of a particular government and one of its agencies (HEQCO). If educators do in fact have dischargeable duties to a particular government and one of its agencies, a very dangerous threshold has been crossed beyond which academic freedom and institutional autonomy in the governance of its intellectual affairs have been subordinated to political expediency and economic power.

Perhaps some will regard that last claim as unduly alarmist. We shall see. What all academics in the province must be concerned about are the conclusion and recommendations of the paper. One of the key conclusions, stated baldly on the second page in the fourth boxed point is that the average course load during the 2012 academic year was 2.8 courses. I will examine in more detail some of the important flaws in the method by which this number was determined below. Here I just want to focus on its rhetorical effects. Anyone who does not read beyond this overview of purposes and results will come away with the belief that this value is a legitimate measure of average course loads in Ontario universities. What they will not be able to understand is that the number ignores the differences in the course loads in the different clusters *the report itself constructs.* That is, course loads are lower in the larger, research-intensive universities. Including them in an overall aggregate measure lowers the average and gives the impression that this number 2.8 tells us something important about average work loads in *each* university. Possible political gain (in terms of support for the government's agenda) comes at the expense of the scientific integrity of the paper.

The tendentious nature of the argument continues in the Executive Summary. It begins with the assertion that the government "has signaled the need to seek further productivity gains." The report, not surprisingly, comes up with a way to do so, which just happens to align with the government's "differentiation strategy" for higher education reform. The report also does not mention the deeper background to its analysis, the so-called Drummond Report (2011), in which "differentiation" was first floated as a means, not of improving quality, but keeping costs down in the post-secondary system. Thus, the productivity gains that the recommended doubling of the teaching loads of "non-research active" tenured and tenure track faculty (the equivalent of hiring 1500 new faculty) is not about quality– (quality is no where discussed with any detail or rigor)– stems directly from a Public Commission into the state of Ontario's *finances* (not the health of its universities).(p3, 4, 44).

Tendentious constructions are not the only problem. The problem noted above, of faculty treated as little more than objects of an undefined indeterminate "we" that needs to study us continues throughout the report. "Little is known" the author's write, "about how faculty members actually allocate their efforts"(p.4) Again, we are not told who this subject that does not know is. Faculty members themselves certainly know how they allocate their work time. The Department Heads and Deans who write and sign off on performance reviews know. The Vice-Presidents Academic to whom Dean's report certainly know. So who is it that does not know? The authors of the report know enough to employ the clichéd 40-40-20 (forty per cent of time devoted to research, 40 per cent to teaching, and 20 per cent to service) distribution of work time. So who is left? The government which has commissioned this report and which masks its agenda behind a (highly transparent) veneer of honest information gathering.

The point is that even though it is their work that is the subject of interest, and even though asking academics about their work load would answer the questions the report wants to answer in much richer and more useful detail, treating academics as active subjects who can respond intelligently to questions posed would run too many political risks: i.e., our testimony might contradict the desired political results of the paper. Given the need to avoid this risk, the report proceeds to try to try to capture a "complete picture of what they do, what they contribute, and how much they are paid." (p. 13) from university and department websites, data bases like ProQuest, and search engines like Google Scholar. I will turn my attention to the methodological problems in a moment. First, however, one further comment about the way in which the report constructs "the faculty" is in order.

Consider the preceding quotation and its use of the third person "they." This construction alienates the faculty from the institutions and the political community of which we are members. It suggests that faculty members are not fellow citizens of Ontario but some species apart that does not speak the same language and so cannot simply be asked about the nature of our work, what we most need to accomplish it, and what limits we think the government should respect. Instead of being called upon as leaders whose work sustains the universities in all important respects, as committed members of an academic community that can identify problems and propose improvements, the study essentially makes us objects of suspicion, cost centres, little more than "a long term … employment and financial commitment by the university." A financial burden, in other words, which must be borne by the administration. (p. 14)

The methodological problems to which I know turn are acknowledged by the authors (but not, as I will make clear below, in the media reports that followed its release). The methodological trouble begins on p. 6, where the authors admit to the paucity of publicly available sources of the information their study requires. They explain that they discovered numerous data gaps on the university websites they consulted, gaps which significantly affect the accuracy of the picture of academic teaching loads and research output. Yet, rather than adopt a different method of data collection, the authors simply proceed with a shrug: "the reality is that there are *few institutional data available that document teaching and research outputs of faculty,* particularly teaching, and for the moment the data that are posted publically are the best we can obtain to advance these analyses.(p. 6, emphasis added). Yet, *if the data is incomplete, the conclusions of the analysis must be suspect,* a fact which might give academic researchers pause (because our work must go through peer review). With access to the government's printing press and no peer review to worry about, our authors proceed as if this *fatal flaw* to their numbers were a mere inconvenience.

The methodological problems continue on p. 11, where the matter of teaching quality is raised. There is no discussion of its meaning beyond the (unargued) assumption that student satisfaction surveys administered at the end of class and (more outrageously) entertainment websites like RateMyProfessor.com (in which, in addition to finding out how "hard" and "helpful" professors are, you can also check out their "hotness") tell us something about it. While the authors again acknowledge the limitations of the data sources in passing, they fail utterly to make the much more important point– student satisfaction is not synonymous with quality teaching. Quality teaching challenges, confronts students with their own limitations, and makes intellectual demands on them that are difficult to meet. These demands may produce short term resentment, which can register as lower scores on satisfaction surveys, *but whose real value may become apparent over the longer term.* Indeed, it is only over the long term that high quality teaching can be fully determined, since whether one has learned anything of value or not depends upon the dispositions one manifests throughout one's life. Facts and particular interpretations will be forgotten, excellent teaching registers as a life-long willingness to think independently and expansively, challenge the given, and only agree to claims supported by sound reasons.

An analogous objection could be made to the authors' attempt to measure research output and "impact." I will confine my criticism here to their discussion of philosophical research, leaving it to economists and chemists to point out problems– if there are any- in their analysis of those disciplines. As regards philosophy, the first problem– which they acknowledge, and then ignore– is that they only count as "research output" articles in peer reviewed journals. Thus books, book chapters, book reviews, not to mention non-academic publications, are not included as research. The authors themselves acknowledge the importance of monographs and book chapters in the discipline, but, with no acceptable justification, exclude them. Immediately, this unjustified exclusion makes philosophers appear less "productive" than they really are, further supporting (but with faulty numbers) the suggestion to double the teaching loads of non research active faculty.(p.40)

The problems get worse when we turn to their attempt to measure "impact." They employ a standard approach to measuring impact in terms the number of citations, but, amazingly, they

decide to count citations only from seven "top" philosophy journals.(see p. 18 for the list) While the journals that they use are top journals, they collectively represent only a tiny fraction of published philosophical research. Moreover, these journals are not neutral in terms of what they consider worthwhile philosophical problems and methods. Across the discipline, these problems and methods are controversial; many acknowledged leading philosophers will never publish in them because they reject the norms upon which those journals select the papers that they publish.

I am not impugning the quality of these journals or the papers that they publish, but it is beyond misleading, it is insulting, to the diversity of philosophical work and the range of its impacts– in the academy and in social life outside- to construct a data set that implies that if your work is not cited in one of these journals, *it has had no impact.* Consider the following hypothetical scenario. A political philosopher is asked by the United Nations to author a report on intercultural communication for use in a culturally divided society on the verge of civil war. The report helps each side better understand the other, thus averting civil war. This report, which helped to preserve thousands of lives, has, by the metric chosen by the authors *no impact,* while a tediously hairsplitting paper (of which there are innumerable examples in 'top' philosophy journals) that is cited 50 times for the excellence of its hairsplitting, will count as highly influential, even though totally irrelevant to real world concerns. Which paper really has the sort of impact people should care about?

But even confining ourselves to real world cases, the number of citations, in top journals or bottom journals or all journals in between, does not tell us if the paper is any good or not. Papers can be cited for being wrong, papers that are cited early on for being right can turn out to be wrong, papers that are ignored early on can turn out to have great impact over the longer term, the research might have its impact outside of philosophy and thus not register on a search of citation is philosophy journals alone. Aggregate terms like "impact factors" might sound serious and scientific, and to be communicating important information, they may also flatter the egos of those who score high on the measure, but the only way to determine research quality is to know the field and read the work and evaluate it on a case by case basis. Since the concrete information gleaned by study cannot by definition be compiled in an aggregate measure, it cannot be included in reports such as this, which speaks against the veracity and usefulness of such reports, not the importance of discipline-specific expertise.

Given the undefined terms, the category mistakes (confusing quality with quantity), highly questionable data, and the construction of "faculty" as passive objects who owe "obligations" to an undefined "we," the report must be rejected as tendentious and misleading. Yet, excluding Prof. Lawson's intervention, it has not been criticized as such in the press. In the country's two largest papers, *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, the stories more or less reported the findings as verbatim confirmation that Ontario professors are underworked and underproductive. The Toronto Star (after briefly citing Prof. Lawson) devoted about half the remaining space to the President of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance's demand that all professors undergo mandatory teacher training. The reporter failed to ask how this proposal would be implemented- if we are all incompetent teachers, who is gong to teach us? Perhaps an obnoxious political wannabe with an undergraduate degree? Worse was yet to come and, as usual in cases of discussions of education in the corporate media, worse took the shape of Margaret Wente. In her view, the report "finds that the typical teaching load of a university

professor has dwindled to less than three courses a year – 2.8, to be exact, just 1.4 courses per semester." As I have pointed out, however, there is nothing at all "exact" about the figure, *and the authors themselves acknowledge as much.* But their qualifications never make it into the reporting on the report, and one can be almost certain that few members of the public will slog through its fifty-four pages to find out just how inexact a figure it really is.

And that is perhaps the point– this is a political document written in a style to almost guarantee that it will not be read beyond the first three pages. The number the government needs to have imprinted on people's minds is right there in the fourth box on the second page, stark, with almost no text around it– 2.8. The number, and not the method by which the number, and not the problems with the method by which the number, or the problems of the assumptions which framed the method by which the number was determined, is all that is reported. Teasing out the contradictions and problems, as I have tried to do here, will not be enough to prevent further damage to the Ontario university system. That can only happen if faculty emerge from their long political hibernation and begin to organize and fight back aggressively against the combined force of governments and administrations trying to mask the own fiscal neglect and bureaucratic over-management behind the myth of the entitled and lazy professor. It is springtime. The bears are waking up and so should we.

The Grayson Affair: Accommodation, Religion, and the Values of Scholarship

Originally Published 10 January, 2014

Unremarked in the multiple discussions on-going around York University Sociology Professor Paul Grayson's refusal to accommodate a student's request to be excused from meeting in public with female students on religious grounds is what it tells us about senior administrators' attitudes towards the educational mission of the university. Even though the student involved ultimately accepted Grayson's decision to not exempt him from the group work assignment, Grayson's Dean, the York Human Rights Office, and the Provost and Vice-President Academic maintained the position that Grayson is in fact obligated to accommodate the request. Grayson's potential troubles do not stop at senior administration. Rather than publicly and robustly support their member, the York University Faculty Association has warned Grayson that he could face discipline for his courageous defence of the academic integrity of his course, his discipline, and the University as a whole.

Grayson refused the student's request because he did not want to be seen as abetting sexist attitudes, and also because he did not want to help set a precedent potentially fatal to the academic mission of universities. If one student can opt out of an assignment on religious grounds, then any student can potentially opt out of any assignment on religious grounds. But Grayson has done more than simply stand up for the equality of men and women and the academic integrity of the learning environment, he has also, perhaps unwittingly, but nevertheless very clearly, exposed the degree to which the administrators who claim to be leaders of the university singularly fail in that task when the situation calls out for it. Rather than defend the autonomy of universities from the potentially disastrous Ontario Differentiation Policy Framework for Higher Education, the Council of Ontario Universities (composed of the chief academic administrators from all Ontario Universities) was silent. In response to a request that, if taken up by thousands of other religious students could make any sort of coherent classroom practice impossible, York administrators try to force one of their professors to meet it.

Why are those who have been hired to lead these institutions, people who are rarely shy about reminding the academics who actually do the teaching and research and mentor the students (i.e., do *all* the work that makes a university a university) that they are the leaders, incapable of doing so when the situation most requires it? Because they have ingested whole the message coming from governments and corporate think-tanks for two decades: education is a customer service business, and the customer is always right. At root, the problem with the student request that ignited this particular controversy has nothing to do with religion, and everything to do with students thinking of themselves, and academic administrators allowing them to think of themselves as customers. *Custom*ers of a business might legitimately demand that the business *custom*ise their products to meet consumer demand; but students need to *demand of themselves* the discipline required to meet the often uncomfortable challenges that educational practices and encounters pose. That does not mean that students should defer to professorial authority uncritically– on the contrary. But they need to challenge that authority by meeting it head on– by developing the strength of character and intellect necessary to do that

which one might not ordinarily do or desire to do, so as to *grow* in intellectual capacity and have something to say *against* the professor when the context invites challenge and argument.

In defending himself from the demands of his Dean and the York Human Rights Office Grayson rightly argued that at root this matter is a problem of governance. It is a problem of governance not only in terms of who has the right to determine that which occurs in the classroom, professors and students or senior administrators, government, and corporate lobbyists. It is also a question of what values and what understanding of education will govern the university institution. Will the values of self-discipline, ability to bear discomfort, capacity and desire to rise to challenges posed to one's beliefs (the values of people who desire to become educated) rule, or will the desire to avoid discomfort and have course content and assignments tailored to one's prejudices (consumer mindsets fatal to the capacity to become educated) overrule the values of scholarship? Will education be understood as rooted in the *demand* that professors and students alike continually question their starting points and worldviews, or will education be reduced to consumer demand for a product (the degree) to be satisfied with as little effort and trouble as possible?

The most extraordinary outcome of this whole debacle is that the student (from what I can tell from the outside) has proven himself to be an exemplar of the sort of willingness to challenge and question *and accept a result contrary to his expectations* essential to the process of becoming educated. To his lasting credit, the student accepted Grayson's refusal and (again, from what I can tell) was willing to work past the discomfort he felt in order to meet the demands of the course. It is the York administration that has failed utterly to defend the academic integrity of their institution. They can try to hide behind the Ontario Human Rights Code and the fact that Grayson exempted another student from group work (because the student lived in Egypt!) all they want. The truth of their failure is plain for all to see. The Ontario Human Rights Code does not exist for the sake of destroying secular, public institutions, (which it could very well do, if the precedent the York administration is coming close to establishing is allowed to stand and is taken up by thousands of other students around the province). There is no commonality between exempting someone from Egypt from meeting other students in Toronto and exempting someone in Toronto because he does not want to be in public with women. The issue is not fundamentally about human rights and not fundamentally about religious versus secular world views. The fundamental issue is about administrators not having the courage to defend academic integrity because they are afraid of losing customers, *even when the customer is satisfied with having his request denied*.

In the sad new world of the academy, the student-customer is always right , the professor is always wrong, and those hired to lead the institution continue to steer it further and further off the course of its educational mission- to provide the time and space for interpretation, critical enquiry, testing of and (where necessary) pushing past the existing boundaries of human knowledge and practice in all dimensions of human experience and activity, in an environment respectful of, but not subordinate to, the cultural differences that shape the identities of all who choose to belong to it.

Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework for Post-secondary Education: A Critique

Originally Published, 16 December, 2013

O to be back in the good old days, when economism was just a theoretical mistake of mechanical Marxists. The assumptions about the relationship between economy and society underlying the Liberal Government's "Differentiation" policy for postsecondary education would once have been pilloried by the anti-communist right as philistine economic reductionism. Unless successfully challenged, this policy threatens to not only concentrate power over what academic programs are offered where and to whom in the Provincial Ministry of Colleges, Universities, and Training, but to almost completely subordinate those programs to market forces and metrics.

Before I begin to examine the document, three points to keep in mind to avoid misunderstanding my argument.

1. I accept the obvious, that in a capitalist economy people require paying jobs in order to survive. I also understand that the capitalist economy, crisis-ridden though it may be, is not about to be replaced with a democratic socialist alternative anytime soon. Thus, the need for paid employment will persist, and students, understandably, will be concerned with the problem of whether courses of study will lead to paid work. At the same time, I know from talking to thousands of students (and parents) over a fifteen year academic career (eight of which were spent as Head of Department), that even in very tough economic times, students are rarely exclusively focused on "employability." Students retain interests in the intrinsic value of ideas, methods, and disciplines, want careers that are meaningful and not only jobs that are paid. They are also savvy enough to understand (as politicians and bureaucrats are not, or rarely) that being employable and being trained for some specific job are different things. Just because one studies a discipline that cultivates general intellectual and critical capacities rather than certain job-specific skills does not mean one will not find work. Moreover, the types and amount of work available in a capitalist economy are not functions of what people study, but what sorts of labour it is profitable to employ. For the past five years labour markets have been soft not because of anything universities and colleges are doing or not doing, but because of the generalized economic crisis that began on Wall Street. If Canadian governments are really concerned about youth unemployment (currently running at just over 14%), they should be finding ways to force corporations to invest the cash they have been hoarding and to make illegal the grossly exploitative "unpaid internships" into which graduates are increasingly forced.

2. I accept the need for institutional accountability for the fiscal decisions that they make. My argument is not that university administrations or individual programs and departments should be handed blank cheques to spend as they please with no reporting responsibilities. Being accountable for public monies spent is required by any form of democratic social organization and is compatible with the institutional autonomy universities require if they are to fulfill their teaching and research missions. What is incompatible with both democratic social organization and institutional autonomy is the application of metrics extrinsic to academic disciplines (employment levels in fields specifically linked to courses of academic study, commodifiability,

etc.,) as the criteria according to which decisions on allowable program offerings will be made. If the government is concerned with university expenditure, it should examine carefully the ways in which higher proportions of operating revenue are being spent on administrative positions and capital investments not directly related to the teaching and research missions of the university.

3. Finally, I accept that social reality is dynamic, and that universities, their departments, and configurations of disciplines must change or risk irrelevance in a changing reality. At the same time, not everything in the natural and social universes (the objects of *univers*ity study) changes at all times and in all respects. There are permanent features and problems of human reality that require and justify on going study by traditional disciplines (philosophy, literature, history, but also pure scientific research in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and so forth). Moreover, where the questions are what new programs to add, what new interdisciplinary clusters to cultivate, what new means of disseminating ideas and communicating across space are to be pursued, it should be academics themselves deliberating about and making the decisions. Institutional autonomy and academic freedom does not mean institutional stasis or a right to be irrelevant. It means being allowed to shape institutional reality according to the mission of academia, which is to study all that needs to be studied for the sake of understanding and improving the worlds we inhabit, free from the pressure to chase trends and serve the interests of the money-appropriating class.

With these qualifications in mind, let us now turn to the document itself.

The document begins with the argument that postsecondary institutions must temper their expectations for funding growth in light of the "challenging fiscal environment" in Ontario as a consequence of the 2008 economic crisis.(p.5) Instead of drawing the inference that an economic system that is regularly plunged into crisis by its own basic dynamics might itself be in need of transformation, the document paints the crisis as a bedrock reality to which the province's institutions and citizens must adapt.

The argument is thus rooted in a general contradiction of capitalist social theory. Economic forces are generated by the way in which economic agents (firms and individuals) act and interact. These interactions do generate objective forces, but the forces only appear as natural necessities because the class interests and ruling value system upon which the economic structure rests are never exposed or called into question. The only interests ever called into question are the interests of people who make demands on the collective wealth the economy produces, who are continually enjoined to "adapt to new realities" and then forced to comply if they do not go along willingly. It is thus both affirmed and denied that public policy follows from political choices– affirmed in the case of all social institutions but denied in the case of economic forces.

The consequence is that there is only ever one choice made available by ruling political parties: change all other institutions to preserve the economic system, even when it is acknowledged that the economic system is not working. When is it ever said by governments: the economic crisis is starving public institutions of needed funds, therefore we

need to change the economic system? Instead it accepts the economic system as a given and forces the public institutions to change.

The demands are always hidden behind the language of consultation and collaboration. "Over time, the government will align its policies, and *funding levers* with Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework to *steer the system* in ways that align with *provincial priorities* while respecting the autonomy and supporting the strengths of our institutions. The *government's goals*, combined with a collaborative approach to differentiation, will help facilitate the achievement of targeted quality outcomes." (p. 6, emphasis added) Institutional autonomy and a collaborative approach are asserted, but their reality is denied by the way in which the policy is going to be implemented. *Levers* are used to move heavy objects. The university system is treated as a weighty anachronism; money will be used to move it to where the government wants it to be. The Differentiation framework will "steer the system," so that it aligns with "provincial priorities." If institutions are being moved by levers and steered to serve government priorities, then they are not autonomous (literally, following the law of their own nature).

Now, the steering and aligning and leveraging might be acceptable if the priorities of the government were acceptable. But when we turn to examine those priorities it becomes very clear that they rest upon a conflation of the outcomes of education with employment in the field studied. The Frameworks Vision sees colleges and universities as drivers of "creativity, innovation, knowledge, and community engagement."(p. 7) However, the only ways in which these 4 values are cashed out is in terms of employment outcomes. "Postsecondary education is an important driver of social and economic development. The government recognizes the valuable contributions that colleges and universities make towards job creation, enhanced productivity, and the vitality of communities and regions throughout the province." Community vitality remains undefined, while job creation and enhanced productivity are explicated in terms of money-value growth for the economy as a whole and for individual workers: "Graduates of postsecondary education … have improved labour market outcomes … including higher employment rates and greater earning levels over time. This is especially significant to ensuring Ontario's social and economic development."(p.7) What 'social development" means apart from economic development (money-value growth) is not explained.

Nor are the "personal aspirations" and the values of engaged citizenship ever spelled out, even though they are listed as outcomes of "quality teaching."(p.7) When we turn to the metrics the government will utilise to evaluate 'quality teaching,' not a single one of them has anything to do with any specific capacity developed through study at a college or a university. "As part of forming an institution's profile and measuring progress in this component, the ministry will use the following system-wide metrics for all institutions: National survey of Student Engagement results (University specific), Student Satisfaction Survey (college specific), Graduation rates, Retention rates, Number of Students enrolled in a co-op program, number of on-line course registrants, programs, and courses at an institution."(p.14) The two surveys are nothing more than customer satisfaction exercises that treat students as passive buyers of "education." They are not *measurements* of whether students have grown intellectually through their studies or what they think it means to have grown (or not) intellectually. One can grow intellectually and be *dissatisfied,* because intellectual growth in any particular discipline and in general demands confronting and overcoming one's own initial limitations, a process which is often resented by

students, at least in the short term. Graduation rates and retention rates would seem to focus more closely on learning, but if one thinks more carefully about them, they are aggregate figures which do not tell anyone anything about whether one has been changed through the successful completion of a university degree or college program. In general, a good education will enable students to grow in breadth and depth of understanding, theoretically and practically, to critically evaluate the effects their transformative relationships with the natural and social worlds have, will expand their capacity to appreciate complexity, nuance, and contradiction, to enable them to see themselves as members of larger wholes to which they ought to contribute as a constituent elements of their individual good, and most importantly, the confidence to stand up and oppose policies and social forces which manifestly damage the natural and social worlds to which we all belong. The degree to which these cognitive and practical life-capacities are developed or not in an educational institution is indicated through how one subsequently lives one's life. Not all graduates experience such growth, while others study briefly but quit the institution to continue their education by other means. Hence, retention and graduation rates are not necessarily measurements of a good education. The inclusion of the number of on-line courses as a measure of excellent teaching is transparently absurd and not in need of critical comment.

To argue against these government mandated metrics is not to argue that teaching in particular courses and disciplines should not or cannot be evaluated. Teaching already is evaluated– imperfectly, to be sure– at the end of every class, by every student who chooses to fill in the now ubiquitous course evaluation forms. When these forms are well-designed they can provide valuable feedback to instructors about strategies that worked and strategies that did not work, and can thus serve a as productive basis for genuine improvement of teaching practice. The important point here is that these surveys, though they use generic questions, are filled out for particular courses, and can be discussed with peers who have a shared understanding of what it is like to teach in this or that discipline, intimate knowledge of the art of teaching specific subject matter not available to government bureaucrats.

The metrics to be applied to research are somewhat better in that in focussing on the number of tri-council grants, publications, and citations, the values for each score will be connected to disciplinary expertise through the peer review and scholarly discussion process. (p.15) At the same time, publication and citation alone are not necessary and sufficient conditions of research excellence. Large numbers of citations can be indicative of fashion as much as lasting contribution, when it is presumably lasting contribution to the discipline (and by extension to whatever aspects of natural and social reality the disciplines studies) that interests the government. As for grants, while applications are peer reviewed, the organizations that distribute them are not free of political influence, especially since the Conservatives secured a majority government. They have pursued a more and more aggressive posture towards NSERC and SSHRC in particular, pushing them towards funding commercializable research at the expense of basic research in the natural sciences and socially critical work in the arts and humanities. That a project is not funded does not therefore mean it was not worthy of funding; it could equally well mean it fell outside of the political parameters imposed on the agency.

