

THINKINGS 4

COLLECTED INTERVENTIONS, READINGS, EVOCATIONS:
2014-15

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The Bookroom, Wyandotte Street, Windsor, ON (Photo by the author)

Ingonish Beach, Cape Breton Island, (photo by the author)

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Interventions



PREFACE: BRING THE NOISE

In his superb 24/7, Jonathan Crary argues that blogging signifies the end of politics: “The phenomenon of blogging is one example— among many— of the triumph of a one-way model of auto-chattering in which the possibility of ever having to wait and listen to someone else has been eliminated. Blogging, no matter what its intentions, is thus one of the many announcements of the end of politics.”(p.124) If blogging is reduced to its most narcissistic possibility- immediate reporting on one’s state of mind, mere opining without reflection or filtering through a grid of principled argument- then Crary is correct. Politics is back and forth argument, not monologue, and if all blogging stems from dismissive ignorance of the reality of counter-argument, then it is anti-political.

At the same time, one must be careful not to confuse a platform with the substance the platform makes it possible to disseminate. All writing runs the risk of being closed monologue, and nothing exemplifies the danger of “auto-chatter” better than much academic journal writing (especially in philosophy). The medium need not be the message. Authorial intention and content matter.

I begin with this quotation as a preamble to a reflection on my own work on this blog over the past year. Since I first read Crary’s argument two years ago I have been sensitive to the double-bind I often find myself in here. One of the reasons that I started *Interventions and Evocations* was to provide a forum for the philosophical discussion of politically and culturally significant contemporary events. The timelines of peer review and academic publication preclude the incisive, immediate commentary that the best journalism provides, but even the best journalism tends to exclude the excavation of depth principles that socially relevant philosophy brings to light. The danger is always that the desire to comment quickly (in order to be relevant) undermines the time for reflection that philosophy demands. (Perhaps one of the reasons philosophy is in crisis today is because it cannot operate at the speed the contemporary world requires).

There is no way out of this double bind. Philosophy needs to be involved in on-going conversations, and philosophical thoughts also need time to gestate. In the first year of writing this blog I think I fell victim to the temptation to write too early. Over the next three years I think I have become more sensitive to the need to let the thoughts form at their own pace, without having to delay comment so long that the urgency generated by the problem or event has dissipated.

The patience that philosophy requires is also served by having, at this point in my career, a body of work to draw upon and a set of principles which I think have been sufficiently tested in the crucible of peer reviewed academic publication and argument. The intellectual value of having access to a platform that allows for philosophical intervention into events as they happen is that those principles can be applied to current problems and their efficacy tested in living environments, after having proven their cogency in the more rigorous (but also more abstract) context of academic journals. I see the blog as medium for a dialectic between commentary and philosophical argument and not just narcissistic reporting on what I happen to think. Plus, the platform allows for critical response (one more reason why it need not be, as Crary charges, anti-political auto-chatter). It is true that I have the power to not post responses, but it is impossible to become a philosopher without learning how to accept criticism of one’s principles and arguments. All critics of the positions that I articulate here can therefore rest assured that their comments will posted, no matter how serious their disagreement with my perspective.

In sum, as I begin the fifth year of maintaining this site, I hope that it has done more than contribute to the cacophony of vanity that bedevils our culture (especially on-line culture). At the same time, these posts are, for better or worse, *my* arguments. I make no attempt to cloak them in the phantom objectivity of “One” or the contrived universality of “We.” I have always hated the convention in social science (one fortunately not yet adopted by philosophy) of pretending that it is not “I” that takes a position. All argument should be in the first person- It is “I”, not “one,” or “we” that believes, asserts, contends, argues, etc. Each mind is a unique perspective on the world, as Leibniz wrote: “And much as the same town is viewed from different sides looks altogether different, and is, as it were, *perspectively* multiplied, it similarly happens that, through the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which, however, are only the perspectives of a single one according to the different points of view of each monad.” (Monadology, section 57). There is one universe and multiple perspectives on it. if we are ever to produce the harmony between perspectives that Leibniz believes already existed by divine choice, then we must share these perspectives with each other, not as auto-chattering monads, but politically and philosophically engaged social subjects, giving ground where proven wrong but courageous in defence of our position when it has proven right.

The Right to Strike: A Defense

Originally Published, September 17th, 2014

Strike rates in Canada have been in decline since the 1980's. In the 1980's there was an annual average of 541 workdays lost per 1,000 employees. By the 1990's, this average had dropped to 233. By the 2000's the average had declined further, to 203, far less than half the 1980's rate. The drop is not attributable to more enlightened labour policies— the same time line demonstrates growing inequality between those who derive their income from labour and those who derive it from invested capital (see Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*). So what explains the long term trend? There are two clear factors which reciprocally influence each other. First, differences in labour costs and the scope and depth of legal protections have been exploited by international capital. Zones of lower labour cost and weaker legal protections for unions and workers have acted as attractors of capital. More mobile international capital has put pressure on states— whose legitimacy largely depends upon their ability to ensure economic growth as measured by standard capitalist metrics— to prove to international capital that they are “open for business.” In practice this cliché means— and this is the second factor—competition with low wages zones to drive down labour costs through coordinated attacks on existing labour law and unions. These changes have made it more difficult to strike, on the one hand, and more risky, on the other.