As troubling as the problems these quantitative metrics are, they are not new. Grants and peer reviewed publishing have always been more or less hostage to fashion and political power. What is new, at least in Ontario and in my experience, is the final category discussed, that of Program

Offerings. Of most concern are the first and third metrics, "Concentration of enrolment at universities by program major …" and "Institutions' system share of enrollment by program major …" (p. 15) When interpreted in light of the goals of the differentiation framework, which include "build[ing] on and help[ing] to focus the well-established strengths of Ontario colleges and universities while avoiding unnecessary duplication," it is hard to conclude that this metric is anything other than a tool to justify program cuts, especially at smaller schools where enrollment in certain disciplines may be low. If "differentiation" means supporting existing strengths and avoiding unnecessary duplication, and strengths are measured by enrolments, what purpose could such a metric serve other than to justify the closure of small programs? As with the metrics for teaching and research, the quantitative information cannot capture the quality of the program, but it can yield information about cost.   And so, when the final tally comes in and smaller schools with smaller programs are asked to define their traditional strengths, they will point to the areas of highest enrolment in order to give themselves the best chance at securing as much provincial money as possible, and the position of disciplines with low enrolment (even if of high quality internally and of supreme social importance externally) will be even more precarious than ever. If this is not the outcome the government seeks, it needs to explain what exactly its intentions are.

If as I suspect and fear the real aim of this exercise is to encourage (force?) a significant reduction in the range of programs offered at Ontario universities, then it is the university institution itself that is at risk. As its name implies, the university is not a collection of professional programs and niche degrees, its mission is to comprehensively preserve and extend human knowledge and practice across the full range of disciplinary approaches to the natural, social, and personal worlds that comprise human reality. For example, [The University of Windsor Act (1962)](#) which created my home institution states that the university will "provide facilities for instruction in all branches of higher learning." It says nothing about supporting the "government's vision and priorities for higher education."(p.9). The two goals cannot be made compatible, because government priorities change as governments change. The branches of higher learning represent permanent human intellectual dispositions towards the realty we inhabit.

While there is thus much to object to in the policy document, its public release provides an occasion for Ontario academics to build common cause against the potential threat it poses. The first step needs to be the construction of a coherent alternative; not retreat to an abstract ivory tower but advance towards a unified explanation of the social value of academic work and why institutional autonomy and academic freedom (with regard to teaching, research, and program offerings) are necessary conditions for its realization and enjoyment, not just by academics, but all Ontarians.

Discipline is His Passion

Originally Published, 26 November, 2013

When I was a child, primary school just felt like prison. Now, apparently, it is prison, at least for "the unruly." The CBC reported last week that the practice of locking children in solitary confinement– sorry "isolation rooms" –is expanding in British Columbia. An on-line survey conducted by Inclusion B.C. and the Family Support Institute found more than two hundred instances of students, many of whom were disabled, being locked in supply closets, storage rooms, and what sound like specially constructed padded cells. When confronted with the evidence, the Education Minister Peter Fassbender responded with the usual bureaucratic diversions from the real issue. While saying that he is "concerned by reports that some children with special needs have been locked away at school for hours," he promised in effect to do nothing about it: "We're going to have that discussion about what some of the issues might be, what some of the protocols are that should be looked at. What we need to do is make a very well-thought-out decision if we do make any changes in light of that."

What the issues might be! Is not the issue plain: children, many of them intellectually disabled, are being locked in rooms. What more fine grained analysis is required before the problem is clear?

The title of the story emphasizes the moral vacuity of contemporary institutions, and the people whose mindlessness and material dependence on paid work or elected office keep them running. "Should 'isolation rooms' be banned in B.C. Schools?" The answer to that question is obvious. The real question is: How can teachers and ministers of education convince themselves that the challenges of communicating with and engaging the attention of students is a policing problem that requires the prison-like solution of locking children away?

I have no doubt that trying to reach intellectually disabled or highly active children is a difficult challenge, made more difficult, I am again sure, by larger classes and less support. So– *fight collectively for better conditions*. Refuse any longer to prioritise smooth execution of routine over the vocation of teaching whose overriding good is care for the cognitive, emotional, and imaginative development of children.

How does this override happen? Through the administrative reduction of education to following government rules. The bosses impose the rules, the teachers execute the rules, the students internalise the rules. Those who cannot or will not follow the rules, "the unruly," are removed. But how can one do that to a child, an observer might ask? That too is an unfortunately easy question to answer– the child disappears behind the demonizing label. This is not imprisonment of disabled children, it is disciplining miscreants, it is protecting the "learning environment." Once the humanity disappears behind the label, those who take it as their role to punish ("correct") can convince themselves that any form of abusive mistreatment is justified, even good.

Tolstoy diagnosed the disorder over a century ago. Puzzling in his novel *Resurrection* over how seemingly intelligent and otherwise caring people could actively destroy the lives of the human

beings they regarded only as "prisoners," with seemingly no self-consciousness of the ways they themselves were implicated in moral crime (the deliberate destruction of the lives of the humans who became prisoners), he concluded: "All this happened … because all these people– governors, inspectors, police-officers, and policemen– consider that there are circumstances in this world where man owes no humanity to man."(p.447).

The circumstance is always the same– no humanity is owed to the person, regardless of age, who by his or her own power disrupts the established flow of things, be that commerce, or enjoyment of property, or classes in school. Since it is the label and not the person, even if the person is a child, to which one attends when one punishes in this way, one forgets everything, even the most obvious facts which regard for the other as human teaches, for example, that most children are terrified of being left alone in strange rooms, and locking the door would only amplify their terror.

What problem today do ruling political authorities not propose to solve with more repression, criminalization, and punishment, and when it fails, insist only on more intense application of the failed policy? If punishment does not work, it has not been severe enough. And if the most serve punishment does not work (capital punishment has not solved the problem of murder), then ignore the evidence and promise to look into the issue, while not stopping even for a moment to consider alternatives.

Perhaps here we have a new metric for the measure of social decadence– that society is closer to the point where it no longer deserves to continue the more it can only continue its normal operations through the externally imposed discipline of punishment. Does the incapacity to risk the uncertainty of argument in pursuit of constructive solutions to problems not prove above all that a society has lost its claim to having the intellectual and political resources necessary *to understand the causes of problems* and address them constructively?

This is indeed the way of the world today. Instead of spending time, effort, and money understanding and treating the causes of problems, more authoritarian rules are passed, more prisons are built, all other social institutions are turned into prisons. To visit a friend in the hospital you have to sign in, to give a guest lecture in a school you have to submit to a background check, to walk in the street is to be subjected to surveillance, to ride the subway with a backpack is to become the object of the suspicions of your fellow riders. And when catastrophe still happens, the media deify the 'first responders' who arrive to pick up the bodies rather than ask: why did this happen, *again*?

But working out answers to that question is difficult, and would no doubt prove as discomfiting to the self-righteous rule-enforcers of today as Tolstoy's answer proved to those who ruled turn of the century Russia. It would be they and their system that would be found guilty of criminal negligence of the conditions of in which people develop the desire to become self-disciplined, to become educated and stay healthy without someone pontificating over them about rules.

The Abuse of Ecology Comes as No Surprise

Originally Published, 7 November, 2013

Any idea can be co-opted and put to work in the service of ends the opposite of which it was initially intended to serve. A recent case in point: the ecological idea of sustainability has migrated from the critique of the material irrationality of capitalist performance metrics (growth as good irrespective of the capacity of the environment to supply resources and absorb wastes) to the capitalist critique of demands on socially produced wealth. The strategy of blaming social demand for public goods as the cause of economic crisis– objectively and demonstrably nonsense– masks its ideological function by wrapping itself in the seemingly progressive or at least politics-neutral idea of "sustainability."

In 2010, *The Drummond Report* into the costs of public services was commissioned by the government of Ontario. It warned that the achieved level of public services– the legacy of social struggles to ensure the use of collectively created wealth for the satisfaction of shared life-requirements– was no longer affordable in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, and thus that serious cuts would have to be made, *in order to ensure that the very goods being cut were sustainable in the future.* More recently, the government of Ontario leaked a discussion paper on the future of higher education in the province, warning that unless the educational vocation of universities was further subordinated to money-value production, i.e., its life-value to the public further eroded, *the system could not be sustained.* Closer to home, in an exchange during a recent strike at my university, the President, in response to certain of my criticisms, argued that he had no choice but to insist on the concessions being demanded, concessions which would threaten the jobs of a number of members of the bargaining unit, because concessions were necessary if *the university of Windsor was to be sustained*.

Now on one level, the use of "sustainability" to justify policies which hasten the opposite result is simply Orwellian double-speak. In other words, the truth of the matter is the opposite of that asserted– the aim is not sustainability of public services or the university system or a particular university. Something called public services, universities, and the University of Windsor will survive, but their character as *public services will be lost.* To hasten the transition from public service providing for the life-requirements of citizens of Ontario to privatised businesses providing commodities for sale, manufactured crises are required. These crises reduce people's confidence in and support of universal, public provision and then conveniently supply the solution- the services are only sustainable if they are privatized, even though, of course, the more services become commodities, the fewer people can afford to access them. Hospitals, schools, and social services of all sorts, which, imperfectly, to be sure, but nonetheless universally enabled people to seek cure of disease, cultivation of intellect and imagination, shelter, support, and cultural development close their doors to all but those who can pay, and this destruction of public access is called "sustainability" of public services.

However, there is more than just double-speak at work here, and it is important to decode the deeper conflation.

These documents and arguments all *sound* enlightened, because at the level of words, commitment to the long term maintenance of public goods is asserted. But the words conceal a fundamentally important difference between the material conditions of ecological sustainability and the material conditions of social sustainability. In the case of the natural world, that which threatens sustainability of the life-support functions of nature is the over-*demand* capitalism places upon nature. Resources are converted to money-value for private appropriation and wastes produced at rates that the environment cannot bear. Life-support systems collapse as a consequence of life-incoherent levels of demand on scarce and in some cases irreplaceable natural resources.

The case of social sustainability is the exact opposite. That which threatens the sustainability of public institutions and the life-goods they produce is not over-demand of the public for those services, but the *lack of supply* of social wealth required to enable them to satisfy the purposes for which they were created (healing, educating, and so on). There is collective choice involved in the level of supply of social wealth that flows to public institutions that does not exist in the case of the supply of natural wealth. In nature, we can choose how much and how quickly to appropriate its resources, but the supply is determined by the laws of physics and chemistry, over which we have relatively no control. In the case of society, supply of social wealth to public institutions is determined by public policies which can either select for options which protect the private money-accumulations of the rich for the sake of their own narrow self-interests, or for investment in public institutions that meets needs because they are needs, and not because they can be exploited as demand for priced commodities. No law of physics or chemistry determines tax rates, but politics.

However, by presenting the task of management and government as ensuring "sustainability" without noting the fundamental difference between natural and social sustainability, defenders of the austerity and regressive tax policy that has dried up the required supply of social wealth to public institutions, mask the choices that have been made behind an illusion of quasi-natural necessity to which they pretend to respond. In this way a false "necessity" masks management, ownership, and ruling party responsibility for the *unsustainability* of the institutions they claim to want to sustain.

It is one, must admit, a brilliant rhetorical strategy: those who would cut and chop and distort the purpose of public institutions, who drive an economic agenda that devours resources as fast as they can be turned into money, now position themselves as the only people who can sustain those institutions, while critics are positioned to appear as self-interested and greedy, blind to the impossible demands they are placing on public finances and economic health. But perhaps not quite as brilliant as the defenders of austerity and privatisation hope.

The apparent political neutrality of the goal of sustainability, its alliance with natural science and objective measurement, can be put to effective oppositional work. Let us agree- sustainability of public goods is the goal. Let us therefore examine together exactly what the conditions of sustainable public institutions are, drawing our conclusions objectively, like natural scientists. Let us examine the underlying issue of quality of life, and work out whether it improves when access to needed services is reduced in scope because the previously unpriced and universally available goods become artificially scarce commodities. And then when it

becomes clear that the real threat to sustainability is starvation of the institutions of the supply of social wealth needed for their proper functioning, and when the business people and managers and politicians begin to distract and prevaricate and warn about the sustainability of the entire economic system, we can offer to take the problem off of their hands if they do not feel up to the challenge. Perhaps here lies the organic framework of a new left politics that can begin to reverse the erosion of past levels of social achievement, secure new levers of control over the means of social wealth creation and the use of the social wealth created, and thus over our own futures.

Win This Strike!

Originally Published, 9 September, 2013

Following his election as President of Unifor, Jerry Dias, rallying the troops, argued: "Unifor is here because it's time to stop playing defence and start playing offence. It's time to stop reacting and time to start acting. It's time to set the agenda . . . We have to show our collective power."

Let us hope the troops have been rallied, because the time for offence has arrived. On September 8th, CUPE Local 1393 representing 282 technical staff at the University of Windsor was forced to take strike action. The walkout comes after months of fruitless negotiations. Management, which has already contracted out some custodial work and is trying to open the door widely for more, is seeking major concessions which would: give them more or less arbitrary authority over job classification and evaluation, undermine members' bumping rights and pay equity provisions, and make lay offs, contracting out, and casualization of positions easier. While the decision to strike was purely defensive– brothers and sisters are simply trying to protect their existing rights, even turning down the offer of a small wage increase because it was tied to major job security concessions– winning is going to require offence.

This strike is not just about 282 technicians and it is not just between CUPE 1393 and management at the University of Windsor. It is about standing up and stopping– here, now– the decades long but intensifying since 2008 assault on public institutions. Which means as well– stopping the decades long but intensifying destruction of the value of democratic social organization represented by public institutions.

The principle of capitalism: the owner of capital exploits labour (paying it less than the money-value it creates) and appropriates the surplus as private property.

The principle of public institutions: the satisfaction of fundamental human life-requirements through the forms of collective labour they organize for the sake of advancing the shared good of life-capacity development. Hospitals are for the sake of healing, schools are for the sake of educating, galleries are for the sake of ensuring access to creations that challenge the limits of sensibility. As *public* institutions, each ought to be organized and governed in those ways that best ensure its ability to fulfill its life-value function– the satisfaction of the relevant life-requirement. Managers in public institutions are not owners or shareholders. There is no surplus money value to be appropriated as private property, nor should there be, in consequence, any private interest opposed to the shared life-value served by the institution as a whole.

In capitalist societies, public institutions are always under threat, because funding them requires the tax-based re-channeling of socially created wealth away from the private and exclusive accumulation of money-value to purposes of shared life-requirement satisfaction. A society which commits to funding public institutions thus must come into conflict with the principle of capitalism, even if to only a very limited extent. Public sector workers are therefore always seen as particularly pernicious to capitalist ideologues, since their existence is a result of successful democratic re-channeling of money-value that could otherwise have been privately appropriated.

Hence, one must expect and be prepared to counter the obloquies that will be directed against the strikers.

They are greedy (they are only trying to protect their jobs).

They are holding students hostage (there are two sides at every negotiating table and the administration was intransigent about weakening job security language).

They need to get with the times, job security is a thing of the past. (The times are what we allow them and make them to be; that job security is opposed to business interests does not mean it is opposed to human interests, on the contrary).

One way of thinking about the neo-liberal phase of capitalist social organization (1973 onward) is as an organized, global attempt of capital owners to re-capture money-value 'lost' to public institutions over decades of successful union and community based democratic political organization and struggle. The strategy by which this 'lost' money-value is to be recaptured is the same across the capitalist world: First, cut corporate and income taxes for the best off and replace them with regressive consumption taxes that do not return the same revenues. Once taxes have been reduced and income redistributed upwards to private hands, claim that society can no longer "afford" to fund public institutions. Now, begin to starve them of funds, blaming "greedy" public sector workers for the ensuing crises of public services. Install management teams that ape private sector corporate practices to further weaken and undermine public sector unions, outsource and casualize as much work as possible, cut wages and benefits, increase instability in peoples' lives and weaken their sense of security, making them more liable to accept the attacks and make the concessions. Enable as far as possible the colonization of the public sector by the private, weakening and finally destroying altogether the commitment to the democratic principle embodied by public institutions. Undermine their capacity to satisfy the life-requirements they have been designed to satisfy, make them vectors for the return of money to private hands. Distract attention from the ensuing decline of quality of life by obsessive-compulsive repetition of mantras of increased 'competitiveness,' 'economic growth,' and 'ensuring opportunities for the next generation.'

The reality, of course, is that as secure and meaningful jobs increasingly disappear, (jobs such as are represented by CUPE 1393) the next generation finds fewer and fewer opportunities to contribute their productive and creative capacities in meaningful and enjoyable ways to their communities and the wider world. So if you are a student at the University of Windsor, try to see past the short-term disruption to the longer-term consequences if management– not only here, but across the country, in all economic sectors– continues to win concessions. At some point, so matter what you choose to pursue as a career, your prospects for success will narrow. But beyond your individual life-horizons (which are of course essential) it is not in your interest as a member of a still nominally democratic society, i.e., one in which we are supposed to make decisions about matters that affect us all together- to allow the further destructive, undemocratic neo-liberal agenda to advance further. All of us must therefore strive to make this strike about that agenda; the problem is not simply the university management, it is the business class and their political servants who have been prosecuting this agenda for decades.

In order to put the neo-liberal agenda on the run, the labour movement needs to get involved, getting out to bolster the picket lines when called upon by the local. As importantly, it means standing up to critics of the strike and saying: workers should not have to apologise or feel guilty about demanding job security. It means exposing the absurdity of a form of social organization which forces people to pay for the resources their lives require, treats having a job as a moral imperative, *and consistently demonizes workers for trying to protect their jobs!* It is time for everyone to understand that the on-going loss of well-paying manufacturing work and professional jobs is not the result of natural-evolutionary forces, but policy decisions that can be challenged and reversed. It is also time to dispel the illusion that one group of workers taking less frees up investment funds to create employment elsewhere. It frees up money to be privately appropriated and invested for the highest return, wherever that return might be– the stock market or real estate in Dubai. Reasonable wages and salaries for workers, by contrast, are spent where people live.

The foregoing argument does not assume or entail that budgets– institutional or provincial– are unlimited. All budgets are finite and in the short term time frames in which collective bargaining functions trade offs have to be made. Unions have not been the party making 'unreasonable' demands for many, many years. Public sector workers are painfully aware that the institutions their work sustains are particularly subject to damaging budgetary pressure because their funding is tied to political forces not under their control. These are all reasons why this strike involves the interests of everyone who has a stake in quality public institutions and the democratic principle that underlies them. Winning this strike does not simply mean successfully resisting the concessions being demanded, it also means building the foundations for a new political movement motivated by the democratic vision of a society that uses its resources to ensure the satisfaction of its members' natural and social life-requirements, whose institutions are governed by collective efforts of those whose lives they shape and enable, which solves collective problems cooperatively, and which organizes its economy so as to ensure that all with something to contribute find the space in which to contribute.

Teachers on the Front Lines

Originally Published, 17 September, 2013

For over a month teachers across Mexico have been mobilized against an educational 'reform' law' that leaders of the militant rank and file National Coordinating Committee of the Mexican Teacher's Union claim is a thinly veiled assault on workers' job security and autonomy. The core of the dispute centres on the bill's goal of increasing the state's power to fire teacher's deemed to be underperfoming according to new metrics also introduced by the bill. The teachers are *not* opposed to being evaluated, they are opposed to the way in which the bill abstracts the problem of evaluation from the social and economic problems plaguing Mexico's schools (especially the massive inequalities of resources that exist between rich and poor school districts and rich and poor areas of the country). This struggle is not the first time that Mexican teachers have been on the front lines of resistance to attacks on worker's livlihoods and life conditions. In 2006, in Oaxaca, teachers fighting a corrupt state governor led a movement that resulted in the emergence of a popular-democratic assembly that for five months functioned as the effective government of large areas of the state. (see Nancy Davies, *The People Decide*, Narco News Books, 2006). The intensity of the teacher's struggle, in 2006 as now– and the armed intransigence of the Mexican State's response, in 2006, as now– proves just how central education has become to neo-liberal social re-engineering.

Education is essential to social reproduction– it is the primary institution by which society imposes its ruling values and shapes latent human capacities into the "skill sets" its economy needs at any given moment. At the same time as education is essential to social reproduction, it is also essential to the possibility of contestation of the value systems through which the reproduction of that society and its structures of power, wealth, and privilege are legitimated. Schools, and the educational workers whose labour sustains them, can serve contradictory purposes and play contradictory roles. Schools teach people to think as they must if society is to reproduce itself, but they can also teach people to think for themselves against the ruling social values and interests, to oppose rather than reproduce the institutions of diseased forms of social relationship and order. Since teachers are in close and constant contact with new generations of citizens, since engaging ones command the respect of their students, the ways in which they structure discussions of social form– open it up to criticism or sanctify it as inviolable– can have decisive effects on students' evaluations of their society and their present and future place in it. That is why the state is obsessively focused on what goes on in the classroom and why each new government wants to place its stamp on the education system.

For the last twenty years the thematic driver of "education reform" at all levels– primary, secondary, tertiary– in North America and around the world has been consistent: preparation of the next generation for the demands of the 'new economic reality.' While job market preparation has always been an essential function of the school system in its role of institution of social reproduction, this functionalism was counter-balanced, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but a more wholistic, von Humboldtian-Millian liberal ideal of all-round personal cultivation. To be sure, that ideal of self-cultivation tended to be articulated in abstraction from the class differences and the racist and sexist hierarchies that marred nineteenth and twentieth

century liberal-capitalism, but its capacity to function as a basis for an immanent critique of the brutal harnessing of schooling to the task of service to labour markets was real.

Today, given the ever-increasing power of educrats over educators, of their demands for generic metrics of success ('learning outcomes'), of the endless weighing in of business leaders and bankers into what one might have assumed were the rights of students to discover their own interest and decide for themselves what they want to study, it sounds ridiculous to invoke "intrinsic values" and "all-round personal cultivation." It is easy to decry such arguments as elitist, distant, so we are told, from the meat and potatoes concerns of parents (who want competent instruction for their children) and students (who as a matter of harsh economic fact need marketable skills in order to survive).

It is certainly true that invoking "intrinsic values" in abstraction from the realities of labour markets can be elitist (an attempt of those who believe that academicness is next to godliness to ward of any social interest in research which they regard as their own affair exclusively). But it is not elitist if it is connected to a critique of the ways in which labour markets fail to value all the capacities, interests, and talents that are valuable (contributory to human creations that sustain life, enable it to develop in meaningful ways, make it enjoyable, open up new avenues of understanding and interpretation, etc.) in favour of those only which can be exploited for a profit. For those with the power to command labour will not consign *their* children to the narrow vocational training they insist on as the model for everyone else. No, for them the von Humboltian-Millian ideal of all round cultivation (an ideal which was also Marx's) remains alive– that which they are trying to buy with violin lesson, sports camps, summer trips to Paris, and Ivy League universities.

That which applies to students applies to teachers and academics. The attacks on teachers' working conditions and autonomy and academic freedom grow more shrill the larger the proportion of poor and working class students they teach. Rich high schools can have drama programs, but should one suggest that working class kids deserve the same opportunity for emotional exploration and growth that drama makes possible and one will be denounced for 'ignoring the real world' and counselling failure for 'our kids.' (No, again, not the *denouncers' kids*, they are spending March Break at the Globe Theater in London).

Here is the secret to understanding the attacks on public sector teachers around the world– individualization of responsibility for student failure as means of impeding critical inquiry into the *social causes* of differential levels of achievement. Vastly unequal amounts of resources are invested in schools, even in public systems, and this massive inequality, when combined with all manner of other inequalities– in consumption of nutritious food, quantities of quality sleep, contexts for quiet study, availability of time for school work– explain the differential levels of achievment. Failing schools do not cause a failing society, a failing society causes failing schools. But pointing that out condemns the entire value system the ruling class requires everyone to internalize if their rule is to be legitimated. Thus, the social causes are obscured by abstract critique of individual failure and institutionalized threats to remove the incompetents.

To point out social causes is not to deny that there are individual incompetents, but to affirm the need for constructive, rather than punitive, response. If there are social causes of failing schools,

and social causes of failing individual teachers, then there should be a social effort to address both problems simultaneously- equalization of funding gaps, extra efforts to support schools in poorer areas, targeting poorer areas for social investment, remediation of ineffective teaching practices through peer networks linking better and worse teachers, etc.). More performance metrics extrinsic to the goals of education (acquisition of employment related skills narrowly construed and measured by employment levels post-graduation versus mastery of basic intellectual skills, development of higher level cognitive, imaginative, communicative, and critical capacities not measured but manifested over a full and free human life) enforced by harsher and more centralized managerial discipline will only exacerbate the problem of failing schools while adding to the crisis of unemployment and alienated labour. Again, criticizing managerial authoritarianism is not the same as rejecting the need for oversight and evaluation. The overseers, however, should not consider themselves a class above and apart–managerial roles should rotate so that no one's work identity is shaped by a sense of *permanent* elevation and authority over the ones doing the actual work, and the criteria of evaluation must be worked out collegially and with the goals of education (not the interests of labour markets) in mind.

The Contradictions of Moral Outrage

Originally Published, 6 September, 2013

Red Lines and Invisible Lines: The Geography and Chemistry of Political Crime

"It is also profoundly about who we are. We are the United States of America. We are the country that has tried, not always successfully, but always tried to honor a set of universal values around which we have organized our lives and our aspirations. This crime against conscience, this crime against humanity, this crime against the most fundamental principles of international community, against the norm of the international community, this matters to us."

So argued U.S Secretary of State John Kerry on August 30th. He is correct on two important points: the chemical weapons attack of August 21st was a crime against conscience and a crime against humanity. But it was not a crime against the most fundamental principles of international community, for there is no international community (save when rhetorically constructed to suit a major power's national interests) and it was not against the norm of the international community, for the same reason.

To the extent that there are international relations and interconnections (relations and interconnections which might someday become but are certainly not now) an international community, the norm of these relations and interconnections is competition: political, economic, military. The aim of competition is: maximise gains for self (or in an extended sense, national ruling class). The practice of self-maximization requires doing that which is necessary to ensure victory. That is what every competitor strives to achieve. In military conflict ensuring victory requires that the will of the enemy to fight be broken, which entails killing and maiming and destroying life-support infrastructure to the point where the opponent gives up. Civil wars are particularly ferocious in this regard. Since all parties to the conflict are already "home" there is nowhere to which the losing faction can retreat. Hence, civil wars tend to be fights to the death.

Thus far the Syrian Civil War has killed approximately 100 000 people, perhaps as many as 1400 by the chemical weapon attack of August 21st, if the United States intelligence reports are correct. (Which there is reason to doubt, although it is not my purpose here to raise those doubts). If the argument that Kerry articulated is to be accepted, it entails accepting the conclusion that the preceding 99 000 deaths were not as morally egregious, not crimes against humanity and conscience, since they were not invoked as grounds for humanitarian intervention. If there is some unique *moral* (as opposed to physical-medical) horror to chemical weapons use, then it would seem to follow further from his argument that there would be no *uniquely* immoral atrocity committed were Assad (or his opponents) to kill the entire opposed force and its supporting population by conventional means.

This conclusion sounds outrageous, but then consider: millions were killed in civil wars in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan by conventional means, and these did not provoke Ciceronian speeches before the United States Congress imploring congresswomen

and men to authorize life-saving intervention. The operative value here is therefore not life and its protection from military destruction.

So, rhetorically, chemistry seems to matter (it is immoral to kill with gas, less so or not at all by bullets, artillery shells, etc.). In political reality, however, which really drives the rhetoric, what really counts, is geography. It is morally wrong to kill some groups of people in regions in which major powers have national interests, but the lives of black people in zones where major powers have no national interests count for nothing in the calculus of major power *real politik*.

What does not matter, clearly, is killing human beings to advance political interests. If the interests served by the killing are judged legitimate by major powers, then killing is permissible, even morally obligatory (as Syrians who have the misfortune to live near the cruise missile strikes that are surely coming are about to find out).

The Vacuity and Plasticity of Universal Values

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the imperfect "American interpretation of Universal Values" has killed millions of civilians in Viet Nam, Latin America, and the Middle East. Since September 11th 2001 hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and tens of thousands of Afghanis have been sacrificed to keep the American "homeland" safe. While there has been no use of nerve gas, Viet Nam involved chemical warfare by means of Agent Orange (up to 4.8 million Vietnamese directly exposed, millions more continuing to suffer the effects) and napalm, (which can kill by burning or by suffocating victims in the general vicinity of the enormously intense fires it caused) while Iraq and Afghanistan have been littered with spent shell casings made of depleted uranium, a known carcinogen particularly dangerous for children, as pediatricians and oncologists in Iraq have discovered. Closer to home, the CIA conducted drug experiments on Americans and Candians in the 1950′s and 1960′s. Americans kill prisoners with chemical weapons (execution by "lethal injection). Its allies have also used chemical weapons and chemical agents without incurring the cutting casuistry of Secretaries of State. According to a recent article in Foreign Policy, the CIA had knowledge of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks on Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (itself egged on and encouraged by the United States. Israel is known to have used white phosphorous munitions against civilian targets in its invasions of Lebanon (1982) and Gaza (2009).

Imperfections in the application of universal values can be forgiven, for no human being, nation, or political entity can understand with absolute clarity that which a particular situation morally requires. That which cannot be accepted is Kerry's claim that America is trying to (imperfectly) apply its universal values. It is trying to project its power in a way that maximally damages Iranian interests. That is the real goal of American policy here: use the weakening of Iran's ally Assad to gain even more leverage over Iran itself. And if this goal requires more Syrian lives to be sacrificed (because they happen to belong to the wrong faction, or they just happen to live next to a missile target), so be it. They are not being killed by chemical weapons, so one supposes they have nothing (morally) to complain about.

Ways Forward, Real and Imaginary

But *something* must be done, all sides declaim. Yes, something must be done, but why should "something" equate to "missile strikes?" The words are not, after all, synonymous. If something must be done for the sake of the suffering civilian population, wrecking more of their lives and life-support systems with cruise missiles is not what they need.

Secretary Kerry is certainly correct that the situation in Syria (as all international and civil conflicts are) is messy and complex. The overlapping and contradictory alliances, the fear of extermination driving the ruling Alawite minority, the legitimate rage against its abuses of power over fifty years of rule driving the secular opposition, the dogmatic absolutism of the Islamist opposition, the total absence (from what I can see from this vantage point) of any potentially unifying nationalist-populist or socialist principles means that, as Kerry again said, peace cannot be wished into being. The slaughter is not going to suddenly stop.

What could slow and then certainly stop the brutality is an immediate freeze on all weapons sales and transfers into the conflict zone. No war can continue without weapons, so if Russia, the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Qatar agreed amongst themselves to stop fueling the fire, the combatants, no matter how deep and visceral their antipathies, would have to stop fighting. That is not abstract philosophizing or wishful thinking or soft-hearted moralism, but political physics: fires need fuel to burn; cut off the fuel supply, the fire must go out. Once the fires start dying down, the United States, if it is to be actually rather than rhetorically true to its "universal values" with will use its power to initiate, [rather than stall](#), peace talks.

But it is almost unimaginable that the path of peace, the only path that can end suffering, will be followed. Politicians learn nothing from history, they will not relent even in the face of self-caused calamities. Generation after generation the sisyphusian stone of regional and global domination is rolled up the hill, each generation it rolls back down, crushing how many millions in its wake, only to find another generation, fully cognizant of what happened [the last time](#), push it on up again.

The End of the American Revolution …

Between "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," and the extension to everyone of the legal space in which decisions will be made about with whom and how this happiness will be pursued, only 237 years. Working out that "all men" means "all human beings" and that "all human beings" embraces the concrete differences of sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, class, and range of ability, only 237 years.

With the Unites States Supreme Court's decision on June 26th, 2013 to strike down the provision in the Defence of Marriage Act that denied federal benefits to legally married gay and lesbian couples, the final act in the drama of the liberal revolutions has begun- the elimination of homophobic state interference in the relationships of gay and lesbian people. Gays and lesbians were the last social group to be explicitly named and targeted for legal discrimination in states which purported to be liberal and egalitarian. What does it say about liberalism that it has taken over two centuries to consistently work out the legal implications of its egalitarian ethos?

Some will argue that it is a sign of liberalism's plasticity, its capacity to transform itself, to include the excluded, the learn from its history and contradictions, to correct itself, and thus its superiority to known alternatives.

Others will argue that it proves that liberal ideals (the self-evident truths to which the Declaration refers) are essentially heteronormative, phallocentric, and white supremacist. If they were not, then it would not have taken 237 years to remove the structures of legal inequality. It should have been self-evident to the eighteenth century Enlightenment rationalists that framed the Declaration that people are marked by differences. "Equality" in the pursuit of happiness just means that people are able pursue it in ways that satisfy the different desires and goals differences of identity generate. That is a straightforward inference, so if Enlightenment rationalists were not able to make it, then it must have been blocked by something more powerful than logical consistency– the privileges of white heterosexual men.

Others will pick up that line of argument and take it a step further. They will argue that the liberal revolutions were not really revolutions, that legal equality is not substantive equality, that the formal right to pursue happiness without the material means of pursuing happiness does not produce actual happiness. Human beings deserve actual happiness, not formal rights. Another "victory' on the road to legal equality is not really a "victory" at all, because legal rights in a society in which wealth and power is concentrated in the hands of a ruling class are not sufficient conditions of real equality, real dignity, real freedom. Every legal gain is precarious. On the same day that the Supreme Court issued its judgement in favour of the constitutionality of gay marriage, it struck down key portions of Voting Rights Act, passed in 1965 to protect the right of African American's to vote. The Court giveth, and the Court taketh away. Social movements must deal with structural problems; legal reforms are no reforms at all because they leave class power in place.

I think all of these claims are true. What does that tell us? It tells us that revolutions are processes and not points in time; that social changes take longer to root than radicals would like. It tells us that legal changes do matter, not because they translate immediately into substantive changes of life-condition, but because they widen the spaces for self chosen action. This is the progressive moment of liberal constitutionalism: oppressed groups can mobilise and fight to widen social choice-space to include alternatives that others find offensive and abhorrent. Legalising the widened choice space does not force anyone to live one way rather than another, but it does prevent the "moral majority"– always a minority but let it slide for the sake of argument– from using the law to prevent marked groups from living the ways they choose to live. People can live how they want to live.

Compare a widened choice space to the suffocating, violent moralism that dominates human history, a moralism that dictated to women their "place," that determined for everyone what the allowable scope and content of sexual relationships would be, that told everyone what to think and say and when it was permissible to think and say it, how to dress, who to bow down to… The revolutionary achievements of the liberal revolutions is obvious every time a joke offensive to the ruling power does not land the teller in prison.

At the same time, legalising a widened choice space does not necessarily remove cultural barriers to people's choosing differently. One can have the space to choose, but be prevented from making a choice because of cultural resistance. There can be large time lags between legal change and cultural change. I do not want to contradict Nina Simone, who sang in her extraordinary anthem "Mississippi Goddamn, "You don't have to live next to me, just give me my equality!" but unless everyone is willing to live next to everyone else, there can be no real equality. Just ask [Treyvon Martin](), who was killed for walking in a gated white enclave in which young black men in hoodies were not supposed to walk, not because it was illegal, but because racist fear made it taboo.

Moreover, widening the choice space through law does not in itself ensure that people have the means to act on the choices they would make if they had the means to do so. One might desire a different career, but unless there is a market for your labour, your right to choose a career amounts to nothing real from the perspective of your labour activity. One might want to pursue a course of study that does not easily translate into remunerative work, so, out of fear for one's future, one chooses a more mainstream path.

The development of human freedom moves along three historical dimensions: the legal-institutional, the cultural, and the material. Societies reach the end of their developmental possibilities not when their forces and relations of production come into contradiction, but when they can no longer widen the choice spaces to accommodate the legitimate demands of some group or groups that remain excluded, along one or more of these dimensions. Liberalism has proven capable of widening the legal choice space in full consistency with its egalitarian ethos. Liberal culture in itself is tolerant, respects difference, and encourages experimentation and heterodoxy, but at the same time it provides shelter for illiberal and antediluvian attitudes which can still pose a potent if informal threat to the communities and practices they demonize. Finally, while there is nothing intrinsic to liberalism that makes it inconceivable for it to support economic policies and dynamics that would ensure the satisfaction of the material

conditions of free choice, its historic co-evolution with capitalism– whose understanding of 'economic freedom' militates against such policies– it has consistently failed to do so, and never will, so long as it remains connected to capitalism.

To say that the American (and the French, and the English) Revolutions are over is thus to say that liberal society has widened its choice space as far as it can (its laws are more or less formally consistent with its egalitarian principles) , but this is not far enough, because it has not removed cultural barriers, and most likely cannot remove the material barriers, to free choice of goals, relationships, and life-activities. But its real achievements– and the 237 years it took to realize them– suggests that a new social formation should expect a similar time frame for the working out of problems of consistency between principles and practices, problems which we cannot even clearly formulate prior to its emergence beyond the limits of liberal-capitalism.

And the Continuation of the Egyptian Revolution

Originally Published, 3 July, 2013

Responding to millions-strong protests, the Egyptian Armed Forces made good on their threat to oust Mohammed Morsi. Their official position was that Morsi had failed to meet popular expectations, had been divisive and increasingly sectarian, authoritarian, and had failed to stimulate the economy. There is little evidence to suggest that these charges are untrue.

But is it really the case, as protesters interviewed maintained, that the army's action was not a coup but support for the revolution?

In one sense the protesters must be correct. They demanded Morsi's ouster and new elections, and the Armed Forces have ousted Morsi and promised new elections.

But the Egyptian Armed Forces are surely not political naifs. They have seen Mubarak fall, and, despite Morsi having removed some senior leaders, they maintained their institutional power. They have now been instrumental in removing Morsi, and have maintained their institutional power. Their refusal to launch all out attacks on the 2011 revolutionaries seems to have leant them a vast store of political capital, some of which they are now investing in a new round of elections. They are taking something of a risk, given that The Muslim Brotherhood is clearly not without its own strong base of support, and are certain to not simply exit the stage completely, although they may lay low for the moment. But it would be even riskier to not accede to the *political* demands of the protesters, because behind those political demands are *social* demands which cannot be met unless problems of ownership and control of the natural and social wealth of Egypt are addressed.

That is a problem the Armed Forces do not want solved, because it would be solved at the expense of ruling class wealth and power, and senior armed forces personnel are amongst the wealthiest and most powerful in the Egyptian economy. It is clear that there is no political solution to the on going Egyptian crisis. The next government is going to face the same problem of a religiously, morally, and politically divided nation. But more important than those problems, it is going to have to address the socio-economic demands of young working class Egyptians. For good reason they see no future under the current economic model, and no government unwilling to tackle problems of class structure is going to be able to give them hope. No liberal democratic or Islamic party is going to do that, and from what I am able to gather (admittedly, from a very far distance) there seems no socialist party anywhere near the levels of popular support necessary to either win an election or channel the popular movement towards the sort of redistribution of wealth and economic power required to start meeting the basic needs of Egypt's poor and workers. A demonized and despised opponent makes political unity easy to achieve, but without a agreement on a positive program of change, impossible to maintain.

Nevertheless, once again Egyptians have inspired critical voices around the world with their capacity for disciplined, peaceful mobilisation, solidarity, courage in the face of opposition, and genuine mass action. 2011 continues to reverberate around the world, in Turkey and Brazil most

recently. Sadly, despite nine years of suffering under an increasingly corrupt, arrogant, anti-intellectual, cruel, and authoritarian Conservative regime at home, the lessons of Tahrir Square have not been learned here– change is possible if people are willing to work together in numbers that cannot be ignored. But building something more than rhetorical opposition and hypothetical alternatives to the current regime remains an elusive prospect at present.

Magic, Materialism, and Murder

Originally Published, 15 July, 2013

The symbolic is not opposed to the physical or the material. In human life symbols are materially real and have physical power. Ideas, interpretations, beliefs, and values become materially real when they inform action. Since the human world is built from natural substances worked over by human action, and human action is guided by ideas (symbolic representations), the symbolic representations which guide our actions are a material force in the human ordering of things.

The material reality of the symbolic in human life has long been known to mythical thought, where it underlies the idea of magic. In the mythical imagination, the power of magic has always been linked to the power of words. In order to unlock the occult forces of the heavens that bestow the capacity to conjure events, to change natural forms to suit one's will, and to attain such power as to make one invulnerable, the mythic magician needs to know secret words and incantations in exotic languages.

But ordinary words can be magical, capable of turning things into their opposites, true philosophers' stones conferring transformative power over unmediated material reality. No esoteric knowledge is needed to utilise this magic, no spells are required, and its effects are not tricks or illusions. Knowledge of this magic requires nothing more than knowledge of how to classify and convince people of the truth of the classifications. Things and people are what they are by their internal structure, and they are what they are according to the classifications imposed upon them. Things can remain what they are by their internal structure and be made into something entirely different, without that internal structure changing, when they have a certain classification imposed upon them. Their nature changes, without their (internal) nature changing. Magic.

Trayvon Martin was the victim of this form of magic.

Material Reality 1: A teenager is walking down the street dressed as many teenagers do, talking on a cell phone as many teenagers do, going to the store to buy junk food as many teenagers do.

Magical Material Reality 2: Fearful and suspicious eyes observe an unfamiliar figure. That which is unfamiliar is threatening, that which is threatening must be eliminated. But what is this figure, what words define its nature? "Young black man," "potential criminal," "suspicious behaviour." "Young black" conjures "potential criminal" "conjures "suspicious behaviour." The words in the mind of the neighbourhood watch captain determine the material reality confronting him. The magical material reality he confronts seems to him to call for action. He phones 911. They tell him to stop following the suspect and wait for police to arrive. He does not listen. He is duty-bound to protect this place. The gates surrounding it are not sufficient, its security requires his unswerving commitment. He stalks the threat, a confrontation is provoked, a gun is pulled, a shot is fired.

What has happened?

Material Reality 1: Trayvon Martin is murdered by a man driven by racist fear of black youth as threats to community safety.

Magical Material Reality 2: A source of danger has been eliminated; a concerned citizen acting in self-defence has done his job.

Zimmerman the neighbourhood watch captain is disciplined and committed to his task. A zealot. He cannot distinguish his identity from his role, he cannot separate his role from suspicion towards black outsiders, he cannot separate his suspicion towards black outsiders from the need to aggressively intervene, he cannot separate his need to aggressively intervene from his right to use his gun, he justifies his right to use his gun by his right to defend himself. Like all zealots, he believes his self extends to include the things he is sworn to protect. Like all zealots he believes that everything hinges on his personal response to demanding situations. The bullet hole is the proof of his commitment to the safety of the neighbourhood and, more importantly, proof the strength of his own character. He was up to the job.

By magic a young man talking to his friend on his cell phone while walking to the store to by candy becomes "black," which becomes "suspicious;" which becomes "threat" which signals to Zimmerman the need to "confront," which is justified by "right to self-defence" which leads to the killing on an unarmed young (black) man (potential criminal).

Trayvon Martin was who he was– a seventeen year old out for a walk. Without ceasing to be that which he was, he became something entirely different.

Magic would not be real if its effects existed only in the mind of the magician. It must also convince others by getting them to accept that reality is as things are classified to be, and not as they are by their internal structure.

In the case of Trayvon Martin, the courtroom is the scene of his metamorphosis. Aggressor becomes victim, shooter becomes sympathetic hero. Innocent stroll becomes sinister surveillance, unprovoked aggressive confrontation becomes self-defence. By the power of words the material reality becomes its opposite and this opposite takes the form of the truth. The reality of the transubstantiation is confirmed by the jury's verdict.

That really is magic. By its internal nature, defence is always and necessarily a *response* to an offence. But Zimmerman was the offense. He stalked, he confronted, he pulled the trigger. Martin was the defence.

No matter, because the power of classification is superior to the power of mere things as such. Magical material reality– material because it has real effects, magic because contrary to reality's internal structure– is superior to the power of unmediated material reality. Hence, unprovoked armed attack becomes defensive response. Zimmerman's story is believed by the jury. Zimmerman is acquitted. Trayvon Martin remains dead, not a victim of fear-engendered racist gun violence, but the magic of words to construct the realities the powerful require to remain invulnerable.

Gamed Theory

Originally Published, 2 April 2014

Why the World Has Become Unbearable I:

Gamification. A new management fad. It is "usually described," so an email that arrived unsolicited last week explains, "as the application of game elements to non-game contexts." How it is not usually described was not noted.

Why gamification? Why, we all love games, and most of us hate work, so, "gamification takes the characteristics we like about games and adds them to everyday actions in order to make them more interesting." In other words, it is behaviour modification, with a prize!! Its real purpose is not hidden: "Gamification encourages behaviour with instant, positive feedback. Consistent feedback connects smaller tasks to larger goals, and makes each action more meaningful." In other words, gamification attempts to distract people from the meaninglessness of work activity. It does not make meaningless activity meaningful, but it does connect smaller tasks to larger goals. That is, it motivates people to work harder for the objectives of the firm or business, without altering the intrinsic meaninglessness of their own particular contribution. People engage in meaningful activity for its own sake; no one needs to be enticed with prizes to pursue that which gives value and purpose to their lives. It is only that which lacks intrinsic value and which serves no life-purpose which must be gamified.

While gamification is a sure sign of alienation, the assumptions that underlie it are not false, at least as descriptors of how people are in fact encouraged to work harder at– and seemingly enjoy working harder at– jobs they would quit if they could. For it is true that "immediate, positive feedback makes us feel good about completing something and motivates us to do it again" and that "by changing the way people think about behavior, gamification can change people's habits." If you can engage your employees' attention in a competition to collect virtual badges that can be redeemed for a prize, you can undermine the habits of passive resistance (of working slowly, for example), and impede the development of more active resistance (like unionization).

And so the gamers are doubly gamed, again and again. Not only do workers who go along with the games succumb to the distraction, but they also yield valuable data that can be used to refine the techniques of happy domination. "Successful gamification strategies require fine-tuning and continual improvement. As employees complete tasks, new ones will need to take their place. Luckily, many gamification providers include tools to make sure your solution is producing results."

Nothing says fun like waking up every morning and consulting the "analytics dashboard" and calculating how much additional work can be squeezed out of people if you add cute kitten faces to the badges for which they are competing.

Why the World Has Become Unbearable II: The End of the Democracy (or, While You Were Collecting Your Badges and Cooing About the Kittens, Feudalism Returned).

Whatever the limitations of existing representative democratic institutions, they are never simply tools of ruling class interest. The legitimate authority they possess to make binding law, and their responsiveness to well-organized and persistent extra-parliamentary power, makes them invaluable in struggles to re-appropriate collectively produced wealth from its capture by the owners of money-capital. It is one thing to attack "union bosses" and "special interests," it is quite another to reject the *de jure* authority of laws passed by democratically elected legislatures. If that legislative power were irrelevant, it would be impossible to provide a coherent explanation of why the ruling class has been working so hard to subvert it.

In a recent short essay the economist John Weeks explores the scope and implications of the subversion of national legislative power. Across Europe and North America– what we used to call, remember "the free world," the freedom of people to democratically determine their collective lives is being undermined by three parallel processes– the destruction of the organizations of extra-parliamentary power, the binding of national legislatures to money-capital friendly international treaties, and the subordination of the legislative to the executive branch of government. As Weeks argues, "The current authoritarian tide in European and the United States also comes from the business elites, but in this case driven by the ideology of neoliberalism not fascism. Neoliberalism pretentiously claims to be the guarantor of freedom – "free markets, free men" was the title of Milton Friedman's infamous London lecture to adoring businessmen in 1974. Reality is quite the contrary. The neoliberal inspired market deregulation over the last thirty years has been the destroyer of freedom. The most obvious mechanism by which this destruction occurs is the weakening of the power of trade unions and other popular organizations. Parallel to that weakening has been rise and consolidation of the power of the financial capital to control the media, political debate and elections themselves." This process has not provoked more radical opposition amongst working people and other potentially oppositional groups but simply weakened democratic power throughout society.

The cause and the effect of this deliberate eviscerating of democratic institutions is the same: the political power of the other-worldly wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. The tiny fraction of the population that controls this wealth is– given its miniscule size- vulnerable to democratic power. Hence the solution is to maintain the marble and granite facades of existing parliamentary and republican institutions while replacing their democratic substance with plutocratic authoritarianism. As Paul Krugman writes in a recent New York Times article, "It seems safe to say that "Capital in the Twenty-First Century," the magnum opus of the French economist Thomas Piketty in which the commanding heights of the economy are dominated not just by wealth, but also by inherited wealth, in which birth matters more than effort and talent." But is this situation best described as "patrimonial capitalism?"