A glaring example of the dangers of striking occurred in February of 2012, when workers in London, Ontario were taught a brutal object lesson in the reality of global capitalism. Then Canadian Auto Workers on strike against the locomotive maker Electro-motive were given an impossible choice. The company (a subsidiary of Caterpillar) demanded that the union agree to cut their existing wages in half, or face the closure of the plant. Seeing that what was at stake was not just their plant, but the future of the union movement in the Ontario manufacturing sector, these workers heroically sacrificed themselves, went on strike, and watched their livelihood move to Muncie, Indiana. Had they not stood up to the brutish tactics of Electro-motive, every manufacturer in the country would have been encouraged to make the same demands. What boss wouldn't want to cut her or his workers' wages in half? While the jobs were lost, the massive public outcry against legalized extortion preserved the possibility of meaningful collective bargaining in other plants, at least for the time being.

The heroism of the Electro-motive workers brings me to my main point. Strikes are generally derided as selfish, as morally (if not physically) violent, because they “use” people not directly party to the dispute as tools to secure the union's victory, and as counter-productive. What is worse is that these criticisms are generally not leveled by the owners of capital (they understand that in current conditions most strikes are doomed to fail after a fairly short period, so they do not need to get apoplectic in the press). Rather, the criticisms tend to stem from the “general public” the vast majority of whom must work for a living and would thus materially benefit from any improvements that successful strikes might win. In all the hue and cry about “using” innocent people as pawns, the violence to which working people are regularly subjected is almost never mentioned. This violence is sometimes overt—as when 34 striking Platinum miners were murdered in Marikana, South Africa in 2012— but more often invisible from the outside: the ever increasing stress of rising workloads and fewer workers, the ever present threat of lay off, of losing benefits, of having one's pension evaporate in a bankruptcy court. Those already defeated, instead of taking heart from those still willing to fight, cheer from the sidelines, for their own side's defeat!

Strikers are derided as selfish, while they in fact are the people who suffer the most. They forgo pay, they suffer the opprobrium of myopic critics, they risk physical attack, and they risk their jobs.

Yes, it is true, people can get caught in the middle. But anyone who thinks that people go on strike to punish third parties has never been on strike. People go on strike (at this point in history, at any rate) only in response to the most serious provocations. For many workers, who live pay cheque to pay cheque, those provocations generally involve the threat of reduced wages. For the temerity of demanding a living wage they will be denounced as greedy. Note to anonymous comment trolls: “greed” refers to the desire to amass wealth without limit. Demanding a pay increase of x-% is, by definition, a limited demand, and therefore not greedy. For others, (very few, today), still well-remunerated workers, the provocations can take other forms— serious threats to long established workplace rights, job security or pensions being the most common. In a society supposedly free and democratic, ought not people willing to stand up to protect their rights— rights which others can and ought to enjoy too— be celebrated, rather than demonized?

Yet, given the very real stresses, difficulties, and dangers of striking, given the precarity of almost everyone’s job today, is it not the height of irrationality to strike? In some cases the answer might be “yes.” And, as I said above, no group of workers strikes for frivolous reasons. But what if current trends continue and workers the world over become too cowed to ever strike? What will have been lost? Some would say: “nothing,” others: “a nuisance.” But these answers, when not rooted in simple class prejudice, are extraordinarily out of touch with the history of democratic development. Democracy, or those elements of it that exist, had to be fought for, because no ruling group has ever willingly limited its power to exploit those below.

When we focus on depth values, it becomes evident that what critics of the right to strike miss is that the right to withdraw labour is one of the crucial distinctions between being a worker and being a slave. Slaves were the legal property of their masters; they worked when they were commanded and rested when they were allowed; they had no input into their conditions of work. Marx used the concept of “wage-slavery” to emphasize the continuities between capitalism and slave economies, but he was not being ironic when he argued that the distinguishing characteristic of capitalism was that its workers were free. Of course, the material compulsion exerted by the need to earn money is normally sufficient to limit the exercise of this freedom to trivial and non-threatening forms. At the same time, legal freedoms are spaces carved out by struggle which workers can use to expand their collective agency and their collective and individual well-being. Marx was always clear about the importance of trade unions in the struggle for democracy, and the importance of the struggle for democracy to the struggle for socialism. As he noted, it took centuries of struggle for working people to achieve the legal right to freely associate in unions and to legally withdraw their labour: “Only against its will and under the pressure of the masses did the English Parliament give up its laws against Strikes and Trades Unions, after it had itself, for 500 years, held, with shameless egoism, the position of a permanent Trades’ Union of the capitalists against the labourers.”(*Capital*, Volume 1, p. 691). The right to strike is material proof that workers are human beings who have the capacity to help intelligently shape their conditions of life. Behind this power stands the real object of ruling class fears— the capacity of working people to recognize the superfluity of capital to the provision and institutionalization of the material and social conditions of life. Lest that power be felt by too many workers, the right to strike has always been precarious— long denied, won only through the harshest of struggles, and always in danger of being undermined, by armed violence, by legal coercion, or by global market pressures.