Of course, that description fits the *political economy* of the twenty-first century, but what about its *culture*? In terms of the ever more rigid genetic, geographical, educational, and vocational divisions between the highest levels of the ruling class and everyone else, and the deference the elite demands from everyone below, twenty-first century culture increasingly resembles feudalism. And that fact, if true, is disturbingly regressive. For whatever the *material and*

social realities of capitalism, it was born out of a philosophical and cultural revolution against the intertwined ideas of natural fitness to rule and natural fitness to serve. Can a society that allows a fraction of itself to wall itself off from everyone else, to send its children to schools no one else can afford, that reduces everyone else to being servants to their every vain whim be called anything but feudal?

Why The World has Become Unbearable III: Surface Insouscience and Deep Obedience

During carnival the peasants were allowed to dress as nobles and pretend to rule. So too today, the ebullient idiocy, the superficial insouscience, and leave everything as it is iconoclasm of pop culture (fun as playing in all this froth can be) belies a depth obedience to the authority of money-value. This is true in the obvious sense, that the main driver of pop culture is commercial success, but also in the less obvious sense, that symbolic opposition to the ruling value system masks a deeper subservience to it. Clicking on on-line petitions, liking clever political memes, helping a plea for solidarity go viral– all express oppositional sentiment, but they do not detach the opponent from the problematic forces, dynamics, institutions, and value system of liberal capitalism. The balance of forces has so far shifted in favour of the ruling class that recovery might not be possible. How quickly Egypt was returned to the authoritarian fold; how little effective opposition there is in EU and the US and in Canada.

Weeks again puts the problem clearly: "Writing in 1947 in the foremost economic journal of the time, *The Economic Journal*, the British economist K. W. Rothschild succinctly summarized the consequences of unregulated capitalism, '…[W]hen we enter the field of rivalry between [corporate] giants, the traditional separation of the political from the economic can no longer be maintained… Fascism…has been largely brought into power by this very struggle in an attempt of the most powerful oligopolists to strengthen, through political action, their position in the labour market and vis-à-vis their smaller competitors, and finally to strike out in order to change the world market situation in their favour.' The deregulation of financial capital threatens to bring us back to capitalist authoritarianism that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. But this time it gathers strength with no strong popular movement in Canada, the United States or any European country to challenge it."

Of course, it does not follow from there now being no effective opposition that such will not arise in the future. One fears, however, that given the extraordinary power assembled in ruling class hands, the outcome of such a struggle might look more like the fall of Rome issuing in the dark Ages than the French Revolution issuing in liberal-democratic capitalism. One only has to look at Iraq or Afghanistan to see the social costs the ruling powers exact for resistance to their plans.

Rebels With Causes, But Limited Effects

Originally Published, 27 February, 2014

It seems the whole world has been lit on fire this winter. Ukrainian protesters protected their encampment with a "ring of fire." Demonstrators in Bosnia and Herzegovina, fed up with unemployment and corruption and tired of politicians playing the nationalist card burned down government buildings across the country. Fire reigning from the sky in "barrel bombs" in Syria and the fire of daily bombings across Iraq and fire in the streets of Bangkok. Were we not supposed to be at the end of history by now? Should we not be living in that period of unprecedented stability, peace, prosperity, and internationalism (under US hegemony, of course) that George Bush the First called the "new world order?"

"Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a "world order" in which "the principles of justice and fair play … protect the weak against the strong …" A world where the United Nations, freed from cold war stalemate, is poised to fulfil the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations. The Gulf War put this new world to its first test, and, my fellow Americans, we passed that test."

The wedding parties of Afghanistan and Yemen could use some of that protection from "the strong" right now. And ground zero for the emergence of this "new world order," Iraq? It continues to burn with the fires lit by George Bush the First, stoked by Bill Clinton, and fanned more furiously by George Bush the Second. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi's lives have been devoured by the conflagration, and still they die, the civil war unleashed by the Operation "Iraqi Freedom" killing hundreds of Iraqis a week. Is this the test America passed: how to become a nation that harbors the war criminals who willingly unleashed this on-going crime against humanity? Is this what the International Criminal Court, the UN, and the sanctimonious schoolboys and girls of the global human rights choir that is the US State Department stand for: silence and complicity?

But maybe I am too impatient in my armchair. Are there not more hopeful signs afoot? What about the Arab Spring, the Ukraine, Venezuela? Don't these portend the end of history as Fukuyama saw it–globalized liberal-capitalist democracy. "Change society," a spokesperson for the Ukrainian protesters demanded, "Turn Ukraine into a European country." (Time) Is that not also what the Venezuelan protesters are demanding, an end to the experiment with twenty-first century socialism, to make Venezuela a European country? "You have a government that increasingly, since the time of Chávez but even more with Maduro, has practically closed the channels of communication," said Margarita López Maya, a Latin American analyst critical of the Bolivarian revolution. Patience, then, the end is coming, just more slowly than initially conceived.

But is it? One can always find, in any protest camp, the polite liberals, the attractive bloggers (why do ugly people's pleas for justice never go viral?) that play well in the West. But the reality, if it does not contradict the image, is always a great deal more complex. The Arab Spring was led by young workers, not tweeters. As Gilbert Achcar argues, "To believe this [that

the revolutions are essentially over], one must ignore the fact that the mainspring of the 2011 explosion is socio-economic: this mainspring is decades of blockage of regional development, resulting in record rates of unemployment–in particular, among young people and graduates. The corollary of this observation is that the revolutionary process that began in 2011 will end only when a solution is brought forward that makes it possible to come out of the socio-economic dead end–a solution which could be progressive as well as regressive, of course, because the best is never certain, alas, but no more than the worst is certain!" In the Ukraine, opponents of the Yanukovych government included virulent fascist elements and were most certainly advised (to some extent), by the United States. In Venezuela, the protests are not about opening up a closed society (Maduro has offered peace talks, the opposition, smelling weakness, has refused) but overthrowing a democratically elected government which retains majority support amongst the Venezuela working class and poor. As George Ciccariello-Maher, author of "We Created Chavez: A People's History of the Venezuelan Revolution," argues "the Chavista government has been in power for more than 14 years and has won a larger number of elections than any other government essentially on earth because they mobilized the poor and have a strong support base among the poor, and also a chunk of the middle class … This support base is not going anywhere, and it's not going to disintegrate because a relatively small number of students are protesting in relatively middle class areas of the country." So this is the end of history? Fascists as freedom fighters and privileged elites as tribunes of the people?

Well, why not? Volcanoes spew toxic gas, but over the long term they also deposit essential minerals,, making volcanic soils amongst the most fertile on earth.   Politics is messy and contradictory and people with bad ideas can serve good causes, can they not?

Politics is messy and contradictory, but it is not the case that people with bad ideas can serve good causes, because the idea that guides is the cause they serve. Which is not to say that all the people involved in these struggles have bad ideas, or that they are not confronting real problems. Yanukovych was no doubt a thuggish Putin ally and deserved to be toppled, and Venezuela is in the midst of a difficult economic crisis that mainstream economists attribute to inevitable effects of Chavez's reforms and socialist economists to capital flight and a capital strike. But it hardly follows that the solution to Ukraine's problems is to become governed by rabid nationalists and endebted to the US and the IMF (or to be carved in half by Russian intervention) or that Venezuela will be better off with a return to the right-wing strongmen who have dominated the history not only of Venezuela, but Latin America as a whole.

And herein lies the real problem of the age, it seems to me, not the end of history, but its running into a wall of long-term sideways movement. In every case of uprising there has been no positive platform developed by any of the main political actors around which real social solidarity could be built. Philosophically, it is easy enough to develop such a program- practically undeniable life-requirements we share as human beings and the resources we need in order to satisfy them. But translating an internally unified set of philosophical principles into social and political solidarity is proving almost impossible. No sooner has a shared political enemy been eliminated than unity amongst the opposition disintegrates.   While all of the crises have important socio-economic dimensions, the fights are all focused on the state, and not the class forces and social and global dynamics which are causing the instability and popular unrest. At one level this strategy makes sense– you can get your hands on the state. But

having captured the state, you now must face the global economic dynamics determine the life-conditions in it. Thus, the new ruling group must comply with the same demands as the recently deposed regime, and the discontent soon returns in a new round of street occupations.   Socialist might say: "see, these changes of government are meaningless, we need a real solution." True, but the "real solution" must mobilize huge majorities, and no socialist movement has been able to do this, even six years into a devastating world crisis. The future, it would seem, does not bode well for socialist real alternatives.

Nor does it seem to bode well for Fukuyama and George Bush the First's hopes. That people are re-learning that their collective power determines politics is antithetical to the "stability" that global markets demand. Having learned that massing in the streets can topple governments, people are unlikely to return to the niceties of once every five years voting. Still, protest, resistance, and rebellion, in the absence of some coherent program for social transformation, can change governments, but of themselves seem capable only of keeping societies in a constant state of turmoil. The world seems to be in for a long period of unstable toing-and-froing between superficially different but programmatically the same parties all claiming to speak for a 'people' which vanishes at the moment when it would be most propitious for it to act.

Bankrupt (Capitalism Is)

Originally Published, 11 August, 2013

The first political slogan of which I was consciously aware was the old Communist Party of Canada-Marxist Leninist's "Make the Rich Pay." They had rented a flatbed truck or something during an election campaign in the early or mid- seventies and were driving it through my neighbourhood, trying to mobilise support amongst the miners who mostly lived there. The support, obviously, never developed, but it was a good slogan then, and an even better one now.

Two looming bankruptcies, one corporate, one civic illustrate once again the morally inverted world of capitalism. Those with already more than they need get more, those who can barely support their basic needs will be forced to make do with even less; those who preach responsibility litigate their way out of it, those to whom responsibility is preached are made to suffer the consequences of actions not their own.

On July 6th, 2013 a train hauling crude oil lost its brakes, rolled through the town of Lac-Mégantic, Québec, exploded, destroying the town centre. The company responsible, Montreal, Maine, and Atlantic Railway, a notorious cost and corner cutting operation, filed for bankruptcy on August 8th, 2013, in an attempt to avoid having to pay the clean up costs and compensation for the disaster to which its corporate practices contributed. Is it not amazing that the 'self-made men' of corporate Canada and America, who never tire of preaching pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps and-take-responsibility-for-yourselves bullshit to everyone else are the first to hide behind their lawyers when it comes time to answer for their mistakes? Like spoiled children, they always make themselves exceptions to their own rules.

On the civic side, my long-suffering neighbours in Detroit have had their democratic right to be governed by those they have chosen through election suspended by a state-imposed Emergency Manager. The Emergency Manager has put the city into bankruptcy, threatening the pensions of public sector workers and potentially putting the collection of the renowned Detroit Institute of Art at risk. (You can sign the petition to Save the DIA here). Pension theft is the latest fashion for the finance capital super-wealthy. It is strikingly immoral, even for capitalism, which claims to believe in the principles of reward commensurate with effort and the virtue of saving. Pensions are not gifts from government to citizens, they are deferred income to which workers themselves have contributed, and which most require in retirement to survive at any human standard of living. Eliminating or reducing pensions is the worst sort of criminal predation- attacking those least able to defend themselves and most in need of what they cannot defend. Food and shelter and electricity and heat– actual life-requirements of real human beings- are converted to money for the banks, where it is invested to make more money, and when and if those investments fail, more life-goods will be stripped from people somewhere else to pay for it. Life begins with debt to the banks, life ends with pension theft.

Family values 2.0: the kids graduate from university as debt-slaves to the banks at just the same time their parent's pensions are being eliminated to pay off corporate debt to the same banks.

If one were to work through the arguments, it is most unlikely that one could find clear justification for the conversion of the life-necessities of the elderly to money for the super-wealthy on classical bourgeois economic, liberal-democratic political, or utilitarian-liberal moral grounds. Liberal-democratic-capitalist society was bad enough, but it is rapidly degenerating into a totalitarian plutocracy in which the rich live by stripping the common wealth (built through generations of labour and struggle against ruling class control over the surplus wealth which labour created for the sake of investment in shared life-goods) of assets and converting them into private money accumulations. The poor are exiled to the dimmest and grimmest suburbs and exurbs, far from the newly polished *cordons sanitaires* "creative capitalist" urban cores, the playgrounds of business people, sports celebrities, artist-entrepreneurs, and well-heeled tourists.

The problems run so deep, are protected by such thick layers of surveillance, armed security, and ideological mystification, that progress in solving the structural issues seem impossible. Perhaps, to begin, we need to set our sights lower.

When I was a student many friends avoided becoming debt-slaves to the banks by ridding themselves of their student loans through bankruptcy. The ploy worked too well. The banks lobbied and the law was changed, ensuring that thousands of young people begin their lives both over-qualified for the few shitty jobs that are available and permanently in debt to the banks. But the banks have at least proven that concerted effort can change laws. So let us follow their lead, and propose some changes of our own to bankruptcy laws. Real human beings get paid back before institutions, in order from the most to the least needy. If the corporation is seeking bankruptcy in the wake of a disaster it caused, corporate assets must be liquidated to repay public authorities and compensate individuals for losses first, before anyone else receives money. If corporate assets alone cannot cover the costs of damage, then the personal assets of the directors should come into play. And if the sale of corporate and personal assets is still not enough, then the directors should be jailed, housed in the same cell as the poor bugger imprisoned because he couldn't pay his parking tickets.

Make the rich pay.

Rob Ford: Derivative Gangsta

Originally Published, 14 November, 2013

It is a sign of the dissolution of a coherent left alternative to capitalism, to its neo-liberal organization, and to its effects on global, national, provincial, and municipal governance that the discussion of the problem of Rob Ford continues to be confined in the quality media to issues of personal irresponsibility, weakness of character, and individual criminality. Sadly for Ford, the days of the gentleman drunk (hello, Sir John A. MacDonald) are over. Character is the new watchword. The media, functioning since the dawning of the age of Oprah as a new priest class to which confession must be made when once your sins they have detected, claim some special competence to pronounce upon the emotional-moral truth of public figures, while more or less ignoring the substance of their politics. Were there a mobilised left alternative, the on-going silence about the real problem of Rob Ford– his politics– could not be sustained.

This concern for character, honesty, accountability, and responsibility erupts *only* in the case of *personal* failings. Let lives by the millions be destroyed by wars ordered by politicians, let the futures of laid off middle aged workers and unemployed young people be dashed against the hard rocks of bank-friendly "austerity" policies, let the whole life-supporting natural world be devoured by unsustainable exploitation, so long as it is steered by well-behaved bores and justified through the autonomic uttering of vapid platitudes, the "character" of the architects will not be called into question. Think about that– a person can violate international law by ordering the invasion of a country, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths, a person can close factories throwing thousands out of work and disrupting the historical integrity of a community, and you will not hear their character questioned in the press or by opponents. Officially sanctioned commentators do not say– "the commander who starts a war of aggression is deeply immoral," or, "only deranged criminals kill hundreds of thousands of people," or, "people who eliminate other peoples' jobs lack all capacity for empathic connection with others and are dangerous in consequence." Appear drunk in public, or smoke drugs on the other hand …

White working class men need to stop falling for T*he Toronto Sun* politics of the he's-just-a-regular-guy-whose-gonna-cut-my-taxes-and-get-those-immigrants-paying-their-
way deceptions. Rob Ford is not a regular working class "guy you'd want to have a beer with." He is a spoiled rich kid and right-wing thug, [son of a backbencher](#) in the Mike Harris government, an open proponent of privatization, an open antagonist to public sector unions and workers, a loyal servant to those above with even more money. Yet he is being attacked not for the policies that have weakened Toronto's commitment to providing the sort of community services that allow working people to continue to live there, but essentially for lacking the good manners that the Shiva's of neo-liberalism are supposed to display as they go about their destructive tasks. Unlike his Republican cousins to the South, he does not justify the unravelling of public institutions and services by appeal to scripture. One can better imagine him at home swigging Vodka and smoking a joint, rapping along with Ice Cube to NWA's "Gangsta, Gangsta" ("Do I look like a motherfuckin' role model? To a kid lookin' up ta me, life ain't nothing but bitches and money"), than penitently kneeling in Church. But it is only as a critique of manners that the current crisis is unfolding. That the agenda Rob Ford has always served adds to the *causes* of poverty that spawns the nihilism that underlies the distintegration of

neighbourhoods and communities, that feeds the destructive forms of drug use and the all-consuming violence he ironically exemplifies has mostly escaped unmentioned.

In the place of serious political argument one reads in *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* and hears on CBC little but abstract moralising, pious condemnation, and incredulous mocking laughter. However good condemnatory invective makes the media-priests who utter it feel, it accomplishes nothing by way of advancing a political and social alternative. Rather, it runs the risk of making Ford look like a sympathetically flawed tragic hero rather than the political brute he actually is. But money has never been lost telling a tawdry tale, so each day brings more salacious details which have so far not budged him from office, but emboldened his supporters (and not without reason) to demand that those who would throw stones let everyone else into their glass houses. And when one day soon a hooker is found hiding under the bed or a roach clip is found stashed in the car of one of Ford's critics, all of his *political* sins will disappear in a fury of reaction to liberal hypocrisy exposed.

Political figures must be judged politically; the media's role in a democratic society is to hold politicians to account for the real impacts of their policies on social life, not to act as life-coaches aping the televised stupidity of pseudo-therapists like [Dr. Drew](). Confession is for church, not for City Council. Self-righteousness cannot solve the problems the city of Toronto faces, trying to derail the Ford express because it bought "illegal drugs" is not the same as derailing it through a clear and convincing critique of its class and racially divisive politics, its inequality-expanding economics, and its suburban philistinism. Instead of wasting time embarrassing and humiliating this oafish bully, the left should be organizing that alternative.

The message is not: judge not lest ye be judged, but rather, if you must judge, be ready to do something about it.

Every recounting of the Ford saga ends with the same defeatisim: this guy is toxic waste, but there is no way for Toronto to get rid of him. This lament confuses democratic power with parliamentary procedures. There is no legal way for Toronto City Council to get rid of Rob Ford, but there is a way for the citizens of Toronto to get rid of him, the way that Egyptians got rid of Mohammed Morsi– organize by the millions and bring the city to a halt until he is forced from office. Ford's extraordinary lack of caution has opened up a space for a massive city-wide common front of every even remotely progressive group and movement. The organizing principle of the movement would be unassailable: Ford must resign. But out of the unity built around that negative demand a real process of deeply democratic debate about the future of the city could be generated: who is the city for, white Rosedale or the protean diversity of the immigrant communities that have transformed Toronto from WASP backwater to global city? real estate speculators who buy the city or the working people who build and maintain it? bankers who see Toronto as but one node on a global circuit of money-accumulation, or the artists and musicians who create the street-level cultural intensity that makes the problems of the city worth enduring?

Bonnes Nouvelles, Mauvaises Nouvelles

Originally Published, 13 April, 2014

Socialism and Electoral Politics In the Global North

In the most recent Quebec election, April 6th, 2014, Quebec Solidaire, the farthest left of any electoral party in Canada, increased its share of the vote from 6% to 7.6 %, and its number of seats from 2 to 3. Its party platform includes a comprehensive green energy policy, ending tuition fees at all institutions of higher education, a plan for creating a public sector bank to fund socially valuable institutions and projects, proposals for more strictly regulating the private banking sector, a plan for reforming the tax code to provide more funds for supporting and enhancing public institutions, policies securing the traditional and treaty rights of the people of the First Nations in the case of a vote for Quebec sovereignty, and new legislative protections for workers and unions. In Europe there are much stronger electoral parties to the left of the dying social democratic project. In Germany, Die Linke received 8.2 % of votes in 2013, which (under Germany's proportional representation system) translated into 64 seats. More impressively, in Greece, Syriza, a union of left parties, garnered 27.1% of the vote in the most recent elections. In Europe as a whole the newly formed Party of the European Left is preparing to contest elections for the European Parliament on an anti-austerity platform.

Can any politically useful conclusions be drawn from this small and admittedly unscientific sample of recent electoral results?   Let me suggest four:

1) The collapse of social democratic parties into system-managers has created space on the left that can be occupied by parties whose platforms address the structural causes of widening income inequality, the destruction of social solidarity and public goods by neo-liberal austerity, the domination of all spheres of social and cultural life by corporate power, and environmental crisis.

2) The more severe the crisis and the more deeply implicated in its perpetuation traditional social democratic parties are, the more successful electoral left-alternatives to social democracy can be. In Greece, the Social Democrats were compromised by their role in the on-set of crisis and their support for the austerity policies demanded by European banks. The ever-more ruthless cutbacks have created social catastrophe, with a reported unemployment rate of 26.7% in January, 2014. In this context, Syriza polled 27% of votes in the most recent election. Conversely, in comparatively more stable contexts, left-alternative parties poll lower (but still statistically significant) numbers of votes.

3) Without a proportional representational system, a statistically significant number of votes cannot be translated into a politically effective number of seats.

4) Even under worsening social conditions, the example of Greece suggests that social crisis will only push electoral support for anti-capitalist left parties into the 27 % range (far below the "vast majority" for whom democratic socialists claim to speak). Hence, under all social conditions it seems imperative for anti-capitalist parties to find new ways to explain what their positive social,

political, and economic goals ("socialism") really mean for the lives of people whose support they seek to win.

What Do We Mean By Socialism

Is there any objective social and historical evidence that supports the belief of democratic socialists that they speak in the interests of the "vast majority?" I believe that there is, but it cannot be found by asking people whether they are "anti-capitalist" or "socialist," but whether they are in favour of public services and institutions. Let me cite three recent Canadian polls to explain what I mean.

In a [nationwide poll in 2011](#), Nanos Research found that 94 % of Canadians favoured public over private health care. In a [poll taken in 2011](#), in the midst of government attacks on public broadcasting, 69 % of Canadians favoured the same or increased rates of funding for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. More generally, a [recent poll proved that Canadians would support higher taxes](#) if the revenue gains were used to support social programs.

"Well, these numbers prove nothing," I can hear more stern Marxists than myself puff. They abstract from class and race and gender and poll people under the nationalistic abstraction "Canadians." Hence, trying to draw political conclusions from their results is tantamount to accepting nationalist myths and succumbing to social democratic reformism. What we need is a systematic demonstration that capitalism cannot resolve its crisis. Only a revolutionary movement, led by workers but involving all oppressed groups as equally contributing members, can overcome capitalist contradictions."

I admit that this argument could be true, but I also look across my study to see dozens of Marxist systematic demonstrations of the contradictions of capitalism, and then out my window into my city, devastated by the on-going economic crisis, but quiet and peaceful (i.e., not in revolutionary upheaval against the bourgeoisie). So, while granting the possibility that the rigorous Marxist objection is correct, let us at least entertain an alternative interpretation of what these polls might teach about building the sorts of parties and movements that solving capitalism's structural problems will require.

In each of the polls cited above, what do the majority of respondents support, at the level of social principle, when they express support for these public institutions? Let me suggest four answers.

1) They support the principle "from each according to his or her needs." The best evidence here is the extraordinary support for the public health care system. The principle of public health care is that each receives the health care she or he requires, not the health care for which she or he can pay. This principle is the opposite of the principle of capitalist consumer markets: each gets what he or she can afford. The principle of distribution according to need is a socialist principle, but if one asked the same group of Canadians if they supported a "socialist principle of resource allocation" it is certain that nowhere near 94 % of people would agree. Perhaps socialists should seek political support by pointing to the ways in which socialist principles are already realized

(imperfectly) in institutions people actually value and not by trying to convince people of the truth of an argument that the whole of capitalist society must be overthrown.

2) They support using collectively produced wealth for democratically decided and socially life-valuable purposes. Belief in this principle is indicated by support for higher taxes to support more investment in social programs. Social programs are designed to identify and meet needs that the market fails to satisfy. At the level of social principle this demonstrates a commitment to the value of each person's life and a recognition that capitalist markets harm lives because they cannot satisfy all the needs that must be satisfied in a good life. If this conclusion is true, then public institutions funded by deductions from collectively produced wealth are a necessary condition of a good society and good lives, and support for a progressive taxation system is evidence of support for this more general principle. Again, the more general principle is socialist, even though people who accept it might not identify themselves as socialists. I think the values and the principles are more important than the name one gives one's political identity. The political way forward is to build from the value base towards new practical struggles to rebuild the system of progressive income tax to better fund existing public institutions and create new institutions (a national drug strategy, for example) with the new revenue.