Anyone who has been on strike has felt that power, the eros of common struggle, the euphoria of solidarity. Anyone who has been on strike for more than few days has also felt these feelings of collective democratic power wane. Strikes are very hard work, undertaken under conditions of extreme stress, in ever worsening economic conditions for the strikers. But sometimes (not all the time) accepting some hardship is necessary to prove that one's position in a hierarchy does not determine the degree of one's humanity. Human beings determine the conditions of their social lives through the work that they do and the relationships that they build. If people have no say over their conditions of work, they cannot meaningfully be called free human beings. And sometimes it is necessary to struggle to protect or extend our rights as workers to help determine our conditions of work.

Of course, it would be best to live in a world in which all disagreements were resolved through uncoerced negotiation and compromise. But that world would require deep agreement upon the purposes of social life and the democratic control over the resources needed to realize those purposes. Sadly, that is not the world we inhabit. So long as we do not live in that world, those most subject to the harms of unconstrained market forces, to austerity policies, to the power of capital and its servants, need means of protecting themselves, and the right to strike is one of those means.

WINDSOR, WUFA, AND HARD BARGAINING: A LAMENT FROM UP CLOSE FOR THE DECLINE OF CAMPUS DEMOCRACY:

Originally Published July 4th, 2014

Collective bargaining is a difficult process. At its best, it is a rare opportunity for workers to participate in the determination of their conditions of work, rather than simply accept whatever conditions are offered. Collective bargaining allows workers to deliberate together as a democratic body about how they think their work should be organized and compensated and to make their case to the employer. Despite what employers publicly maintain, there is no equality of power. Since employers retain ultimate legal control over the workplace, since they continue to draw full salary during any work stoppage, and since the legislative deck is stacked in their favour, without solidarity, both between members of the bargaining unit and between the bargaining unit and the wider community of labour and concerned citizens, the employer is typically in an advantaged position.

That does not stop employers from playing the victim card. Ontario has just come through an election campaign in which the leader of the Conservative Party tried to spook Ontarians with tales of the nefarious deeds of phantom “union bosses” holding the province hostage. Fortunately, Ontarians saw through this nonsense and sent him packing. One would hope that thoughtful people would draw the appropriate lesson: one should try to convince by argument and not by demonizing threat. Sadly, my employer, the University of Windsor, seems determined to try to resolve the on-going round of collective bargaining with my union, the Windsor University Faculty Association, by the time honoured tactic of union blaming.

In a letter to the Faculty dated July 3rd, 2014, President Alan Wildeman wrote: “It is now more than five months since my January 28th public address when I expressed to the campus community the desire going forward to have new collective agreements in place at the time the existing ones expire. This was done with the goal of breaking the persistent pattern of negotiations carrying on through the summer, and bargaining groups either threatening or taking strike action in the fall. This is a pattern that causes tremendous anxiety for students, their families and the greater community. While this pattern may represent the tried and true tradition of collective bargaining and forcing an employer’s hand, and unions might think it appropriate to threaten strike action at a time when it puts the most pressure on the employer, it is a pattern that the University cannot continue to quietly accept.”

I suppose we should be proud that the administration, by threatening (but so far not acting upon the threat) to lock us out at the earliest possible moment is copying our purported tactics. For of course, the summer is when *they* have greatest leverage. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Still, while it is in fact the case that bargaining has often stretched from May until October, it has never been the explicit strategy of WUFA to back administration into a corner. We have been on strike exactly twice in 50 years and we have never gone into bargaining with a strike mandate in hand. We have only taken strike votes in the face of protracted impasses at the bargaining table over issues of fundamental importance to the membership.

Why, then, has bargaining often stretched into the fall? The answer is that both sides have too often brought so many items to the table that it took that long to work through them all in a responsible manner. It is of course true that any academic union is in a more powerful position in the Fall, when a full slate of classes is running, than in the summer, when many members are away from campus and fewer classes are offered. Nevertheless, despite the nightmares of right-wing pundits, university faculties are not full of rabid leftists chomping at the bit to prosecute the class struggle (there are a few of us still left, but I can assure everyone we are in a small minority). Most faculty members care most about their research and their teaching, they do not want either interrupted by either lockouts or strikes, and most are loath to engage in struggles that might harm the reputation of the institutions in which their own reputations as academics are forged. You really have to push academics hard to anger them enough as a collective to make them want to strike (or a strongly resist an imposed lockout).

It would seem that President Wildeman is working hard to push us in that direction. While the lockout date has come and gone and the university's doors are still open to WUFA members, his letter of July 3rd threatens changes to the conditions of employment if WUFA does not acquiesce to administration demands by Monday, July 7th. Specifically, it warns that:

“The University will no longer make employer contributions to the Money Purchase Plan component of the Faculty Pension Plan (Article D of collective agreement);

ii) The University will cease to pay the premiums for all health insurance benefit coverages for WUFA members described in Article F of the collective agreement, including the Green Shield Supplemental Hospitalization Benefit Plan and Green Shield Extended Health Benefit Plan;

iii) The Grievance and Arbitration provisions in Article 39 of the collective agreement will no longer be in effect;

iv) The University will cease to honour requests for reimbursement of Professional Development and Membership Dues described in Article I of the collective agreement;

v) The University will cease collecting union dues from members and forwarding those dues to WUFA (Article 4:01 and 4:02).”

Now, on one level, these changes are not alarming, for they are changes that would occur in the case of a lockout. What is most disconcerting is that they were unexpectedly thrown into the room when it appeared that both sides were making progress *by negotiating and not threatening*. Both teams bargained past the lockout deadline and had scheduled meetings for the next day. The assumption amongst members—naïve, as it turned out—was that both sides had found common ground and were splitting the differences that get split for the sake of reaching an agreement with which everyone can live.

Rather than contribute constructively to the talks, the President's letter accuses the union of distorting the University's finances and ignoring the economic realities of the province of Ontario:

“We continue to be advised by WUFA’s bargaining team that it is their steadfast view that the university does not face a financial challenge, and that they should not have to do as all other employees have done. In contrast to the position of WUFA’s bargaining team, our fiscal challenge, as evidenced by \$43M of realignments over the past six years and reductions in faculty and staff numbers, is real. It is a challenge being felt across the provincial and national postsecondary system, and it is a challenge clearly articulated in the provincial policy on differentiation across the university and college sector.”

I will not get into the specifics of WUFA’s analysis of the University’s finances here, save to note that the same university that has cut 43 million dollars from its operating budget (which is what “realignment” means) has embarked on an ambitious building program that will cost well in excess of 100 million dollars by the time it is complete. One can argue, as the President does, that this money was specifically earmarked for capital improvements and is thus not money taken from the Operating Budget. Even if one accepts that argument as a matter of accounting practices, the fact remains that money is being found for construction at a time when the university has not been hiring at a pace to keep up with retirements. As a consequence, faculty student ratios are increasing even though overall enrolment increases have been modest. The real issue is priorities, not accounting tables.

As for the provincial situation, the President is correct to argue that all post-secondary institutions across the province are facing real challenges to their finances. Yet, these challenges have nothing to do with purportedly unreasonable faculty salary demands and everything to do with: a) decades of inappropriate taxation policy which has redistributed income to the richest Ontarians while starving vital public institutions of needed funds and b) a provincial post-secondary education policy which has put universities in competition with colleges and universities in competition with each other to attract students. These provincial policies, made worse by the long inadequacy of federal transfer payments in support of essential public institutions, explain whatever financial challenges we face, and should, if everyone is committed to the university’s intellectual and pedagogical missions, be ground for common cause.

Whether or not it was ever practiced in reality, the principle of collegial self-governance is the goal to which universities should aspire. Unlike for profit businesses, universities do not have owners whose goal is to maximise profits. Instead, all members of the institution— faculty, librarians, learning specialists, lab technicians, students, support workers, and administration have the same goal—the advance of human knowledge and creativity in the widest and most comprehensive sense. If that claim is true, then it should follow that all the groups who together make up the university ought to cooperate (not without respectful disagreement) in the determination of the budgets, policies, rules, and goals that guide the institution’s mission. The best ideas emerge through deliberative and democratic argument—no one group knows best just because of the position they occupy in the hierarchy.

Collegial self-governance should be the goal, but we all know from experience that it is increasingly distant from reality. At the University of Windsor, as at other universities across the country, the norm is too often imperious, top-down imposition of senior administration’s plans. True, we are sometimes “consulted,” but consultation is the prerogative of monarchs. Engaged discussion, argument, and collective decision-making by all with a stake in the outcome ought to be the practice of democratic public institutions (as well as the organizing principle of collective bargaining).

Sadly, (because I am thankful every day that this university allows me to teach, to have felt the joy of helping thousands of students to pursue truth rather than expediency, and to be a philosopher), I do not

see much evidence of commitment at senior levels to this principle. I have no doubt that senior administration is sincere in its commitment to what it considers the institution to be, but the university is not a name, a 'brand,' or a collection of buildings. It is the work of teaching, learning, and research. Everything else, including administration, is a support function, important, yes, but support, not the *raison d'être*.

A LABOUR DAY GIFT FOR SISTERS AND BROTHERS: COLLECTIVE BARGAINING IN THE AGE OF UNNECESSARY AUSTERITY

Originally Published September 1st, 2014

I first published this essay in *The Scoop*, Issue 134, August 29th, 2014, Windsor, ON. Thanks to the publishers for allowing me to repost it.