3) They support the value of non-commercial cultural production. While just as in the case of public health care the institutions of public television and radio broadcasting can be criticised for their actual performance, such criticism does not entail rejection of the principle underlying the mandate of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation: to tell stories that are important, not stories that are money-valuable. Like all traditional broadcasters, the CBC is facing the challenge of audience fragmentation that new media is posing. It is also facing the additional burden of contending with a Conservative government ideologically opposed to the non-market value that CBC's mandate commits it to serving. Public support for the CBC even in the face of funding cuts and declining viewership is thus again a sign of belief in another important socialist principle: not everything of cultural value is of commercial value, and that markets, while they may be arbiters of taste, are not, for that reason, arbiters of cultural value or aesthetic quality.

4) Collectively, these polls demonstrate majority support in Canada for the use of collectively produced wealth to meet needs that would otherwise be unmet by capitalist markets. In other words, they demonstrate support for a conception of socialism (as I defined it in another post) as "institutionalized reciprocal care in those dimensions of our lives that require collective effort." ([Socialism and Snow Shovelling](#)) When people focus on concrete issues of access to resources and quality of the good provided, majority opinion favours socialist principles. Is not the rational political conclusion to draw from this evidence that socialists– those who believe that ultimately a society based upon the principles discussed above must replace capitalism- should henceforth focus on concrete issues of policy, not theoretical demonstrations of capitalism's long term impossibility? This conclusion is the opposite of that which most revolutionary democratic socialists to the left of social democracy have drawn over the past 40 years. In consequence, policy has been ceded to social democrats moving further and further to the right while revolutionary democratic socialists have largely taken refuge in systematic academic criticisms of capitalism.

The best of this work has generated deep insight into the structural problems of capitalism, uncovered hidden implications of the core ideas and values of Marxism, and produced brilliantly original decodings of the ideological messages of popular and high cultural semiotic systems. Has any of it advanced the struggle to reclaim life time, life space and life resources from their subordination to capitalist money value? Most of the hard work of reclaiming life space, time, and resources was accomplished in the previous two centuries, by a vast array of social struggles- workers, women, racialized minorities, gays and lesbians– fighting **not** for wholesale revolutionary change, but for access to wider spaces of free self-creation, more time for reflection and interaction, and more access to the life-resources that enable valuable and valued lives. Cumulatively, those struggle partially institutionalized the socialist principles noted above.

"Ah, yes, but the key is "partial," the rigorous Marxist rejoins. All these reforms were not sufficient to overthrow capital and the capitalist class, and because their power was left intact, these victories were precarious. Hence we still need a revolution on a Leninist model, in which, as Zizek says, (*In Defence of Lost Causes*) the "divine violence" of the people will sweep away bourgeois power and rebuild society anew, as Marx demanded, on the basis of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Now this sort of bad poetry might strike some as uncompromisingly radical and revolutionary, but it is eminently ignorable (and is in fact ignored, by the powers that be, although for reasons that escape me not by some political philosophers who ought to be able to see its true vacuity) because it has no addressee interested in trying to put it into practice.

Instead, the ruling class worries about more prosaic struggles to save public institutions threatened by austerity. These struggles, defensive and "reformist" as they may be, can actually work, as in Spain, where determined fightbacks by health care workers and community members have saved hospitals from privatization. If one is serious about the goal of revolutionary change (rather than trying to sound radical and uncompromising), then the only efficacious means (if we judge as an historical materialist ought to judge, on the basis of historical evidence) are patient, long-term, dare I say "gradual" struggles organized by specific projects of life time, space, and resource reclamation. Given the enormous efforts of women, workers, and demonized minorities of all sorts to open the institutions of political power to their votes and their participation, it would be self-undermining to repudiate the institutions of parliamentary and republican government as undemocratic in essence. If parties can be built that are willing to use institutionalized political power to legitimate and protect recovered space, time, and resources, and to build links across borders with likeminded parties, then there is indeed a "parliamentary road to socialism," although it would be a long, long road. Nevertheless, with one's feet planted on a real road each step brings one closer to a real destination; "leaping" in thin air just lands you on your arse in the exact same spot from which you leapt.

Socialism and Snow Shovelling

Don't be fooled by the signs on the 401: "Canada's South Coast." From December through to March Essex County and Windsor are more "Canada" than "South Coast." While the born and bred locals pretend otherwise, it gets cold, and it snows. True, we are spared the harsh discipline of ice fog and family fights because the kid forgot to plug in the car overnight, but we do have to shovel.

Labour, Marx wrote, "is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence." (C*apital Volume 1,* p. 179) As we need not only to eat but also to go from place to place, a most basic form of labour is the removal of impediments to our ability to move around in space. As snow accumulates it impedes our way and we must remove it or stay trapped indoors.

But labour as *imposition* is also the origin of labour as *contribution.* Marx also makes clear that labour is the general means whereby human beings become real for each other. The necessities with which nature confronts us become opportunities for human action through which we reveal to each other what we are capable of and what commitments are important to us. In its "human form" the labour of each is a specific contribution to the good of all (or it would be, in conditions where labour is freely given). For the most part, capitalist society alienates us, not only from our capacity to freely contribute, but also from any desire to do so. Many people conclude on the basis of this absence of desire to contribute to the common good that the capacity to form it is foreign to human beings, that we are just selfish bodies driven by selfish genes to secure our own good, come what may for others.

And yet much of the little things we do when material circumstances call upon us to rise to the occasion points in the other direction. Consider snow shovelling. What does it say about a person (assuming she or he is physically able) who not only does in fact, but *desires to* leave the warmth of the living room to clear his or her stretch of sidewalk? Three things, I think:

First, it shows that people not only do in fact work but also form the desire to work, often in severe conditions, even when there is no money involved, when they grasp the importance of the work they do for the lives of other people. Here is evidence that people are motivated by concerns for the well-being of others, not only money for themselves.

Second, it shows that people are capable of recognizing that other people have needs, and that a good way to spend (at least some of) one's own time is to help them meet those needs. These needs are objective functions of our bi0-social nature (our feet or our wheelchairs do not work very well if at all in deep snow) and not (as neoclassical economics would have it) of market demand. At some point, there is no substitute for moving around in space, and the labour of snow shovelling is a recognition of this objective fact.

Finally, it shows that people's sphere of concern is not limited to kin and small circles of friends. To clear the sidewalk is to make way for the passage of anyone through your stretch of

street, regardless of relationship to you, or their race, or gender, or sex, or sexuality. Your act does not say to the world: "I mind my own shop and everyone else can bugger off," but rather, "all are welcome who need to walk down the stretch of public street that runs past my home." No one demands payment for clearing their share of the public sidewalk, each does it as a free contribution to the needs of everyone to walk unhindered.

This is a core virtue of socialism– desire to contribute to the satisfaction of the needs of all others through one's own labour. Such a desire is not, as critics like to maintain, the impossible product of an altruism too high for real human beings. Shovelling my snow and thus helping to meet the needs of others involves no sacrifice of my own interest. By clearing my stretch of sidewalk as a commitment to the good of the neighbourhood I ease my own way as well as the way of others; others who clear their stretch of sidewalk ease my passage as they ease their own. By focussing on needs and what is required to satisfy them, we all contribute to collective well-being as we contribute to individual well-being, and all without sacrificing anything essential to ourselves as individuals. "The free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

What is perhaps most impressive is that almost no one must be coerced by centralized state authority to fulfill their responsibilities in this regard. Another calumny of socialism is that unless there is a strong state "riding herd" (to quote the inimitable George W. Bush) on free individuals they will never devote themselves to the good of others (Thus the calumny says: socialism is contrary to freedom and the conclusion to be drawn: it ought to be rejected on those grounds). While there are fines for not shovelling your sidewalk, most people do the work without a "tyrannical state" making threats against them. They feel an obligation to the good of the neighbourhood and those who might pass through it. They do not need to be forced to sacrifice their time; they willingly choose to expend some of their time doing what is needed because that is the right thing to do. They know it, they learn to like fighting the cold on their face, the feeling of their heart pounding with exertion in their chest. They know the drink will taste better when it is well-earned.

At bottom, socialism is just institutionalized reciprocal care in those dimensions of our lives that require collective effort. It does not stand in contrast to 'free individuality;" it exposes the "free individuality" of market ethics as indifference to the needs of other people. ("Is it the government's job — my job to feed my neighbour's child? I don't think so," Industry Minister James Moore mused a few weeks ago). For the Moore's of the world everyone works for themselves and no one or nothing else. Such a person very well might charge you to walk along his stretch of street, if he had the power to do so. Is that a neighbour you really want to live beside?

The Persistence of Place

Originally Published, 6 December 2013

"Traditions are actually a very democratic thing compared with fashion, which is always a tool of the plutocracy." (Andrew Collier, "Marx and Conservatism.")

Where are you from?   A perennial question, a fundamental question, not of geography but of a more occult science of spatial archetypes, of decoding the aura of places that shapes identity.   Knowing glances once the questioner has the answer– "Now I know where you are coming from. Now you make sense to me."

The claim to discern truths about people on the basis of their origin presupposes clichés of regional or local cultures, of the seamlessness of traditions; it mistakes guidebook generalities for concrete truths.

The educated ones, the cultured ones, the critical ones, the radical ones know better. They leave the places they are from. Whatever traces they find of the original place lingering they work to expunge. The educated ones, the cultured ones, the critical ones, the radical ones try to come from nowhere, to make themselves strangers to settled ways, family, dialects, in-jokes, and difference rooted in knowing how things are done around *here* (rather than everywhere). They make themselves strangers to all things local so that they can become cosmopolitan friends to all. Strangers to humans, friends to humanity.

At a conference once I asked an activist what should be done about intensifying threats to freedom of inquiry in universities. He replied that such problems were irrelevant, the institution as such was the problem. "Burn them down," he said. I asked him how he would finish his Ph.D if the institution of the university were burned down.

To change the world you not only need a lever, you need a place to stand. Must we not stand within the traditions constituted by old solidarities, disciplines of inquiry, practices of creation, friendship, bonds of mutual support, and local lifeways? Where capital expands through the disintegration and destruction of every evolved practice by which people might shield themselves from the dependency and subservience it demands, when it re-integrates by inculcating a mindless neophilia endlessly stimulated by its "innovations," its cultures of "constant improvement," when it appropriates the language of cool, do not defensiveness, protection, and letting be become radical values?

How much can we abstract ourselves from/abstract from ourselves without becoming inhumanly empty? The struggle against parochialism can lead right back to it– a small group of the like-minded, strangers to everyone but each other, having nothing to say in a way that can be understood, because they speak from grammar-books and not the feel of the place.

True, perhaps, and yet: the feel of places differs given one's position in the established social hierarchy. All beautiful things are built on the bones of the exploited. Laughter bruises the butt of the joke. The coffee is exquisite, it has been rinsed of the sweat of the plantation

workers. A magnificent dress, scrubbed of the ashes of the garment worker who died in a fire sewing it. An attractive woman, but only viewable through a patriarchal gaze.

But must one therefore close one's senses to beauty and one's mind to laughter?

A good question.

"The essence of humanity is not an abstraction inherent in each individual, but is in reality the ensemble of social relations." (Marx, 6th Thesis on Feuerbach) By like reasoning: the ensemble of social relations is not a set of abstract forces and dynamics, but meaning-laden contradictory histories to which people have contradictory relationships. In a social contradiction, both sides are real and exert a dynamic tension on each other. That goods are bound up with bads does not mean that goods really are bads, but only that they cannot be experienced free from the opposed force.

Hence, a political project: a) to determine which present institutions, disciplines, values, practices, languages, modes of relating to one another, jokes, music, bodies, desires, are under assault by political and economic power, b) to distinguish that in them which lays them open to attack, and c) to see whether that which lays them open to attack tells us anything about their value and why it might be worth preserving.

An opening gesture: Those traditions which are attacked are attacked because: i) they are not easily assimilated to commodification, ii) are unconventional, and therefore not mass marketable, iii) affirm values that are not readily measureable by quantitative metrics, and as a consequence, iv) not amenable to effective centralized control, because v) dependent upon intimate knowledge accessible only to the practiced initiate and serious student, vi) liable to lead to at least boredom with and at worst (best) active opposition to the centralizing, commodifying, uniformity-imposing money-value system that the attackers serve, and finally vii) that edify, educate, entertain, enliven, embolden, and energize people because of i-vi.

A provisional distinction between the good worth preserving and the bad that must be fought: that which is not commodifiable, unconventional, unique, incommensurable on all scales of quantification, created through intimate knowledge that can be acquired only through practice, frees people from subservience to the money-value system, and helps them understand that what makes life valuable is not money and its acquisition is good. The opposites, therefore, are bad.

To want to preserve such traditions is not reactionary sentimentality, but proof of abiding concern with that which enables us in the present to go creatively beyond it. Against the void of groundless innovation and change for the sake of money-value accumulation we ought to take our stand in the midst of traditions of inquiry, practice, and solidaristic relationship that express values i-vii. The stand is first of all defensive, in that the aim is to preserve, but also revolutionary, in that the aim is to build outward and upward from there.

The Economics of Ugly

Originally Published, 9 July, 2013

The rich have always thought the poor to be animals. If they are animals, the rich have reasoned, they will not mind their neighbourhoods treated as waste dumps, as thoroughfares for freight travelling elsewhere, as sites for the production of noxious, toxic fumes. Animals have no sense for beauty, only survival. So too the poor. Thus, it is no offence to a humanity they are assumed to lack to pile sludge on their rivers, clear cut their old growth forests, run expressways past their windows and train tracks across their back yards, feed them corn syrup poison and keep them awake at night with the clanging of archaic machines. They don't mind ugliness, they need the jobs.

Petcoke, North Shore Detroit River

Ugly: Foundational out-of-placeness, violent disruption of the integrity of formal structure.

A garbage pile in the midst of a forest, a limb separated from its body.

Ugly: The opposite of the beautiful (that which holds us in its presence and generates the desire to remain in it). Hence, the unbearable in general in sight/smell/sound/touch/taste.

All that causes anyone human who pays attention to turn away and flee.

Economics: the science of allocating scarce goods and resources.

The Economics of Ugly: the allocation of the unbearable in sight/smell/sound/taste/touch to the living spaces of the poor.

Essex Terminal Railway Bisecting Union Street Townhouses, Windsor

The poor: those who cannot turn away and flee, those who are tied down to suffer the ugly by lack of capacity to move.

The politics: Assume that the deprivation of physical-organic life-requirements against which the poor constantly struggle will keep them quiet. If by chance the abomination is so great that they mobilise, construct a Potemkin village of promised "economic growth" and use the promise of "good jobs" to sow conflict in the community. Demonise those whose continue to resist as outside "elites." This strategy should undermine effective opposition.

The poor: Those who can be manipulated by material necessity to deny their human need for beauty, their need to occupy a space they would want to occupy forever if they could. Those who can be held in place by invisible but socially effective bonds, those who must negate their instinct to flee the ugly.

The rich: Those who inhabit environments that satisfy the totality of human needs, physical-organic and aesthetic. Those who do not tolerate the ugly but need not flee it because it has been permanently banished to the other world occupied by the poor. Those who despise the poor for tolerating the intolerable their money-power imposes upon them.

One thinks of capitalism as unjust because it deprives the poor of basic life-requirements, and that is true, but it is also unjust because it separates the poor from spaces and objects that could satisfy their need for the experience of beauty. It is the worst sort of contempt for the humanity of the poor to force them to choose between their human sensibility and their need to eat. Bread *and* roses, they demanded (and demand still, if anyone listens).

Huron Church Rd. Approaching the Ambassador Bridge, Windsor

The task is not just to feed the poor the way livestock is fed, or employ the poor the way a non-sentient machine might be used. The task is to build a democratic life economy in which economic development means ways of working and living in which biological necessities are met and life-spaces beautified at the same time.

A re-definition of economic irrationality: the overproduction of the ugly and the waste or destruction or unequal allocation of beauty.

Enough of so-called "economic development" that assumes that the poor will–and ought to, gratefully – accept any level of damage to the form and appearance and feel of their living spaces in exchange for "jobs."

Henceforth, the patterns of distribution of beautiful spaces and things must become an object of a life-valuable economic science. Economic planning and policy must learn to take into account beauty as a good independent of income, access to which people require just as much as they require income. In any society that allows even small degrees of income differential and

choice of living space, those at higher ends of the scale will always be able to command more beautiful spaces if income alone allocates access to beauty. An economy that comprehensively satisfies the totality of human life-requirements– that overcomes poverty as structural barrier to full and free human development– must address the problem of the production and distribution of the ugly as it must address the problem of the production and distribution of ill health or the problem of the production and distribution of housing.

No Assembly Required

Originally Published, 30 December, 2013

Miles Davis: Birth of the Cool; "Creative Economy:" Death of the Cool.

I am sitting in Clinton's. Outside, Bloor Street is quiet. An ice storm will do that. I flip absentmindedly through *Exclaim*! A text bubble catches my eye: "Boiler Room will be curating showcases" at the next NXNE festival. Curating? The light is a little dim. I read it again. Yes, curating. I am not quite used to my new glasses, so I go over it one more time. At NXNE? That is what it says. The focal point of the "indie" rock festival is no longer the bands, but the 'curators' bringing the bands together. Of course, the promoter always attached his name to gigs, but when the promoter becomes a "curator" something more than advertising is at stake. There is a dangerous inversion of the value of background and foreground work occurring, a confusion of actual doing (making music, but also painting, dancing, thinking…) with assembling the material conditions for the doing.

Well, so what? Curators assemble and bring together. What matter if they gather bands or Ming vases? But it is not the transgression of the boundary between the "high and the low" (nothing is more cliché at this point in history) that sets me thinking.

No, the problem is not that a practice formerly reserved for museum and gallery shows is now being applied to "indie" rock festivals, but the opposite- that "indie" rock bands would allow themselves to becomes objects of curation. Isn't it that type of top-down determination of content from which they desire to be "indie?"

But "indie" is now no longer a term indicating independence from major labels, but itself a brand. By extending connoisseurship to objects deemed formerly beneath good taste, markets are created where there were formerly none. The generation of income from tourist dollars carried aloft and around the world by the festival and must-see exhibition jet-stream is the core of the so-called "creative economy." Tourist dollars drive demand for hotels, restaurants, bars; they turn ordinary local neighbourhoods into exotica for the pages of the travel section in the Saturday newspaper. Landing a spot on the high-end tourist circuit draws capital in its wake, which builds the hotels and funds the celebrity chef restaurants which create the "synergies" which inflate real estate values.

That which is sold must have some determinate identity, which implies categorization. Curators, whatever they are curating, not only assemble and bring together, they categorise (and don't be taken in by clichéd assurances that binaries are being rejected and opposites co-mingled, categories still emerge). The audience must be told what they are listening to and looking at (how else to build 'buzz?'), and so all must submit to the grey seriousness of classification. No matter how many adjectives it takes, some kind of unified category will be built.

There is only one way to exist without categorization, and that is to *not get serious.* But there is no room now, even at the beginning, for just play-it-fast-and-loud-and-who-gives-a-fuck if anyone-likes-us insouciance. Instead, it is professionalization and businessization right from the

beginning. And that means- your sound must be categorized. Serious. But also, "No Fun" as a certain play-it-fast-and-loud-and-who-gives-a fuck-if-anyone-likes-us insouciant singer once growled.

But it is not just musicians who must submit to the tyranny of the category, it is artists of all sorts, and academics too. The saddest thing in my world is to try and have a philosophical conversation with a new PhD (especially Americans). They simply cannot discuss reality philosophically, but only dissect different bits of what you say and slot the fragments into the word-holes their professors have taught them. "Oh, that is x-ism, and by that you mean y-ism, and we deal with x-ism and y-ism by applying these set-piece arguments." This is the fruit of *serious,* often ivy-league education– total incapacity for philosophical thought, just vacuum tubes lighting up in response to a familiar input. If you argue from a perspective they have not heard (one not taught in serious schools), perhaps one you have worked up yourself out of but not reducible to x-isms and y-isms, they stare at you blankly before nervously looking around for a better partner for namedropping and the exchange of formulae and pat answers.

All of this because the so-called "creative economy" the economy that demands "higher" education as both individual duty and entrée into the money-economy absolutely expels creativity from the actions of artistic and intellectual workers to relocate it in the background functions formerly understood– properly–as enabling conditions of creative action, not creative action itself. Increasingly in the econo-culture of twenty-first century capitalism the assemblers of conditions, the organizers, administrators, managers, sponsors, and 'curators' present themselves and are presented as the real creative forces, while the artists and thinkers are reduced to passive mediums on which an entrepreneurial *poesis* is worked, polite and smiling backdrops, grateful for "the opportunity" to perform in the new *Salon:* tourist friendly festival X, destination exhibition Y, internationally ranked department Z.

But the studied and contrived character of everything kills the fun. The supreme effort paid to getting noticed and selected, to fitting in with the themes of the assemblers, crowds out the playful spontaneity which, as Schiller knew, creative work always presupposes. Creativity is resistance to the instinct to follow, fit in, and be approved of; the so-called creative economy is the monetization of replication of that which was once a good local idea everywhere. Is SXSW now the go-to destination for all the planets bearded and pig-tailed scenesters? Then don't try to do something *different* (i.e. local, unique, *creative)* in Toronto. Instead, try to make NXNE *exactly the same* as SXSW, just with different relative coordinates (Toronto is NNE of Austin, SSW of Iqaluit).

"Aware that lucrative vested interests are looking over their shoulders … people end up competing with everybody else, looking over their shoulders at the competition as they "do their own thing." Which is to say … that fewer and fewer people are doing their own thing. They are cautiously and calculatingly imitating someone or something else." (Lee Siegel, *Against the Machine: Being Human in the Age of the Electronic Mob*, p. 72).

Worry, Anxiety, and Existential Injustice

Originally Published, 31 January, 2014

No one asks to be born, or to have to eat, or to require education. We are, as Heidegger says, thrown into being, helpless, (initially), to meet the needs our bio-social nature imposes upon us. We are not responsible for the consequences of decisions (or non-decisions) that led to our coming into the light. We did not choose to be vulnerable and needy. There is no personal responsibility for that which is imposed by nature and the actions of others.

If the infant is not responsible for procuring the milk it needs, who is?

The mother (or, more generally), the parents? That is the obvious answer, but it is wrong. They may have chosen to reproduce (or reproduced without planning to do so), but they are not furnished with all the resources their infant will ultimately require just by virtue of being parents. No one (or two, or even a few) produces out of themselves that which they and others who depend upon them need. The infant looks to whomever is closest, but his needs connect him to the whole world. Could he express himself in words and not just cries, he might reasonably ask: "how do you intend to keep me alive, world, now that I am a part of you, not by own choice?"

The world speaks through the human beings ruthless enough to assert control (for a time) over it. And the ruthless of our age would say:

"It is not our problem that you have not chosen to come into being and have not chosen your nature– not chosen to get hungry and thirsty and to need house and home. It is not our problem, though we control all that you will eventually require, whether or not you are able to access it. We care only about this: whether or not you are able to pay your way. For this you will be held responsible. You see the earth and water and schools and houses and opportunities and think: a place has been prepared for me. But you are wrong. Those are not yours, they belong to us. They can be had, for a price, and we will do nothing to ensure that you will be able to cover the costs."

And the infant might respond: "But no one told me that I would be brought into a world in which all the means to satisfy my needs are controlled by people unmoved by the urgency of my requirements. Still, I accept the deal. I will focus and struggle and be willing to work; I was born through the labour of my mother so I will labour in turn.

And the spokespeople of the world rejoin: "Whether you labour or not is again not our problem. Though we have need for the labour of some (and then, on our terms, not theirs), we do not have need for the labour of all, and so, though we control all wealth and resources as well as the jobs through which the money needed to pay for everything else is procured, we cannot guarantee that we will have use for you."

To which the infant might respond: "Why then have I been allowed to be born into life without any place prepared for me to live it? Is it not unreasonable that we bring creatures like me- hopeful, wide-eyed, eager to grow and develop, willing to contribute, asking only for a place in which to make ourselves into what we desire to become- and not take care to ensure that there is a place for us?"

To have — or rather, not have– a place is indeed the bedrock issue of our time. Having a place in society is different from being locatable at a set of spatial coordinates. A place is meaningful and not only structural. The society that ensures places for everyone says: you are wanted, you are needed, you will be enabled to flourish here and contribute back to the store from which you drew to satisfy your needs. The places we make for each other shelter, protect, encourage, and enable each to grow and develop and contribute. To have a place is existential justice: a welcoming into being spoken by everyone whose life the newborn joins.