University Administration Tactics Threat to Labour Movement

On July 18th, 2014 the administration of the University of Windsor informed the Windsor University Faculty Association that they would cease to bargain. Instead of continuing what had been a productive—if hard-nosed—set of negotiations, the administration chose to walk away. But not only that, four days later, on July 22nd, a letter from President Alan Wildeman informed WUFA members that his administration would be imposing the terms and conditions of work contained in the July 18th offer.

The unilateral, authoritarian move has understandably alarmed and angered WUFA members. It ought to alarm and anger all unionised workers in the city. It is not a well-known fact that employers have the right, under the Ontario Labour Relations Act, to dictate terms and conditions of work in the absence of a signed collective agreement. It is not a well-known fact because most employers chose not to exercise this right. So why is the University of Windsor administration behaving more like Caterpillar, (who moved their Electro-motive locomotive plant from London to Muncie, Indiana two years ago after insisting on impossible-to-grant concessions from their workers), and less like academic colleagues devoting some of their career to administrative duties?

The answer is complex. It involves intensified pressures on public universities as a result of the 2008 financial crisis and austerity ideology, endless demands from government for ‘accountability’ measures that waste time and resources but make administrators feel like they are the only people standing between the institution and oblivion, and policies that have put universities and other institutions of higher education in competition with each other, increasing the pressure of market forces and making administrators feel more like bosses in private business than colleagues in a university.

These factors are important, but on their own insufficient explanations of the Wildeman administration’s approach to bargaining. These pressures exist across the university sector and our sister institutions have been able to settle fair collective agreements. In the past couple of weeks Carleton and Brock have settled difficult negotiations on terms better than currently being offered by the University of Windsor, even though Windsor is not in worse financial shape than either.

<http://ocufa.on.ca/blog-posts/bargaining/bargaining-update-settlements-at-carleton-brock-laurentian-requests-conciliation/>

<http://ocufa.on.ca/blog-posts/bargaining/bargaining-update-settlements-at-trent-st-jeromes/>

In addition to the political economic pressures being exerted on all public universities, Windsor seems to suffer from a leadership style that has no place in a twenty-first century public university in a democratic country.

Leadership is important. Boldness of vision is important. Investment is important. No one faults the President for doing his job, articulating a vision, or investing in new infrastructure and buildings. But investments are supposed to create work, not come at the expense of it. Over the last six years the University of Windsor has lost 48 full-time faculty while increasing its enrolments modestly. That means fewer courses, larger class sizes, and a threat to the comprehensive nature of the University of Windsor.

It does not have to be this way. Universities are not for profit business in which the owners appropriate the surplus as private property. There is no structural conflict of interest between administration and faculty in the way there is between owners and workers. If relations between administrators and faculty take on the adversarial character of relations between owners and bosses, it is because administrators start to act like bosses. (Faculty members typically are more interested in their own research and teaching than union politics).

The problem at Windsor takes the form of an administration that simply cannot get along with its workers, its faculty, or its students. Last year CUPE 1393 was on strike for more than a month. The President regularly took to the press to denounce the CUPE leadership for not understanding fiscal realities. Last March, an attempt by students to organize a boycott of products made in the occupied West Bank created a campus wide controversy which, while sharp, is just the sort of controversy one hopes for on a university campus. It potentially gave students an opportunity to put into practice the communication, argumentation, and criticism skills they are supposedly here to learn. But rather than let students democratically figure out a solution on their own, the President intervened to effectively suspend student government and take over the finances of the University of Windsor Student Alliance. This shocking move came after an organized protest was successful in preventing the election of a full slate of UWSA councilors. Now, as summer of 2014 draws to a close and the beginning of the fall term nears, the University again finds itself at a critical moment. Instead of finishing the job of negotiating a collective agreement with WUFA, Wildeman has once again put his interpretation of the problems ahead of democratic deliberation and compromise and has attempted to impose terms *he* finds acceptable on the faculty.

Faculty, of course, have rejected this unilateralism. On August 14th, we took a successful strike vote. 81.4% of faculty voted in favour of job action if it proves necessary to achieve a negotiated agreement. Regardless of what Windsorites may think of the university's offer (and it is not as generous as it has been made out to be by the administration or *The Windsor Star*, and does not meet norms in our sector), all working people have to be concerned, and ought to raise their voice against, the tactics of the administration. For most working people, terms and conditions of employment are arbitrarily dictated by management. The great benefit of belonging to a union—indeed, the great advance for democracy represented by the union movement—is that unions enable working women and men to help shape their work conditions through the collective bargaining process. If the university administration's draconian tactics are allowed to stand, the hard won rights of collective bargaining are put in jeopardy for all workers.