To have no place, in contrast, is to be neglected, discounted, to have your needs ignored, to find no outlet for your capacities, to be impeded in becoming who you are. To be thrown into a structure of social being that has not prepared any place for you, to be unwelcomed by the world of which you did not choose to be a part, is existential injustice.

Of course, if the masters so deign, you may be allowed to persist, as their servant. Well, is that not a place? No, it is a function, a temporary use imposed upon you. A function is not a place; place nurtures and protects, function is something you are allowed to do, not for as long as you need to, but for as long as it serves the masters' interests.

Life as a function is a life spent in worry: that grinding, gnawing, sapping, fear of having day in day out to figure out how you might please the master, so that he might spare you some change (or more likely lend it to you, at interest). To worry is to never be sheltered in place even for one second– to be exposed to the demands of the master until he is bored with you. Worry is the psychological reflex of existential injustice.

In that it is distinct from anxiety, the dread of annihilation, of anticipating the end of one's existence in time and space: "for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations.(Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, par. 194) This shaking to the foundations, but making us conscious of the compressed time and space of life, intensifies the expression of the energy of self-realization. Worry accomplishes the opposite: it wastes life, consumes body and soul in the search for a place in which to realize ourselves.

To struggle against this existential injustice is to struggle for a place. But to struggle for a place means colliding with those who distribute them. The struggle is not about their money (who cares about their vanity) and it does not aim to exterminate them (whatever inane accusations they might from time to time interject). It just demands that they make room.

What's Next, Learning Outcomes?

Originally Published, 2 May, 2014

Against the Festivalization of Art

Art as an institution occupies a paradoxical position on the margins of and at the centre of capitalist society. While as individual creators artists may conceive of themselves and in fact be outsiders to the prevailing systems of representation and the clichéd and ideological meanings that rule within them, as cultural workers they are dependent upon art markets or public support to survive. One might expect that art markets would be a greater threat to artistic freedom than public support, but increasingly the opposite seems to be true. As public funding becomes more closely tied to demonstrable "value for the dollar," the aesthetic dimension of publicly funded art is in danger of being destroyed by government insistence that it satisfy criteria and metrics foreign to the artistic vocation to *imagine differently and create accordingly.* To point this threat out is not to look to art markets as salvation from creeping philistinism (there, money and fashion rule), but to call for forms of public funding that leave artists free to experiment without prior regard to how their creations will be received.

In illustration of my concern, consider the criteria by which artists hoping to be included in the newly announced W.A.V.E.S festival in Windsor will be judged. Cathy Masterson, manager of cultural affairs for the City of Windsor, explains in a recent interview that "Artists and creative thinkers need to demonstrate in their application how the audience will be engaged in the activity: how will their imagination be sparked, how will they connect with the works on display." (Walter Petrichyn, "Making w.a.v.e.s.," *The Urbanite*, April 23rd, 2014, p. 10) How, though, it must be asked, can the ways in which different people's *imaginations* will be sparked be predicted in advance of their encounters with the work? That which is subject to prediction is determined by mechanical law; the imagination, its 'sparking,' is not subject to mechanical law, and therefor the artists are being asked to provide information which, were it available, would prove only that the work they hope to exhibit would not be art.

The reaction of a public to a work of art is not predictable because: a) one cannot know in advance who will constitute the public; b) reactions vary depending upon the expectations that viewers bring, which differ from person to person; c) the effects that works can have are not confined to the initial moment of experience; because d) any piece worth spending time viewing cannot be so one-dimensional, obvious, simplistic, and instrumental as to satisfy predictions about its reception. The value of works that initially left one feeling cold and uncomprehending can emerge only slowly; the fact that they remain in memory and provoke thinking about them proves there was more to them than initially apparent. Conversely, a work that shocks on first sight and seems to be a bold new departure in a discipline (or a new synthesis of disciplines) can turn out, upon reflection, to have been too calculated, and thus not really the higher plateau of artistic development it first appeared to be. Moreover– and perhaps most importantly– the quality of particular works is for a long time undecidable, and therefore the subject of disputed interpretations and arguments that constitute a central part of the public life of art.

Art works, whatever their genre and whatever the context of their presentation to the public must do one thing above all in order to be art: they must challenge, somehow, the prevailing modes of sensibility so that a viewer must *pause to consider what is happening in the piece and their feelings towards it.* Once artists had freed themselves from directly illustrative, didactic, and representative practices, it became more difficult for the public to understand their works. Hence the objection that modern art (from about the middle of the nineteenth century on) is incomprehensible and elitist. It is to obviate that sort of objection that audience response metrics have been imposed upon publicly funded works and festivals, to the detriment of the work, and the public.

Is Fear of Feeling, Rather than Lack of Understanding, the Problem?

One might object that if art is going to receive public subsidy it should be comprehensible to the people funding it. This objection might be sound if the enjoyment of art presupposed its comprehension. However, as the example of music proves, enjoyment and understanding are different achievements. The former is not dependent upon the later. Far more people listen to music than can read it or compose it. No one, I believe, regards their inability to read music as an argument against their ability to enjoy listening to it, perhaps because most music has such an immediate emotional impact upon us that we forget that it has been (or could be) scored. Hence, the fact that most people cannot understand the music as a score is not an impediment to their listening to it.

For some reason, visual (and literary) arts are, at least in the modern period, regarded *primarily* as objects of understanding. When they prove opaque to people's capacity to interpret their meaning (often because people lack the knowledge of the history of modern art needed to decode the allusions and references that constitute much of the challenge to understanding) they dismiss it. It is thought illegitimate to enjoy the music of word arrangement in a poem or to enjoy the sheer novelty of composition in a non-representational painting without knowing exactly what the author or painters meant to say, and thus *illegitimate to make poems or paintings whose meanings are not perfectly transparent.* Legitimate art works must be *about* something, and that which they are about must be obvious to the public that views them.

This assumption underlies the pedantry of the public art festival in which artists must prove that their work will have demonstrable effects on the audience (ensuring a steady supply of visitors, hopefully tourists ready to spend money). Such demands, as I noted, are fatal to the artistic vocation to challenge prevailing modes of sensibility, but they also sell the public short rather than better "include" their interests and satisfy their needs. Instead of forcing artists to make concessions to people's limited capacity to understand difficult works on first encounter, a better strategy would be to encourage people to stop approaching artwork as if there will be a test at the end. As a beginning, why not just look at art as if it were a song? Let the piece transport you somewhere you have not been. Later, you can try to understand it.

Perhaps the real impediment to enjoying challenging work is that people do not trust their own feelings in relation to the unexpected. Hence, they find repellant whatever does not tell them what to do or feel. The beauty of feelings, however, is that they arise in us without any effort. If we just let them happen, their unfolding in relation to a work that we do not understand contains

its own validity. One does not have to *know* anything to *feel* something. It does not follow that feelings cannot become the occasion for learning. A music lover may deepen his love of music by learning to read the scores of the works he likes best, and this knowledge may refine his ear, revealing layers of complexity and subtlety previously hidden. But no one must promise to learn to read music in order to attend a concert or buy a CD. Nor must musicians explain, as a condition of their being allowed to play, what effect their songs will have on the audience.

Why, then, should people allow an incapacity to decode complex visual or literary texts be used as grounds for the demand that artists produce nothing but predictable, didactic, and banal work? What the public needs is not government bureaucrats regulating artistic production, but to accept the challenge that difficult works present. There is no right or wrong thing to feel about a work. By not breaking off the visual encounter, by letting feelings happen, one's sensibility is broadened. Art that broadened sensibility is art that was worth seeing, whether one understands the artist's intentions and the implications of the work as such. Understanding can always be achieved later, but it will never be achieved if the work leaves no trace in sensibility. Our experiences are not more legitimate if we can pass a test that asks us what they meant. Nor is it the function of art to help us pass such tests. As a culture, we need to accept the validity and the value of the unexpected, the unique, and the ineffable.

II: Readings

Readings: John Brown: Paintings, 2014

Originally Published, 10 March, 2014

John Brown: Paintings

At Olga Korper Gallery

17 Morrow Avenue, Toronto

Until March 29th, 2014

One who is free from attachment,

firmly resolved, self-effacing,

unmoved by success or failure,

is said to be a pure agent.

(The Bhagavad Gita, Ch. 18, 26-30)

In every era across all forms of human activity there are practitioners whose reputation amongst their peers exceeds their standing amongst critics. To be a member of that set is to both know your own excellence (it is confirmed by the judgements of those who know from the inside, as fellow practitioners, what excellence in the field demands), and to doubt, (the critics, the public arbiters of taste, do not respond in a way proportional to the quality of the work). No one can control the reception of their work, and in any case, that is not what ultimately counts, since the work will endure (or not) only if it can speak to different times and places. Criticism speaks to the standards of the present, great work to an open future. (That is why great work is often said to be "ahead of its time"). What speaks to us in an old work of philosophy, or poetry, or a medieval painting is not what the original audience heard or saw. Works either transcend the moment of their creation or are hostage to it. We no longer know the names of the works that were hostage to the moment of their creation, because they died with its passing.

No contemporary can say what the future of a new work will be, since it depends upon subsequent ages finding something in it that resonates with them. One can say with more certainty what will not escape its present– work that is purely personal or too overtly tied to the politics of the moment. People die, taking their motivations with them; political problems change, yesterday's revolutionary slogan is tomorrow's t-shirt. To continue to communicate across ages a work must have content which is universal, which speaks to more or less permanent human needs, fears, and problems, while at the same time finding formal means of expressing that content that are not reducible to the fashions of its age.

If there is a Canadian painter whose work should live beyond the moment of its composition it is John Brown. His new work -16 paintings on exhibit at the Olga Korper Gallery– include stellar examples of Brown's long-standing focus on the human body (in particular, the head) and his more recent concern with the structures and machines which threaten it. Formally considered as paintings and not as illustrations of a theme, each fascinates with the complexity of its composition. Every painting is a whole any part of which could be isolated from the rest and treated as if it were an aesthetic whole in its own right. Even surfaces that from a distance appear as mere white grounds for the figure that attracts attention turn out, on closer inspection, to contain colour fragments bursting from beneath the surface, like particles randomly popping into existence in the vacuum. No part of the painted surface is merely instrumental to the purpose of directing attention to the figure or the centre; to be fully appreciated each must be viewed from afar, as a thematically unified whole, and from close up, as an infinite set of relations between scrapes, brush strokes, colours, and absences of colour.

The conventional relationship between figure and ground is disrupted in Brown's works, especially the larger ones, by the exquisite working over of every part of the surface. Though obviously unified compositions, looking closely at different parts of the surface leads one to imagine that every painting was constructed so as to contain an unlimited number of other possible paintings that could be produced by cutting portions off from the whole. In most paintings, classical or contemporary, much of the work is extraneous and uninteresting when isolated from the whole, because it has been instrumentally designed to serve a specific function. In Brown's work, there is a unique fractal-like nesting of scales, potential wholes contained in the actual whole which close-up examination brings to light.

Something similar could be said about the six smaller works (Grimm 79, 80, 83, 87, 88, 92) which have been hung together. Viewed from afar, the arrangement looks like it has been deliberately composed as a hexaptrych. Yet in reality, each painting is a whole unto itself. The appearance of "belonging together" was not intended in the creation of any of the six paintings. Even though the relations between the paintings are external and accidental, their co-presence in a single gaze generates the impression of looking at a single work whose unity could be preserved even if other Grimm paintings were substituted for the one's here included (as a living being retains its organic structure even though its cells are constantly being replaced).

Connecting all of the works in the show is the archaeological way in which Brown paints. The paintings emerge through a dialectic of putting on and scrapping off, of constructing images and erasing them only to have parts re-appear through later scrapings. The paintings complete themselves as Brown goes in search of earlier structures of paint. The paintings all have a weathered, aged appearance which adds to the power of their affect on the viewer. The stressed, laboured, appearance of the finished painting calls to mind medieval works which have lost their sheen to the elements and have become cracked and disrupted by blanks spaces where the paint has decayed. The illusion of perfection having succumbed to the forces of physics and chemistry, their materiality as works of art, as human constructions, comes more clearly to the fore, and they are more interesting and moving to look at in consequence than many better preserved examples. Brown's works are only a year or two old, but they appear older, much older, because of the way they have been painted, and this illusion of age adds substance to their emotional impact on the viewer.

This impact is always to draw the viewer into a reflection upon the most basic elements of human being: the face as the bearer of identity, our mortality, our isolation (think of how most of his heads float in space) and struggles against isolation, (but somehow call out to the viewer for silent companionship), and of the threats to our flesh technology and machinery poses. No machine is so threatening today than the drone, which Brown explores in this show in four large paintings (Inferno 5+1 (Drone 1), Bubble Puppy (Drone 2), Wimple Winch (Drone 3), Dolly Rocker (Drone 4). . The drone terrifies because of its inhumanity– the victim will never see the face that flicks the switch that launches the missile that kills the body. There is no possibility that a chance meeting of the eyes will forestall the execution by reminding the executioner of the humanity he shares with the target. There are no faces in in the drone paintings, the machines hang there, ready to kill, mechanically.

But the drone paintings are not mere commentaries on contemporary geo-political conflict. Really, they express a deeper and more general existential menace– impersonal death which takes people without remorse. It is this universal experience, articulated through the particular painting, that will allow them to continue to resonate far beyond the moment of their creation. As formal compositions, they stand apart from whatever thematic content they might convey. If the viewer concentrates on the figures the paint composes, as opposed to the name of the painting, it will be readily apparent that they are not critiques of American foreign policy, but evocations of the power of destruction that looms over us all at all moments, and which no political change can resolve: death, loss of the loved one, destruction of what the self values, always there, looming, deeper and more pervasive and more forever than any specifically military-political techniques and tactics. The only resolution to the depth problem of human vulnerability is the coffin, which, perhaps not accidently, Grimm 95 and For Jack both evoke.

Brown's paintings are thus extraordinary formal constructions with paint and deeply philosophical mediations on the unyielding problems of human mortality. Nowhere do these two sides of his work come together more perfectly that in Double Portrait of Herb Sigman, hung alone on the south wall of the gallery, stark in its black and white contrast. It is the best painting in the show and possibly the crowing achievement of Brown's career thus far. It is an intensely personal piece, a love poem, but one needs know nothing of Brown's life to feel its power. The two white heads, like classical marble sculpture, emerge as almost three-dimensional figures from the mostly black background. The white, the light that enlivens and moves, shining defiantly against the cold black of the universe. The black, the dark of natural forces that surround us at any moment. The light cannot hold back the forces of natural history– the black is slowly advancing into the face, drawing it back to earth, to disintegration, to mute unity with the elements from which its life was created. The beauty of the face can be preserved in paint– here, the black can advance only so far as the artist allows, but everyone knows that in real life the advance cannot be stopped, the light will be drowned in the dark, life in death, love in unfeeling matter. Here is the most extraordinary testimony to the impossibility that makes art great– open admission that the forces against which it fights– death and loss– cannot be defeated. That we make art, as Brown once said, is a sign of hope, but the works that really succeed beyond the time of their creation are the ones that are honest enough to somehow acknowledge that the hope is futile, though not, for being futile, worthless.

Readings: Richard Ford: Canada

Originally Published, 9 February, 2014

Works of art challenge given modes of experience, feeling, and understanding by demanding that viewers/readers/listeners open themselves to non-literal re-presentation. If the challenge is met with the appropriate openness, one enters into constructed possible worlds distinct from, but connected to, mundane objectivity and the structures of experience, feeling, understanding, expectations, and valuations that rule there. The construction of these new worlds requires the imposition of aesthetic form– the practices whereby a given content is transformed, the elements of the work arranged in artistic space and time (which is not outside of social and physical space and time, but not determined by them either). In order to communicate *as art,* the formal dimension of aesthetic transformation, the transfiguration (or de-figuration), of the mundane is essential. At the same time, in order to make good on art's invitation, its invented worlds must have something to say. Art is threatened by literalist pedantry and didacticism, but also by empty virtuoso formalism. The best art expands the boundaries of the permissible- both of content, (that which can become the subject of artistic presentation), and in terms of form, (the ways in which content can be re-presented). In the synthesis which is the work, our receptive capacities are expanded at the same time as we are forced to think about things in new ways.

Of all the arts, the novel perhaps offers the greatest potential for world construction. The human world– the world of symbolic meaning within which we live, not the raw natural world of which we are also apart and upon which we live– is a world narrated into existence. Novels grow out of the universal practice of story telling, but free it from any imperative to relate events that happened as they happened. By freeing narration from empirical history, the novel liberates meaning from established natural and social laws. The author– and her or his readers– are free to explore dimensions of reality closed off by the given world (or to explore the given world in ways it would rather not be explored). When reality is fictionalized the immoral becomes moral, the impermissible permissible. As art work, the novel pushes the boundaries of what is fit subject-matter for telling, by exploring new narrative structures, or pushing to see how much structure intelligibility can do without. But the novel as art work is not only story, structure, and playing with structure, it is also words, which have their own aesthetic value apart from the story they are assembled to convey. The perfect novel would be one in which no word was wasted, not one could be changed, in which each sentence could function as a poetic micro-universe, meaningful in itself and pleasurable to read on its own, and whose narrative and characters were so engaging that the reader must forever resist the temptation to skip ahead to find out how the story resolves itself.

Richard Ford's *Canada* is not that novel, but Ford's superb story telling, his deep understanding of the psychology of isolation, and his economical prose put the idea in my mind.

The novel tells the story of Dell Parsons, a fifteen year-old living in Great Falls Montana whose hopes for normalcy are destroyed when his parents rob a bank. After his twin sister runs away, he is spirited across the Canadian border to live with the brother of a family friend hiding from his own past in Fort Royal, Saskatchewan. It is not a coming of age saga, into which it

could easily have degenerated, but a meditation on the way in which lives are co-equally determined by chance and inertia, on the way in which the unravelling of expectations isolates, but does not necessarily destroy, of loss and reconstruction and more loss, of redemption, of a sort, and of Canada as a closeness that divides and an undesired but welcoming (and ultimately welcomed) refuge.

Ford writes the way the eye sees: detailed, complex, nuanced, in colour, but without unnecessary colouration. (I cannot remember reading a single simile in the book). There is a matter-of-factness to his descriptions that communicate more about the character's feelings than noisier and busier prose would. The deepest forces and the most tragic conflicts that human beings face are related with a detached that-is-just-how-it-wasness. The terror of events is announced with an unadorned narrative voice: "Of course, I know some particulars because we were there in the house with them and observed them– as children do– as things changed from ordinary, peaceful and good, to bad, then worse, and then as bad as could be (though no one got killed until later." (20) We are often spectators of our lives, involved but not in control. We survive by paying attention, not dressing things up.

One of the core themes of the novel is the way in which inertia determines much of human life– we are spectators, but we become authors when we stop *being* carried along by events and *allow* ourselves to be carried along. Agency can be expressed negatively, by *not* exercising our capacity to act as a force equal and opposite to those impelling us in one direction. It was inertia holding his mother in place that set in motion the events that led to the catastrophes that Dell undergoes. Instead of leaving his father, as she often thought of doing, Dell's mother simply rides along with her husband's increasingly desperate scheming until it is too late: "She could have left him … But again she didn't. Therefore, all that might have happened to her … didn't happen. Instead, she lived in Great Falls, a town she'd never before heard of … lived in one world taken up with us … feeling isolated, not wanting to assimilate, and thinking only frustratedly, complicatedly, of the future. And all the while our father existed in another world– his easy scheming nature, his optimism about the future, his charm. They seemed the same world because the two of them shared it, and they had us. But they weren't the same. It's also possible that she loved him, since he unquestioningly loved her. And given her general unoptimistic frame of mind, given that she might have loved him, and that they had us, she conceivably couldn't face the shock of going away and being just alone with us forever. This is not an unheard-of story in the world."(24) Tragedies that could be avoided would not be tragedies.

This inertia condemns Dell to flight, to Canada, until then a looming non-presence in his life– close, but without identity of its own. "It was Canada there. Indistinguishable. Same sky. Same daylight. Same air. But different. How was it possible that I was going to it?" (212). But it was possible, and a few hours later he is driving towards his new "home" which, as he sees the next morning, is a desolate and abandoned farm town in the middle of a country which looks like his own, but is not. "Life-changing events often don't seem what they are. Voices woke me. These voices were somewhere outside the room I'd been asleep in, a room I remember entering, but didn't recognise. the cool smell of the earth and something tangy and metallic and sour thickened the air. A thin grey cotton cloth with a white border was tacked over a window beside my bed– which was only a metal folding cot– softening what had to be

morning light. I didn't know morning light *where,* or how long we'd driven the night before, or if *here* was my destination." (228) Ford restrains himself from any narrative overlay; he does not need to *tell* the reader that Dell feels alone, fragmented, far from home, he lets the scene itself do all the work. Dell's psychic isolation resonates all the louder in consequence.

But it does not destroy him. He persists and succeeds, not through any heroic strength of character, but in the way someone makes it home through bitter, windy cold– by putting one's shoulder to the wind and taking step after step, because there is no real alternative. "Don't send a lot of time thinking old gloomy, though," the friend who spirits him into Canada tells him. "Your life's going be a lot of exciting ways before you're dead. So just pay attention to the present. Don't rule parts out, and be sure you've always got something you don't mind losing. That's important."(217-218) If there is one thing he learns, it is to not "rule parts out."

But although he makes a new life for himself, he cannot– no one can– ultimately escape the events that set him on his journey. Meeting his sister again much later in life, she gives him her mother's journal, which she kept while she was in prison. Her words about death repeat the truths that Dell *lived.* "I think … that when you're dying, you probably want it. You don't fight it. It's like dreaming. It's good. Don't you imagine it feels good? Just giving into something. No more fighting, fighting, fighting. I'll worry about this eventually and be sorry. But right now I feel good. A weight's off me. Some great weight. Nature does not abhor a vacuum, as it turns out."

Readings: 24/7 by Jonathan Crary

Originally Published, 26 September, 2013

Jonathan Crary, *24/7,* **(London: Verso), 2013**

The self-transformations of capitalist society, engendered by its search for ever-new avenues of money-value accumulation, means that it continually creates novel problems for those who live within it. Understanding those problems forces social criticism to co-evolve with its object. While capitalism has proven itself plastic beyond the imaginings of its first systematic critics, after 200 years one would be forgiven for thinking that this social formation has caused all the problems it is capable of causing. However, capitalism continues to find new human and social spaces to invade and disrupt, opening up new terrain for criticism at the same time. But even capitalism, one might think, would hold itself back from threatening the most basic conditions required by physical health and sanity. One should think again. The 'information revolution' has allowed its system-need to continually expand to breach the defences of even the most primordial bodily cycles, allowing it to call into question the need for and the legitimacy of sleep.

Of course, the frontier marking off sleep as a sacred private zone has always been problematic for capitalism. Already in *Capital Volume 1* Marx had exposed the destructive effects of capital's non-stop efforts to push the working day past the feudal limit of darkness to include the full twenty-four hours. But nineteenth century factory owners did not imagine that *each individual worker* could be kept working for the full natural day. What is unique about contemporary capitalism, Jonathan Crary in his superb new book, *24/7*, reveals, is that it seeks to command the labour power, the buying power, and the whole of every individual with money to spend's psyche and attention, every instant of everyday.

What Crary uncovers is nothing less than an all-out assault on sleep, in both the literal sense of a necessary physiological state of restful unconsciousness and in the figurative sense of a general respite from worldly engagement, a metonym for temporary withdrawal from the demands of work and commodified leisure routines. "The huge portion of our lives that we spend asleep, he writes, "freed from the morass of simulated needs, subsists as one of the great human affronts to the voraciousness of contemporary capitalism. Sleep is the uncompromising interruption of the theft of time by capitalism.(p. 10) In the 24/7 world sleep becomes an act of resistance which, like the more traditional modes of opposition (strikes, mass demonstrations, political movements) capital sets itself the task of defeating. The sleeper is neither worker nor consumer, a mere respiring body taking up space, valueless, because disengaged from the cycles of money-value production and circulation, and thus a potential subversive.