ON LEADERSHIP

Originally Published September 30th

Unlike John Lydon, I am not an anarchist (or the antichrist, despite what some may say). Leadership of social movements, of societies, of complex institutions— is, I would argue, both necessary and valuable. In their moment of birth and initial development, “horizontal” movements and consensual politics allow the subaltern a voice and create a transformative experience of agency, of their capacity to debate the rules they will live by, and to figure out means of enacting those rules. However, horizontalism and consensus have never proven to be sustainable over historically relevant periods of time in complex orders in which multiple and opposed perspectives have to be reconciled into a coherent organizational or social direction. Allowing every voice endless play and never moving until everyone is convinced is not a recipe for viable democratic communities, but rather permanent instability and implosion. The inability of Occupy to sustain itself for more than few months is a most recent case in point.

It does not follow that democratic self-organization and self-governance is impossible, but only that both require leadership. Those who think that leadership is contrary to the democratic organization of societies or institutions confuse it with the power to command. The power to command derives from the model of military hierarchy in which subordinates must obey their superiors. But the power of leadership is not grounded in the capacity to use force against insubordinates, but the ever tested and ever proven capacity of the leader to discover the point around which diverse views can be unified. Complex entities need leadership not because people need to be told what to do, but because they require unity of purpose. Unity of purpose *emerges out of* deliberation and argument, but the coherence required for action depends upon there being someone a little above the fray, who can evaluate the relative merits and demerits of different perspectives, synthesize the perspectives as far as possible, and re-present the compatible parts as a coherent proposal for the members (of the movement, the society, the institution) to approve or reject.

Good leaders do not, therefore, substitute themselves for active membership. On the contrary, the best leaders energize members to give the most they can give to the collective enterprise that brings them together. They are replacing themselves even as they serve their term by helping to develop an active cadre willing and able to take over the reigns at any moment. Every leader should be challenged all the time, not by ambitious social climbers seeking the spoils of office (there should be no spoils) but by committed members serving the mission of the organization. The function of good leadership is indispensable, the person of the good leader should be fungible. Any group dependent upon a single person for charismatic direction is doomed, since functions can be replaced, but not the unique characteristics of a person.

Commanders, by contrast, tend to identify their person and their role. They tend to treat themselves as agents and everyone below as a passive object. This fact is not accidental, since only passive objects can be commanded. People who can and do think for themselves can be persuaded, but never commanded. Democratic self-organization dies as soon as there are commanders, because the very existence of commanders proves that the followers have ceased to exercise their capacity to think for themselves. As soon as they regain the confidence to demand participation, command becomes

impossible. The commander who cannot lead people who have freed themselves from fear and apathy will soon lose the power to command. Over the long term, fear has never proven to be an effective source of social stability.

Hence, one cannot lead by threat of sanction. Leadership is exercised by persuasion. Members argue, leaders listen, they channel, they pose problems, they encourage further argument, all the while gathering and unifying the elements that will become the position the group will have to decide upon. Sometimes arguments fail, sometimes they bog down in splits, sometimes they are outright rejected by the members. The coming to pass of those possibilities need not prove fatal to an organization or its leaders. Changing, like staying the course, requires leadership as well. The commander insists on pressing forward no matter what the cost; the leader understands that his or her duty is to the future of the organization, and has the courage to adjust a strategy when circumstances make that necessary. The commander insists on his or her own way, the leader, as I said above, synthesizes democratically expressed positions of the members. Since in a living organization members are constantly democratically engaged, the work of synthesis never stops. Command appears clean from the outside but its dogmatism ends up incapacitating everyone further down the hierarchy; leadership is messy and chaotic from the outside, but it ensures the long term health of the organization by constantly engendering the emergence of a new generation of leaders from the active cadre. Leadership takes time, and takes it time. Command is urgent.

Crisis generates a false sense of urgency. A false sense of urgency allows commanders to assume the mantle of leadership. They stand on the balcony and promise bold new directions— and the need for decisive action to break from the old ways. Of course, crises *are* turning points. Human life is not— and ought not be—static. But when commanded rather than *lead* in a new direction, people do not have time to ask the crucial questions: what lies beyond the horizon, where is it, in fact, the we are going? Is the new direction consistent with the purposes which first brought us together, or is it a re/destruct-uring of those purposes masquerading as service to them? Finally— and this is the most important question that does not get asked— what is the cause of the crisis? Is the problem in the operations of a particular institution, or is it in the basic dynamics of the society in which that institution is embedded and upon which the successful carrying out of its mission depends? Is the particular being blamed for a problem of the universal, and being destroyed so that the whole society can carry on its problematic path, dragging every particular institution down with it? If there is no time for question, argument, and dissent, if there is no time for reflection upon what the mission of particular institutions really is and/or ought to be, and how it can be organized to ensure that purpose is fulfilled, if, in short, people allow themselves to be commanded (for ultimately, it is only our acquiescence that allows commanders to function) then the real problems are not solved (they are not even understood) and the mission of institution and the purposes of social life in general can be undermined without anyone seeing the danger.

PROTECTING EDUCATION FROM SCHOOLING: THE COMMON INTEREST OF ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY, AND POST-SECONDARY TEACHERS

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As Alan Sears demonstrates in his superb *Retooling the Mind Factory*, (Garamond, 2003) the values the school system will serve has been a fundamental political-economic problem for over a century. Mass education developed as a response to economic changes that required a literate and numerate workforce. At the same time, the development of literacy and numeracy skills enable working people to think for themselves, with the attendant danger that they will begin to think against rather than with the dominant value system and structure of power.

The political and economic struggle of the ruling class to control educational labour reveals a contradiction in its social interpretation. On the one hand, education is regularly extolled as *the* means to economic success and equality; on the other hand, educational workers are regularly demonized as incompetent, lazy, greedy, and selfish, in need of strict managerial control if they are to fulfill their responsibilities to students and society. The rhetorical attacks prepare the public to support legislative attacks on their conditions of work and right to bargain freely. In the past five years alone Ontario teachers have seen their right to collectively bargain stripped away by Bill 115 and have been pushed into a strikes (high school teachers) and a work to rule campaign (elementary school teachers) by a government seeking to impose wage freezes and undermine teacher autonomy in the class room.

The problem is not limited to Ontario and elementary and secondary school teachers. The Nova Scotia government is currently trying to pass Bill 100, which would effectively bar strikes in the University system, allow the government to violate existing collective agreements, and essentially impose budgets on Nova Scotia universities. Across the university sector faculty are seeing more and more resources devoted to administrative salaries, while administrators themselves increasingly forget their roots in academia to behave as urban planners embarking on ‘campus revitalization” projects and business managers bent on imposing discipline on faculty members treated as disposable employees.

The neo-liberal assault on public institutions has become a coordinated assault on educational workers at all three levels of education, with “student interest” mechanically invoked as justification for policies which manifestly do not serve them (larger class sizes, higher tuition, fewer courses, intensifying pressure to forsake education for critical consciousness in favour of careerism). As with any assault on working conditions, its success depends upon the degree to which workers are able to find the confidence to resist and build networks of solidarity, between each other across sectors and levels and with students. The current moment seems ripe for both.

To build the network of solidarity needed to both resist the austerity agenda and construct a democratic alternative guided by the real values that education must serve (openness of mind, capacity for social criticism, understanding before acting, openness to the new and different, the capacity to evaluate alternatives non-dogmatically) we first need to remind ourselves that the problem in the Ontario economy (as elsewhere in the global North) is not lack on funds to support public institutions, but priorities. While the government demands that teachers accept another wage freeze, the average salary

of Canadian executives rose approximately 25% between 2008 and 2013, from \$7.35 million to \$9.21 million. Clearly, there is money in the general economy that can be accessed by government through taxation if it wanted to access it. Government is only as poor as it wants to be. If education were a priority, then the government could generate funds to support its institutions and its workers if it wanted to tax wealth appropriately.

When put in the context of the fiscal priorities of government (tax breaks for the rich, austerity for workers), the argument in support of free collective bargaining, including the right to bargain wages, salaries, and benefits, is easier to win. The greater job security (for the moment) that educational workers have vis-à-vis their counterparts in the private sector should be seen as a source of strength. Just because it is difficult to lay off teachers and tenured faculty means that these workers have an objective basis of strength to fight back in the strongest way possible—by taking strike action and building links between strikers at different levels in the educational system.

However, the fight is not wholly financial. Alongside the budgetary constraints imposed on public institutions and public sector workers governments, school boards, and university administrations are keen to impose an ever wider set of political constraints on the nature of educational labour. In the current round of negotiations, both high school and elementary teachers are pushing back against demands to change their working conditions which would: threaten larger class sizes, put the control over teachers' preparation time in school board/government hands, and generally further erode the professional autonomy of teachers. Analogous moves have been made at the post-secondary level: Strategic Mandate Agreements, learning outcomes, institutional evaluations based upon "key performance indicators" (which by and large reduce to the success of graduates in finding work after graduation). While these new expressions of managerial power over educational workers might appear to be justified by appeal to students' interests, the real interest served by these metrics is the interests of employers in having open access to a steady supply of compliant people willing to do whatever they need to do to find a job—until that job disappears and they need to reinvent themselves to find another one.

I am not saying that educators and education can be indifferent to students' need to find paid employment. At the same time, educators cannot fulfil their vocation as educators and meekly accept the subordination of education to schooling. Education frees the intellect of students from subservience to appearances and the status quo—it demands that both justify themselves at the court of truth. The goal of schooling, by contrast, is to integrate students into existing social structures and roles, seeking meaning in life only in the rewards the current society makes available. If, as at present, pursuit of those rewards generates economic, political cultural, and environmental crisis, but education can help young people understand these causes and start to work against them, then the subordination of education to schooling ensures the perpetuation of crises, not their solution.