Contemporary capitalism is at war with sleep because it is at war with all aspects of the human being that resist subsumption by commodity cycles. Thus it is a war, Crary demonstrates, between the *machinic intensities* of money-value flows and the *organic rhythms* of living nature and humanity. "A 24/7 environment has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness … 24/7 is a time of indifference, against which

the fragility of human life is increasingly inadequate and within which sleep has no necessity or inevitability."(p.9)

Life-processes are rhythmic and cyclical; health and intellectual acuity demand that the body's circadian rhythms be respected; our sensibility is attuned to cycles between light and dark, wet and dry, hot and cold, beginning and ending. 24/7 is the obliteration of all lived experience of the qualitative, material signs of time passage. In the 24/7 capitalist world every moment is exactly like the moment before and the moment after– there is none in which one could not/should not be working or consuming or being targeted by advertising. *Human* time-sensibility is attunement to difference; 24/7 money-value time is the obliteration of qualitative difference and the shaping of consciousness by attunement to it. "24/7 … is always a reprimand and a deprecation of the weakness and inadequacy of human time, with its blurred, meandering textures. It effaces the value of any respite or variability. … the effectiveness of 24/7 lies in the incompatibility it lays bare between a human life-world and the evocation of a switched-on universe for which no off-switch exists."(pp.-29-30). But 24/7 capitalism is not content to command from without, to overtly coerce. Rather, it functions more by colonizing desire, producing object-subjects who regard their need to sleep as itself a betrayal of their own most valued on-line, virtual engagements.

From the standpoint of the object-subject, 24/7 life is networked life, the life of compulsory happiness, "mandatory communication," (p. 72), endless exchange of trivialities and one-dimensional likes and dislikes, all monitored and data-mined to produce patterns of behaviour fed back to the object-subject to tell it what it wants. A*nd it works.* "Even in the absence of any direct compulsion, we choose to do what we are told to do; we allow the management of our bodies, our ideas, our entertainment, and all our imaginary needs to be externally imposed. We buy products that have been recommended to us through the monitoring of our electronic lives, and the we voluntarily leave feedback for others about what we have purchased. We are the compliant subject who submits to all manner of biometric and surveillance intrusion … without complaint." (p.60) The echo of Marcuse (as McKenzie Wark notes) rings strong throughout his argument.

Like Marcuse, Crary deals brilliantly with general tendencies, but could also be justly accused, as Marcuse was, of over-generalization. To whom does "we" refer? Everyone in the Unites States? Or the entire developed world? And what of class difference, race, and sexual difference? Has everyone been ingested without remainder, and is there no possibility of resistance, counter-strategy, disconnection? Crary is rightfully dismissive of the naïve belief that mere on-line discussion and broadcasting of events is itself an act of effective resistance, but it does not follow, as he seems to me to suggest, that such practices are always already anticipated and controlled by the ruling powers.(p. 121). Cyberspace is not the public space occupied by demonstrators, strikers, rebels, or revolutionaries, but it is a space through which more than money can pass. It itself has no revolutionary potential (no more than a newspaper or a loudspeaker), but it is not counter-revolutionary either. Most newspapers were and are filled with advertising too.

Nevertheless, it is true– and this is the signal importance of the book– that newspapers did not and could not "update' themselves 24/7, and thus could not penetrate and manipulate the human

desire to not miss out on something. Ultimately this desire is what drives the individual to submit to monitoring and advertising and "mandatory communication" — the fear that if they unplug they will miss something they do not want to miss. Self-activity thus becomes self-management in the service, ultimately, of the corporations whose monetary interests the internet serves in turn. "The rhythms of technological consumption are inseperable from the requirements of continual self-administration. Every new product or service presents itself as essential for the bureaucratic organization of one's life, and there is an ever-growing number of routines and needs that constitute this life that no one has actually chosen."(.p46)

The end result, according to Crary, is a flattened, de-politicised, domesticated cultural universe of homogenized experience and psychic impoverishment. For the end of sleep means the end of the possibility of momentary imaginative withdrawal from the world, i.e., the end of dreaming, and thus the end of the possibility of radical disruption of the status quo by plans and desires that it has not anticipated because, as dreams, they have as yet no objective, operational reality, but are dangerous nonetheless because they reveal deeper needs that can only be satisfied in a different society.   That too is a Marcusian theme, and if Crary cannot, like Marcuse before him, specify a collective subject capable of articulating dreams of unmet needs as a coherent and realizable political program, the problem is not his, but simply more evidence of the extraordinary power of capitalism to incorporate, atomize, and re-program people and what they want, reproducing itself despite the manifold forms of life-destructiveness it causes.

Readings: Sherry Turkle: Alone Together

Originally Published, 25 July, 2013

Psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle has spent more than twenty years studying the psycho-social impacts of robotics and evolving communication technologies. The concerns she expresses in her most recent work, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other,* are a departure from the (to my mind) uncritical enthusiasm with which she greeted on-line identity-play earlier in her career. In her work in the 1980′s she welcomed cyberspace as productive of more expansive, creative, and potentially more satisfying forms of selfhood. While she has not abandoned that position completely– and certainly has not embraced any form of anti-technological distopianism– she finds that high speed networks, social media applications, and more interactive robots have not deepened and strengthened people's capacities for self-creation, but threatened the self's integrity and ability (and desire) to bear the burdens of meaningful relationship.

Alone Together focuses on the ways in which advanced robotics and ubiquitous connectivity are changing both our understanding of "who" it is possible to have meaningful relationships with (robots, avatars, on-line personae which may be fundamentally distinct from the person's material identity) and the constituents of what people will count as a meaningful relationship.

Turkle's evaluation of the implications of virtual life have changed because the technologies have changed. In the 1980′s, computer networks were slow, interfaces mostly text-based and monochromatic, and the idea of a "sociable robot" still confined to science fiction. No longer. Robots are now interacting with the elderly in nursing homes and "learning" speech and emotional expressivity in artificial intelligence laboratories. People and their on-line personae are globally linked in real time, multimedia networks. Richer, more complex forms of human-machine interaction and computer-mediated human interaction are fundamentally transforming people's expectations of what counts as a gratifying and valuable relationship. "We ask less of people," she writes, "and more of technology."(Turkle, 2011, 231).

Why is it that we are asking more of technology and less of each other? The causes are complex, of course, but a fundamental issue is the intensification of time-pressure. Capitalism has constantly accelerated the pace of life, and capitalism since the emergence of networked computing has accelerated this dynamic beyond what anyone in the nineteenth century could have imagined. Working people must work more than one job to survive, or they must work longer hours, or do the same amount of work with fewer co-workers; professionals must produce more and be constantly "tethered" to the office as a condition of employment and advancement. Work-time is both longer and more intense, leaving less time and emotional energy for depth connection with family, friends, lovers, and other people in general. "Connectivity technologies once promised to give us more time. But as the cell phone and smartphone eroded the boundaries between work and leisure, all the time in the world was not enough. Even when we are not "at work", we experience ourselves as "on call;" pressed, we want to edit out complexity and "cut to the chase." (Turkle, 2011, 13).

This intense time pressure has allowed people to start imagining what thirty or forty years ago would have seemed unthinkable: that machines could unburden us of the emotional labour (Harriet Fraad) of caring for each other. Turkle's interview subjects, pawing a Paro (a robotic baby seal designed by Japanese roboticists to "keep the elderly company") cannot help but fantasize that it could free themselves from the responsibility of having to help meet the needs of an institutionalised parent. A student that Turkle meets muses unironically about replacing her difficult boyfriend with a programmable robotic partner. The problem here is not the violation of some taboo against machine-human communication. Rather, it is that the human beings know that the robot has no interior life, no consciousness, no self-consciousness, no feelings, no desires, no needs, and desire a "relationship" with it *because of* this emptiness, this simulacrum of interaction, this programmability. They feel relieved of the difficult burdens of working through the opacity and contradictions of other people. One can "cut to the chase," program in precisely the responses one thinks one needs, and rescue one's self from the uncertainty and unpredictability of human partners and caregivers.

Initially, it is shocking to read the ease with which people seem willing to discard interiority as a condition of meaningful selfhood and social relationship. The robot's lack of interior life, spontaneity, feelings, concerns, worries, anxieties– all that makes our emotional life so frought that we require others to help us through– appears to no longer be seen as barrier to the robot's being a consociate. The robot can "perform" emotions, as Turkle nicely phrases it, and her subjects seem to accept that this performance is not only better than nothing, it might be better than the real thing.

But as one reads further and more closely, it becomes apparent that what is really speaking through these people is the growing anomie, loneliness, and meaninglessness of life in contemporary capitalist society. Turkle does not waste time in moralistic condemnation, but traces the causes of this sort of self-editing to the barriers that the pace of modern life erects against the satisfaction of deep psychic needs for both solitude and material connection. Human beings require moments of solitude– if we are never apart, we have nothing to share– and yet the demands upon us make solitude more and more impossible. Constant virtual inter-connection robs us of the ability to be productively alone with ourselves (to imagine, to let the mind wander, to pay attention, to build a self out of the found materials of everyday life). The incapacity to be alone leads to a thinner, less confident self in need of constant superficial affirmation from others. This self can bear neither the demands of solitude nor material sociality. This thin self is anxious around other people and is anxious alone: the only solution, it seems, is to remain connected on terms each self thinks she or he is dictating. This relationship without openness to the difference of others is being alone together: needing the virtual presence of other people but always on one's own terms. "It is poignant that people's thoughts turn to technology when they imagine ways to deal with stresses that they see as having been brought on by technology. They talk of filters and intelligent agents that will handle the messages they don't want to see."(Turkle, 2011, 202).

The networked self thus faces a peculiarly modern anxiety: "the anxiety of always." (Turkle, 260).

The anxiety of always is overwhelming, and so the self tries to unburden itself: of irreplaceably human and irreplaceably valuable emotional labour (caring for children, the sick, the elderly); of the uncertainties of building mutually affirming, multidimensional relationships in real time and space, of the multiple roles material social life imposes upon it, of its real life-history, neuroses, and limitations. All of this expresses one truth clearly: people have lost control over their life-time, but desire to reclaim it back from the roles into whoch they have been forced. "Our machine dream is to be never alone but always in control. This can't happen when one is face to face with a person. But it can be accomplished with a robot, or … by slipping through the portals of a digital life."(Turkle, 157) Over and over again Turkle's subjects calibrate the value of an interaction with the degree of control they are able to assert within it. What they discover is that virtual life offers the appearance of control– over what the robot says in response to your actions, over your avatars and on-line identities, about those aspects of others to which you will pay attention– but that the rigid instrumentalism they bring to bear on their on-line interactions robs them of lasting value. They end up realizing that the value they seek through virtual connection cannot be realized without (eventual) material co-presence; that the goods of social life are inseparable from the material messiness of others' needs and demands upon us, of our spontaneously developed not instrumentally programmed psyches, our ambivalences, insecurities, and desires.

The problem these people confront– loss of control over life-time– is important, perhaps the most fundamental social problem. For a being with a finite life-time, there is nothing more important than its capacity to dispose over its time. Human freedom is freedom of action, and freedom of action presupposes free time, time not already structured by externally imposed, coercive routines. The problem is thus real, but it is a *social* problem. The attempt to find a technological fix exacerbates rather than ameliorates it. Instead of creating social and political movements that address the socio-economic causes of time-pressure, people, feeling collectively powerless, retreat *as individuals* to virtual communities for respite. There, they discover an environment in which they seem to be in control, but forget that the meaning of "community" is "to give among each other."(Turkle, 238). For embodied beings, giving amongst each other requires "physical proximity."(Turkle, 239) That does not rule out new forms of virtual relationship, but, so long as we have bodies, it does mean that the virtual will always be a supplement to the material.

The dreamers of machine dreams are motivated by goals inimical to the constant pressure the economy imposes upon us to perform. They want to play, to explore who they are by pretending to be someone else, to find new ways to stay in touch, to cultivate multiple friendships not bound by place or shared history– but repeat the oppressive performance imperative even as they seek to release themselves from it. In their initial openness to programmable robot companions, in their work to craft the perfect on-line personae, in their terror of separation, they bear the scars of the capitalist value-system, in which everything is designed to sell, and quickly, in which nothing has value in itself but only in terms of that quantifiable reward it brings, in which there are no social problems but only technologies that have not yet been invented, in which there is no society but only abstract individuals trying to get what they want from each other with no cost to themselves.

Unmet needs persist in feeling– we cannot will ourselves to not eat, and we cannot will ourselves not to desire connection with the not-self. The human good is not self-contained, it always involves relatedness to the world and other people. But as soon as we go out of ourselves to find in the world and others what is not programmed into us, there is risk: of rejection, of failure, of disappointment. But if we could– as the machine dreamers hope– program everything in, it would be of no value, because expected. Life without the possibility of the unexpected is life without the future. But human freedom depends on the openness of the future, on not knowing what will happen, on not being able to program in others' responses to us, or our ours to them. Life with others is made profoundly difficult by both forms of uncertainty– the only thing worse would be to find an algorithm to solve it.

III: Evocations

Philosophy as Medium and Creative Practice

Originally Published, 23 May 2014

Perhaps because he was pursuing a PhD in philosophy before abandoning his studies to become one of the most important Abstract Expressionist painters, Robert Motherwell's understanding of what it is to *work* as an artist resonates with my experience of working as a philosopher. Objecting to the naïve view of art as the simple copying down of an experience, Motherwell thought of artistic work as the struggle to structure the artistic medium in ways that express the truth of feelings about reality:

"Most people innocently think that a painter or a musician or a poet has an experience, and then goes and writes it down, or paints it down. That's not at all what happens. What the poem or the painting or the piece of music is, is an experienced person working with a medium, and what turns out to be the poem or piece of music or the picture, as worked out in the medium, is not illustration or journalism or having a dream experience and then putting it down. … In painting or music or poetry, one is concerned with how a very specific medium functions, and paradoxically, in how it is functioning, the whole human soul is revealed, more than if one tried to paint a "picture" of the human soul. It is one's soul that's being communicated, how one feels about the character of reality."("The Humanism of Abstraction," *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*, p. 255).

I think this description also applies to what it is to write or speak a philosophical argument. (I set aside whatever objections could be raised to Motherwell's understanding of the aims of art and the means by which those aims are best achieved). I think the connection resides in the fact that in philosophy, as in art, there is an experienced person, with an idea, struggling within a medium (natural language) for the means of truthful expression.

But careful philosophers will object: Motherwell, (and artists in general), tries to communicate *subjective* feelings about reality ("how one feels about the character of reality"). Philosophers are not struggling for the words to express their *feelings* about reality, they are arranging their words in logical structure to *prove* something about reality (or about what can truthfully be said about reality.) Therin lies the difference between art and philosophy. I want to say: yes. But also: no.

Yes. The medium of philosophy is natural language but the goal of philosophy is not to play with the possibilities of pleasing and meaningful expression. Rather, the goal is to tame those possibilities by the imposition of logical form. That is not to say that philosophy can be conducted in formal languages alone and exclusively. Symbolic logic can clarify the validity of inferences but can never on its own communicate anything meaningful about the human relationship to natural and social worlds. Nevertheless, it is the goal of an argument to infer a conclusion from premises. While it is a fatal objection to a philosophical argument that it is illogical, it would be senseless to make such an objection to a poem. This difference proves that philosophy is subject to criteria of evaluation extrinsic to the content of particular philosophical

arguments in a way that a painting, a poem, or a piece of music is not. They are primarily to be judged by rules imminent to the particular work itself (that is what Motherwell means by "how the medium is functioning.") That is, a painting is not good because it follows a set of rules for paintings of type x, but because it is a sui generis stretching of its medium until it successfully communicates this particular feeling about this character of reality. In art, there is the constraint imposed by the need to get the medium to communicate, but this constraint is endogenous to each work– it either "works" on its own terms or it does not, there are no knock down external criteria to be brought to bear against it. A philosophical work, by contrast, only "works" if it is true (or at least valid), but either way, criteria exogenous to the piece as an arrangement of sounds or meanings in natural language are brought into play. There is sound poetry composed of intoned letters or syllables, there is no sound philosophy. Philosophy must have something to say, and it must say it in a way that does not violate the rules of logical structure. Philosophers have ideas and, it would seem, should just "argue them down." Philosophy is thus more akin to science than to art.

But also, no. Philosophers do have ideas and often they just "argue them down." Such approaches rarely resonate beyond a small circle, composed not of all philosophers, but of those who already agree that "arguing it down" is the way to do philosophy. G. A Cohen says somewhere that philosophers must eschew the poetry of language for the sake of perspicuous argument, but if you read his work sympathetically, you will discover that he did not follow his own stricture. Philosophy seeks to *communicate* truths about reality (or about what can truthfully be said about reality). In order to do so, it must find ways of resonating with people. Philosophers, therefore, have to struggle, as artists have to struggle, with their medium. Philosophy is not simply hanging words on a predetermined logical structure, it is finding the expressive and affective words that will convey your ideas in logically rigorous form each time that calls for philosophical intervention. Philosophical arguments are typically expressed in public talks, in lectures, in essays, and in books, all of which, I think, are legitimately counted amongst human creations to be evaluated not only for their logical form, but for their success as individual, expressive constructions. Perhaps Irving Singer oversteps when he says that "in writing [philosophical] books, as in art works generally, one makes a loving gift to the universe," but he is surely correct to say that writing philosophy (like art) is a "creative gesture [that] enables us to have a meaningful life … we extend ourselves through symbolic representations of what we feel and what we appreciate." (Irving Singer, *The Pursuit of Love*, p. 59). That philosophy that successful intervenes must be both rigorous and moving does not mean it is doubly difficult. In some respects, the demands of logical form make philosophy easier– it is always clear, at least, how *not* to argue, whereas in art, both how and how not to go about one's work in the medium must be invented each time anew (or one just keeps making the same painting or writing the same song or poem with indifferently different words and images). To other philosophers, perhaps, one's work is only the logical rigour of its inferences, but for oneself it is also always (I think) a work, the outcome of a struggle to create something that is unrepeatable, an intervention that not only derives a valid conclusion, but changes the way people think. A talk or a lecture or an essay or a book can only do that if it moves people, *both* by the rigour of its arguments *and* by the evocative power of its words and rhythm.

Return to the Ruins With Ronnie Packard

Originally Published, 26 June, 2013

Some things are worth doing twice and going further. So back to the Packard Factory with J. and S. and C. The stairways are irresistible. Onward to second and third floors; five open blocks of decay, broken glass and bullet holes.

Silver W.E.E.D. on the walls.

And chance encounters that become conversations.

A figure waving his arms in the distance, a dirty Mobil mechanic's shirt with "Chet" on the right breast.

But he's not Chet, he's Ronnie Packard.

He had been lying in the grass and saw us pull up and park. He's ok, an ex-Marine with something in his bag to sort people out, if he had to. (A gun, perhaps? But J. and S. and C. disagree). Wanted to keep an eye on S's car, to make sure we were ok, not being hassled by anyone, by people like the guys in the red pick up. Car thieves, he tells us, probably had their eye on S's car.

(Strange, to never really think about having the car stolen, it being out of our sight but not others' whose presence and motives are invisible to us).

Is it noble or stupid to feel safe?

He calls us brothers and sisters, which feels good, real, but it's clear in so many ways that we are not from here.

Here. Ronnie's stories remind us: this *is* a neighbourhood, not really a site for our playful Saturday excavating. People live in here, people like Ronnie live around here. He's been here for 56 years, came from Atlanta.

People used to take care of one another, he said, but not anymore. But that isn't true, on either count. People didn't take care of people then– the plant has been closed for 56 years (it used to shine like the sun, he said, when it was all lit up at night). But not now, not for half a century. The workers and the neighbourhood left to fend for themselves/itself. Strange society, that won't commit to the minimum welfare of its members, but demands their patriotic love and their lives in pointless wars.

Well, maybe not pointless. Keeps people out of the long grass and off welfare, I suppose.

But if it wasn't true then that people took care of each other, it is also not true now that people don't. Ronnie is taking care of us, sort of, in the ways that he can.

Care now, not care then. Care/not care, depends on the people, not the time.

His 90 year old mother is at home, "lying down." I thought he meant she was dead, but, like the gun, I couldn't build consensus around that interpretation. So he cares about her too. His knucklehead son lives there, too, but it's not certain how he feels about him. His wife is also home, waiting.

He takes a cigarette for later, 'cause he's going to need it when he's drunk on the beer he's going to buy with the money we gave him for watching the car. Wife's gonna have to put up with him, he says, when he's drunk.

It's time to go. He invites us to his place, (so the others told me). Talk is wonderful, but this is not our world. There comes a time when you have to extricate yourself and go to the Bronx bar, rather than Ronnie Packard's place.

I tell Ronnie to share the beer with his wife.

Fragile (A Link Poem)

Glass- hard, beautiful, brittle; life, or that which makes it worth living, moreso.

Easy to break/ruin/end.

Crazy cop volley of bullets and taser for good measure,

talking when you should be turning,

right-sizing responsibility,

suffocating in a petcoke cloud.

Or you live, just to be told what to do,

or rather, not do

(no blow jobs for you, Virginia).

But what is philosophy's response?

Talk, split hairs, define and redefine and argue about the redefinition,

carve niches and feather nests,

or just make fun,

leaving everything as it is, (mostly)

despite that which we claim to know,

about life and how to live it.

But where did that knowledge come from?

Books? can't teach life.

Life? just living and everybody does it.

Neither art not science,

it persists despite itself.

On Anger

Is there anything uglier than a human face contorted in anger? White hot rage is as close as we get to experiencing an animal's life from the inside. Its heat dissolves the bonds that hold thoughts together; anger is pure physicality, matter become energy, raw aggression, whatever words are screamed, their meaning is reduced to the animal's signal– I have lost control, get out of my way. Anger is animality, but it looks different on us. Whereas the bared teeth, the coiled muscles, the wild-eyed intensity of the predator captivates with its power and majesty (what immortal hand or eye could frame the fearful symmetry of the tiger, asked Blake) on the human face anger is repulsive.

Why should this be so? Anger is no more or less a product of our natural history than any other emotion, the affective expression of cellular energy against a threat or a barrier to the ego's designs. Rooted as it is in the most archaic survival instincts, the expression of anger terrifies with its intensity. It takes control of the musculature, the brain, channeling all vital functions against the opponent to which it is directed.

But when the opponent is human, when anger migrates from natural to social history, that is when it becomes ugly. Anger is not only survival reflex, it is social relation– antagonism towards another human who is perceived as a barrier to the realization of a goal. As a social relation, it terrifies in the unconstrained destructiveness it can unleash. Anger provokes anger in return, threatening to open up a self-amplifying cycle of mutually harmful or mutually destructive fury.

In moments of calm reflection, philosophy reveals the better path: "Do not speak harshly to anybody; those who are spoken to will answer thee in the same way. Angry speech is painful, blows for blows will touch thee." (Buddha, *The Dhammapada,* Verse 133*)."* "Anger is the desire, whereby through hatred we are induced to injure the one whom we hate." "Hatred is increased by being reciprocated, and can on the other hand be destroyed by love." (Spinoza, *The Ethics*, Part Three, Definition 36, Proposition 43.) Simple emotional physics reveals the path to peaceful sociality: do not get angry, if another is angry with you, do not repay anger with more anger, but with love, which negates the hatred that fuels the anger of the other.

Beneath the emotional physics, a metaphysical psychology– Buddha and Spinoza, in their distinctive ways, argue that peaceful sociality requires an expanded sense of self-identity. The self is not just this desiring ego that hates that which stands in its way; the ego itself is but a moment of a universal substance which embraces all that we regard, unphilosophically, as distinctly other. When reflective philosophical consciousness recognises its identity with the all-embracing substance, it transcends the self-other dichotomy upon which anger feeds. Anger is the desire to injure or destroy that which we hate, and we hate that which is opposed to us. If, on the contrary, we regard the other as a moment of something greater to which we both belong and which sustains our being, then we can let go of the unreflective demand that everything outside one's self should serve it, and become reconciled to the other through recognition of a shared identity in a more all-encompassing, substantive unity.

But whatever the aesthetic and moral merits of these arguments, they seem politically and morally naïve. We are both barriers to and enablers of the satisfaction of each other's goals. Some goals take on supreme significance for the ego, and it attacks whatever stands in its way. Moreover, since some goals are of essential (and not just subjective) importance, it is right to struggle against obstacles to their realization. Anger is a sign of taking things seriously– our own integrity, the problems of the world we inhabit, other people and our and their commitments. Hence we have ideas of "righteous anger," anger that it would be morally blameworthy *not to feel:* anger directed against bullies, tyrants, and oppressors. Part of taking ourselves seriously, of respecting ourselves, is the capacity for standing up for ourselves, for demanding respect from others, and for life-conditions that are adequate to our life-interests. But when standing up for ourselves is fuelled by nothing but anger, nothing of positive value is accomplished. Anger insists that its grievances be addressed immediately by walls being knocked down, but solutions require patience, the capacity to listen, a willingness to change ourselves as we transform, not knock down, the world.

Thus, the angry face is ugly to contemplate, whether it explodes selfishly in personal life or when it screams justifiably and accuses truthfully in political struggle. Is the ugliness just a way in which our fear of anger registers? Perhaps. But could it not also be that we find the angry face repulsive because we know that anger is not ultimately a human response to adversity? Whatever the legitimate justifications for some expressions of anger, solving the problem that encourages the anger in the first place requires constructive intelligence, not blind fury. We turn from the angry face as from a looming catastrophe, the hurting of those who are closest and most dear, the making of the politically enraged targets of the superior violence of the state.

Whether justifiable rage at injustice or selfish explosion against someone who is thwarting one's will and desire, anger alone never allows one to achieve one's objectives. Frustrations are real, anger builds up behind them like a reservoir behind a dam. The land needs water, yes, but a flood from a broken dam destroys all that lies in its path– so too unchecked anger.

Ciudad de los Autobuses y pintura

Originally Published, 20 August, 2014

Ciudad de los Autobuses y Pintura

NAFTA City (like my own),

but suffering opposite effect.

Mine: empty, of factories moved south.

Theirs: full, of the emptied countryside

intensifying and extensifying up the mountains.

City of Shrines,

forgetful of Mother Courage's wisdom:

"You think God provides/

But you've got it wrong."

Work provides.

Everyone busy about the ceaseless toil

of subsistence retail:

Nortena's and *ranchera's* on the buses and metro,

pensetswavypencilsreadingglassescdscandyapples

solo diez pesos,

the poorest selling to the merely poor.

City of life unregulated,

no stop sign geometry of avoided collisions.

Eating beneath tarps

the tacos or tortas

sold by smiling if haggard women,

while in a distant plaza,

old, fragile bodies dance with grace.

City of exhaust gas and grit,

but moreso the laughing colour

that softens hard life.

We are too clean and complaining.

One learns that life needs some dirt

in order to be enjoyed.

Diego Rivera and Fra Angelico

Written By: J.Noonan - Aug• 31•13

Fra Angelico: Frescoes at the Convent of San Marco, Florence (1438-1443)

Diego Rivera: Frescoes at the Edificio Sede de la Secretaria de Educacion Publica, Mexico City, (1923-1929)

(All photos of the Rivera murals, J. Watson)

Evocative Spaces.

As soon as I entered the courtyard of the Secretaria the unexpected scope and scale of Rivera's work transported me. I was back in Florence, in San Marco. The feeling was intensified by the architectural similarity between the two spaces. Large interior courtyards provide sanctuary from busy streets outside. In one, arches, in the other, columns frame covered walkways around the perimeter of the gardened interiors. Very few people, a quiet and contemplative air. The muted colours of the murals quieted the eyes, made them pay closer attention. Perhaps this

resemblance provoked the question that occurred to me: had the young Mexican revolutionary, painting from the history and for the future of his country, ever visited San Marco? Had he perhaps been inspired by the devout monk painting for the spiritual edification of his brothers?

Both spaces originally served sacred purposes, purposes which still reverberate. Both invite a contemplative and meditative attitude. Such attitudes lend themselves to the irruption of memories, the forging of unanticipated connections, the discovery of surprising resemblances. So standing in what is today a thoroughly secular, working building, marvelling at the three hundred frescoes Rivera painted around the three stories of outdoor perimeter walkways, one still senses its religious roots in the Convent of Saint Mary of the Incarnation of the Divine Word (1594). Perhaps the ghost of this purpose whispers to me as my thoughts are drawn back to Florence.

Universal Gifts

Before even really looking at any of Rivera's frescoes I thought: this is a universal gift, not just to the peasants and workers and revolutionaries which form the subject matter of the murals and in whose name Rivera created, not just for the Mexican people and the consolidation of their national identity for which the murals were commissioned, but for anyone who takes the time to navigate the teeming streets of the Centro Historico to find their way here. The usher seems to be waiting just for you because, amazingly, there is no one else around. Such is for the best, for to experience the real aesthetic depth of Rivera's creation time and space to linger are necessary.

San Marco is the same sort of universal gift. Angelico conceived the frescoes illuminating the cells of his fellow monks as gifts to them, to aid their contemplations, to strengthen their faith, to deepen their love of God. But like Rivera's murals, which transcend the overt political function for which they were executed, Angelico's paintings cannot be confined to any narrow denominational-sectarian purpose or reduced to any one-dimensional religious reading. The human drama shining out through the religious allegories is to strong. That which is remembered is Angelico's understanding of human desire and pain. One wonders: is that what impressed itself on the monks too?

Salvation and Revolution

Universal gifts, open without exclusion to anyone who accepts accept the call of this art. To pay attention to it is to transcend narrow-minded and mechanical opposition of the sacred and the profane, religion and politics. Neither set of works instructs, rather, both evoke, suggest, commands attention, yes, but does not program or determine the response to it. Rivera's earthy materiality, his peasants with their pots and cooking fires and sensuous dances, his hardened revolutionaries, the fruits and grains that sustain the body, the struggle that frees it from alienation, exploitation, and needless suffering, are echoed in the wonder and confusion (and anxiety) on Mary's face as she hears the angel announce that she will give birth to the son of god, in the weeping face of the women looking over the dead Jesus, of the fevered relief of sinners being released from hell. Fra Anglelico and Rivera both tell human stories about human problems and human goals: joy, grief, salvation, *for the human body*.
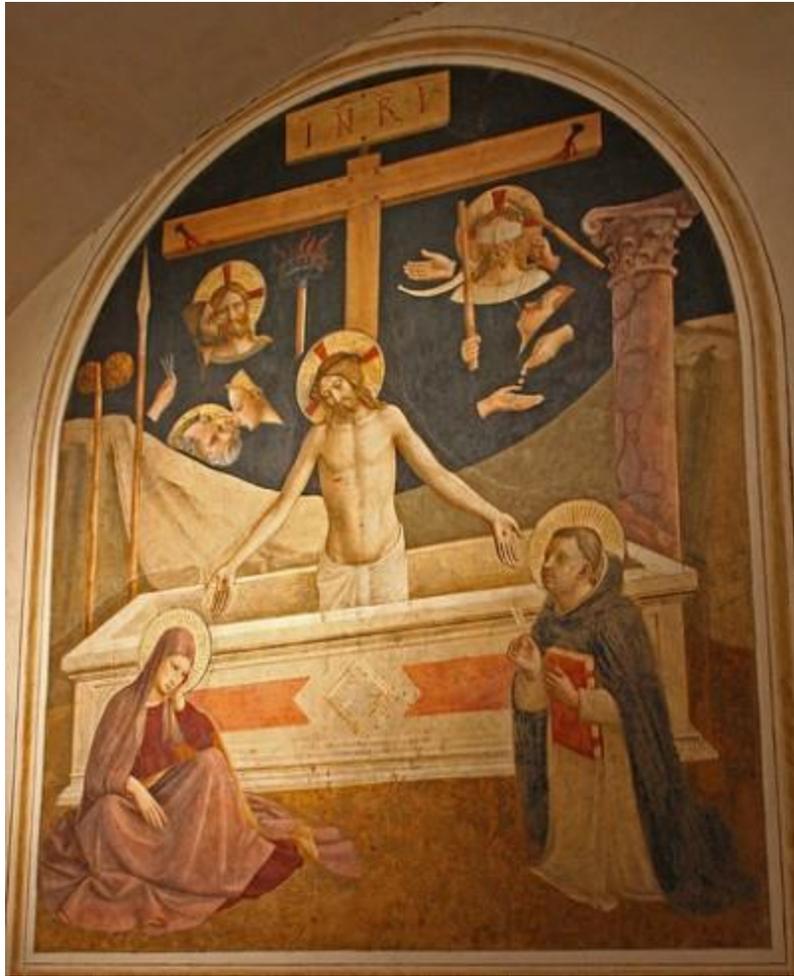
"For I was hungry, and you fed me, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you entertained me, I was unclothed, and you clothed me, I was ill, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you visited me." (Matthew, 25: 5-37) The materialist ethical core of both Christianity and Marxism non-dogmatically understood: what counts is what we do for others when they need us.

Christianity is a religion of embodiment. Angelico conveys this truth with his exquisite treatments of the human face. Marxism is a politics of embodiment– not the moralistic treacle of liberalism and republicanism, but the hard work of building up from the ground a society which enables us to develop, grow, and, most importantly, enjoy our brief lifetime. Rivera conveys this truth in the joy of eating and being together his subjects reveal– the smiling simplicity of a meal of food grown yourself contrasting with the unsmiling gluttony of the capitalist's table.

For both, the spiritual (revolution, salvation) passes through the material– the painful *and* joyous embodiment of human being.

The dogmatist will surely be unsatisfied, for she or he needs opposition. What has religious nonsense to do with the real political struggles by which human beings emancipate themselves from superstition and oppression simultaneously? Rivera and Angelico both– although from opposed intentions– remind those paying attention rather than sermonizing that more important than the fight, the condition without which the fight cannot lead to the desired emancipation, is caring and tenderness for the fragile human being. Without caring, revolution is just killing and exchange of one set of masters for another.
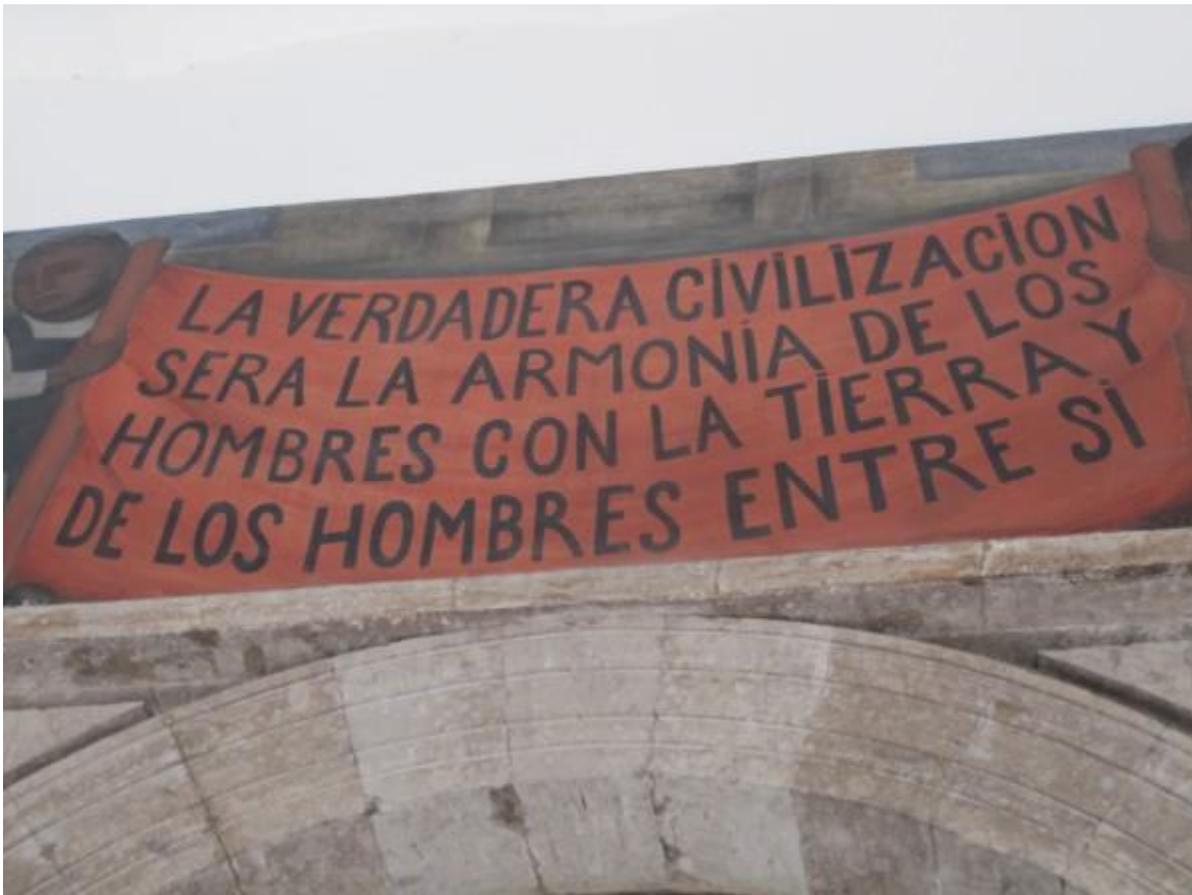
Rivera, a man of enormous appetites, Angelico, a man of almost none, nevertheless share a recognition of the primacy of material truths: the reality of pain and deprivation, the terror which is death, the yearning and struggle for a just world, salvation from that which torments us, our right to that which we require for life and development. Both say in unison: Happiness is not achieved without sacrifice and pain and loss, but the body and the face must be present for there to be happiness.

The Imperfections of Architecture (Heraclitean Fragments and Aphorisms for Winter Evenings)

Originally Published, 20 January 20, 2014

The slope is too shallow. Either your head is in the way or a head is in your way.

Two vectors happily tracing their lines in space collide: geometrically, an angle, materially, a corner, squaredly, a room. Defined space makes activity possible, but limits it at the same time.

People who think comedians tell deep truths …

That which enables excludes. Definition is by limitation, creation is through constraint.

Philosophy as Parasite: Reflection presupposes other peoples' risks. If everyone were a philosopher there would be nothing to philosophize about.

To be is to do, to do is to ignore the determinist's proof that ends are not origins.

A sofa in the median is not an invitation to sit.

My end is your beginning.

Hell is other people: they block one's road, but without them there would be no where to go.

…working with only wood and twine.

How complicated it gets, with just two. Now multiply by billions.

Idealism and choreography: the question is not how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but how spirit-entities without bodies can dance.

Art is experience of the same, differently.

Book learning really is overrated. (Learned from a book).

How much of what we are is built from the parts we forget?

So powerful was … make of … and … understood … no [cost?] was too high.

Mere proximity in closed space is enough to cause aggression and animosity to rise. The danger of violence increases with the degree of enforced immobility.

By forces, nutrients, shelters we live, by symbols we die.

Home.Ward(2).Bound.

This is not a world historical neighbourhood. There are no monuments, not even any local landmarks, just people passing through, mostly, and they don't seem to notice much. Its probably better, not really seeing. That way, one is not implicated.

An old woman, in a threadbare chair, in a room yellowed from time and light from the shadeless lamp, a shelf with a few mementos standing sadly behind. Further back, one supposes, a kitchen, somewhere a bedroom and a faded, unravelling crotched blanket at the end of the bed. The building not nearly closed off enough to the elements: frail windows death-rattling in the west wind, rusty trim, peeling siding, the door so wind-worn an arm could punch through without a scratch.

So close to the street. What she must have to bear on Friday nights when the kids, loud, exuberant with drink and desire, roll home from downtown. No building abuts the sidewalk in this place (as they should, in a real city). Everywhere a missing-tooth gap of parking lot between structure and street. Except here, where an old woman needs to sleep, somehow the connection between the dead things was got right. But she never looks afraid, face ever stern and square to the TV.

Words lie, but not eyes, hands, and faces. Those don't seem like laugh lines etched into her hard, bespectacled face, the furrows accentuated in the dinge. This is not a room for fond reminiscence. No, better suited for regretful cigarettes and spiteful glasses of whatever it is old women drink. Staring through the TV, back to some history only she knows, only she can free herself from. If not for her memory, whatever it is could rest, far off in time, where it belongs. But here and now, it shares her space, and provides no pleasure.

What does she keep alive with that same harsh stare, night after night? She is alone, has been forgotten, what is it that she cannot she forget? A trauma, a singular failure or breach, a chance left untried? Or, just the gradually accumulating weight of years piled on years pressing home the point that it won't get better now. Does her anger rise as night falls? Does she roll up the old comforter at night (when during the day it hangs down, as a curtain) so that everyone can see that despite it all (whatever it was) she is still here? Does she feel redeemed by the witness the transient gazes of passers by, (briefly, so briefly), bear? Perhaps she wants to implicate us.

One walks by, one sees, one keeps walking. A few more paces and one finds oneself seized, thinking, for a moment, and then a few more steps. Well, what could one do?

Does she ever think: "they can see me, why does no one ever knock?" Or maybe she has lived too much to care about things anymore. It is better, really, to stop caring, once one is past the point where change was possible. One frees oneself from being implicated.

It will end here, most likely, (but not now). Is that Saint Francis in the window? Is this what you have prayed for, this dingy aluminum sided box all sooty from exhaust and spattered in mud, open for me to see? No?

Everywhere I have been, it seems, the prayers of the poor are never answered.

Memory: Sediment, Fragment, Random Geometry

Originally Published, 24 April, 2014

There are unimportant places in the world. Unimportant in the sense that no one visits them on their merits, no one thinks that their stories are worth telling. Reality in an unimportant place is always local. Even if there are objective connections to the rest of the world, the rest of the world does not acknowledge them, which makes it seem, to the locals, that they exist in a land apart, without value to others. There is an ever present, but rarely satisfied, need for acknowledgement, not of themselves individually, but of their place.

There are important places in the world, places that locals and strangers alike think have stories worth telling. These places have a double reality– local and cosmopolitan. People who live in important places expect to see their place acknowledged as a centre to which others are rightly drawn. This expectation is part of their demeanor. A New Yorker walking down Great Jones Street might never have heard of Don Delillo's novel of the same name. But her face will tell you that she knows that she lives on "storied streets."

"Storied streets" have an aura about them. Streets are streets, in one sense, and human dramas play out on all of them. But you feel differently on a street that is storied, even if nothing of any interest is happening while you are on it. To look up and see "Broadway" on the lamp pole is a different experience than looking up and seeing "Huron Church Road." The later is a far more interesting and unique name, as far as street names go, whereas there are Broadways in almost every American city. But "Huron Church Road" connotes nothing to those who have never driven on it, whereas "Broadway" generates innumerable connotations of global cultural significance even to those who have never walked it.

There are people who are drawn from unimportant to important places. Often, they think that the move gives them the aura of the storied streets down which they now walk. But light reflecting at just the right angle, or a molecule with just the right shape to stimulate your olfactory nerve, brings up a memory which throws all that work upon the self into jeopardy. We live on surface layers of ego but we are sedimentary rock. Nothing goes away (for good or ill), but is just buried. The angle of the light beam bores a hole that allows the deeper layer some oxygen.

Sedimentary rock, yes, but underneath all that which has been compressed into coherence there are also shards and fragments that make the formation unstable. How there can be any stability to a structure so liable to earthquakes that stretch you across a fault line of here and now and then and there together is not an easy question to answer.

A glance, and then I am two places at once: in a line waiting for beer at Joe Louis Arena and sliding on my back in the Garson arena, frustrated at missing a perfect pass and an open net, swearing as I throw my stick against the boards.

How many times have I stood in that same beer line, shifting my weight from foot to foot, looking around, trying to dissipate my annoyance at the person in front of me who is paying for two beers with a credit card? But the vectors of light had never connected my eye to the black

and white portrait of a man who I recognized before I could form the words to say his name. A man from the same unimportant place as me (or close enough that only the locals would care about the difference). A man who carried our name here.

(At least for a moment. His career with the Wings was not long. The drink did him in, so it was said, by others who were not models of temperance).

"Dale McCourt, 1977-78-1981-82."

The name had long since ceased to mean anything, never did mean anything of ultimate importance. It was his brother, Greg, who made the perfect past to me, not Dale, who was older and a first round draft pick of the Red Wings. What mattered was not the two degrees of separation between me and a first round draft pick, but rather that others far away, busy about their important affairs, would know that there were people up where we were. The feeling that I had then, the feeling that comes washing over me now, (still waiting for the fool in front of me to get his beer) was (is) not civic pride, which I do not understand and never have. Where I come from, where anyone comes from, is an accident. Like seeing the portrait now and not earlier, one's being born here rather than there is, from the standpoint of the universe, pure contingency, no higher power intended it. It is just a fact. Not pride, then, but just simple satisfaction that our home had been acknowledged.

We do not escape who we were, but it is not there as a underlying truth acting constantly upon us. It is both present and absent. We go on to other things, (as Dale and Greg McCourt surely must have). As we build, the earlier strata upon which we build disappears– until they return by the unpredictable agency of a random physical event. Random and unpredictable– so the memory could just as well have stayed unremembered. Who we were, are, and would have been is changed by these accidents. There is an occasional aspect to the self. Since we do not choose the occasion, we can continue to surprise ourselves.

Short Essays on Airports, Art, and Drinking in Lancashire

Originally Published, 31 October, 2013

Why I Love Airports

Paul Virilio wrote somewhere (*Speed and Politics,* maybe) that airports would be the cities of the future. He was wrong– cyberspace is the airport of the present, increasingly negating the *belief in,* but not the *reality of*, the difference space makes. Airports are a nostalgic commitment to geography; testaments to the value of exerting oneself to go *someplace else for real.* They affirm the superiority of experience in five sensory dimensions that physical presence makes possible.

Art Lessons on Family Values

Public galleries are increasingly ruined by an overbearing pedantry on the one hand and family-friendly vacuity on the other. One is no longer allowed to freely feel anything through untutored reflection upon the works. Galleries are now an extension of school: one must submit to being told what the art means– especially "in context" and politically- by the curatorial notes sometimes larger than the works they are supposed to explain. At the same time, more and more floor space is given over to suburban-family friendly "interactive zones' where the kids can play whilst mom and dad try to understand what on earth "transgressive liminality" means. Art succumbs to the evil of enforced "lifelong learning" and the tyranny of family values.

On a Lancashire Street

Preston- (Priest-town, Martin and Niall told me) slumps along under those heavy grey skies. Fuckin hard-lookin chavs in front of the pub, shell suits and sunken cheeks, looking hungrily at the Ladbrokes, as if anything good would come of that. The fag hanging from her mouth and the kid in the pram don't add up to easy days for the girl trying to keep the rain out of her eyes. But the dark old wood shields and the pints of Old Tom are warm. We are far away.

A Portrait of the Artist as Narcisstic Exploiter

At the Tate Liverpool I watched a video of a "performance" initially staged by the Spanish artist Santiago Sierra in Salamanca in 2000. For the price of a shot of heroin, he convinced four junkie prostitutes to have a 160 cm red line tattooed across their backs, for the delectation of the audience and the furtherance of his career. He imagines his work as some sort of critique of capitalism, but think: capital accumulates via the exploitation of wage labour. He who pays the wages is the exploiter, whether flattered with the title "artist" or not.

Solitary Pints

It does the imagination good to drink alone some afternoon, and into the evening even, as the dark swallows the light and a slight giddiness takes over. Although you are lonely, it is pushed back a moment, allowing you to just be there, with whatever thoughts decide to come.

On Seeing the Backs of Paintings

One is generally only exposed to the front of the painting, to the work, the creation. To see the painting from the back, to see it stamped "Tate Liverpool" and read the packing instructions reminds you: this is a material thing, a piece of property to be crated and tracked, part of the furniture. Usually, only the artist gets to see it this way.

In a Liverpool Pub

They watched my stuff for me while I went for a piss. He– Ringo Starr nose, severe silver-framed glasses, black running shoes, although his physique says he has not run anywhere in quite sometime. She- short mousy hair, a too-tight green mohair sweater, ballet flats with no socks. He– drinking half pints of John Smith, she, Zinfandel. They- smiling and laughing easily, arms casually draped over each other's shoulders. After all the shit they no doubt put each other through (we all do, one way or the other, don't we?), they still wanted to spend Saturday night together in the pub getting just a bit drunk.

Against Compulsory Happiness

Cy Twombley's [Untitled 1987](#) (Tate Modern, London) quotes the last line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies:* 'And we who have always thought of happiness, climbing, would feel the emotion that almost startles when happiness falls." The later feeling has been ruled out of order in the twenty-dirst century because happiness is not allowed to fall. No longer an achievement, valuable because difficult and rare, it has been reduced to an enforced cheeriness whose falseness is belied by the number of times one's feeling it must be publically pronounced.

Cafe Cathedral

It is comforting to know that a sinner can still get a beer (but it was too early, I had tea). The blue-white light filtering through the magnificent stained glass windows does not judge. Who knew Anglicans could be so much fun?

El Greco and the Cool Kid

El Greco, [Adoration of the Name of Jesus](#) (National Gallery, London).

What amazes is the effectiveness by which the mystery of the shape of infinite spaces is conveyed: above, the non-physical holy name carves an arc into which the saints are drawn to the non-place of heaven; below, the horrifying physicality of the demon's jaws is the passage way to the all too concrete but infinite space of hell. But one must tarry and look; he had great clothes and the right beard, but he walked right passed not knowing what he was missing.

The Silence of Airports

Dense crushes of human beings sweating and shopping and checking the departure board, all talking to each other or on the phone while flight announcements interject. But there is an

underneath silence unique to airports, (listen next time) a sign that secretly people are at least a little relieved that they are still on the ground?