There are many differences between teaching toddlers and adolescents, teaching a secondary school class in calculus and supervising a doctoral dissertation on string theory. Yet, more important than these differences is the continuity of the austerity agenda underlying the attacks we are facing: on our bargaining rights, on our professional judgement and capacity to do our jobs free of stifling managerialism, on the finding for the institutions in which we serve our students and the public. Together, these attacks are not only attacks on educational workers, they are attacks on education. Teachers and professors, not administrators, bureaucratic overseers and their abstract, generic metrics inspire (or do not inspire) the animating love to understand the real education cultivates

in students. In standing up for their autonomy and professional integrity, Ontario secondary school and elementary teachers are saying to the government: we did not choose this career so that we have summers off, but because we care deeply about the intellectual growth and well-being of students—leave us alone to do our jobs.

Austerity in the schools is not only an economic agenda, it is political. Its aim is to increase pressure on educators to accept the values of productivism that rule in the private sector economy. In order to impose those values— the production of the most graduates with those skills and those skills only that labour markets are willing to hire, for the least cost—rights to control our own labour have to be undermined. Since we are all facing a common problem, we need to start to work out common solutions. This work needs to go beyond informal picket line visits (important as those are). Both the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations and the Canadian Association of University Teachers have been strong critics of austerity as it negatively effects university education. We need to make the links to its negative effects on elementary and primary education. We need to build a public campaign to counteract managerialist propaganda by reminding the public that those who educate their children are the ones who best understand how the goals of education are best accomplished. And finally we need to build solidarity in action, coming together as educators in demonstrations and building connections when workplace struggles break out. The public wants their children to receive the best education they can receive. It is our job to provide that—but also to prove to parents that there is a contradiction between the austerity agenda and excellent education. In making that case, we also make the case for our own autonomy as educational workers to teach for the sake for freeing students' minds, as opposed to schooling them as mere inputs for labour markets.

THE PUBLIC VALUE OF PUBLIC SECTOR STRIKES: A SOLIDARITY MESSAGE FOR CUPE 3902 AND 3903

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The essence of an unjust society is to continually demand and take from those with the least the little that they have to support their lives and life-goals and add it to the money-value hoards of those have the power to restructure public life to serve their limitless appetites. So we see a recurrent pattern of struggle across history: Those with the least power are forced to fight the hardest just to maintain what little they have.

These two political and historical principles need to be kept in mind when thinking about the on going strikes by Teaching Assistants at York and the University of Toronto. At York, the major issues, according to a striker I have spoken with are:

- 1) “To Preserve the agreement they made with us linking tuition to funding for all members. This is “tuition indexation.” All we ask is that the university keep to this agreement as they did from 2000-2013. Since 2013, however, they have broken this agreement. We are not asking for anything more than for the university to keep its promise from 2000 and preserve education’s financial accessibility.
- 2) Include LGBTQ equity language in our agreements. It is necessary that all members of both our union and academic community have their identities recognized by the university and feel secure and comfortable in their learning and working environment at York university.
- 3) Gain a sufficient funding package for Master’s students (unit 3 generally) with which they can pay rent, not go hungry, and hopefully avoid debt. ”

At the University of Toronto, the issues are similarly focussed on securing a living salary for graduate assistants trying to work and study in the most expensive city in the country.

To people outside the university, strikes by graduate students might seem absurd– are they not just there to study and pay their academic dues (so to speak) before they too join the ranks of overpaid blowhards expounding at great breadth and depth about nothing?

Alas, were that only so. The reality is that graduate students perform essential work without which the university could not function and students could not learn at the level they ought to demand from a university education. There could be no essays in large classes without TA’s to mark them, no tutorials to provide more intimate intellectual spaces for more intense discussion of fundamental problems, no labs for science students to hone their experimental skills, no time for faculty to research and make the profoundly important contributions to human understanding that faculty are capable of making.

So what these strikes really come down to is an opposition at the level of value systems. On the one hand, the administration's opposition to the unions' demands is rooted in the austerity agenda the Wynne government has adopted. As Dave Bush and Doug Nesbitt explain: "Their approach has usually been different from the frontal assault of the Harris years. The Liberal government, especially under Wynne, has been adept at carrying out austerity by isolating potential struggles. Cuts and tough bargaining are directed against one sector of the public service, while others are temporarily left alone, to suffer under a slow strangulation of funds." The agenda is justified by appeal to the combined effects on the Ontario economy of the 2008 recession and cuts to federal transfer payments. What is left unsaid, as Bush and Nesbitt note, is that "the Liberals have repeatedly cut the corporate tax rate, have written off \$1.4 billion in owed corporate taxes, and wasted billions on privatized "P3" hospital construction."

They have also signalled repeatedly, in a series of documents which began with the Drummond Report, that funding for higher education is not going to rise faster than the inflation rate. The slated 1 % increases are in fact cuts if inflation is taken into account. Yet, university revenues continue to rise. How? By increasing tuition and ancillary fees for students. That is why tuition indexing is a major target for the York administration— it is a hard limit on how much money can be drained from students' pockets to fund administrative goals— goals which, across the university system are increasingly determined by unaccountable senior executives coordinating with private business interests to turn the university into a node in a circuit of money-value production.

But of course, I am being alarmist. If we listen to the government's own agency, the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (HEQAC), there is only good news for students, educators, and the general public. HEQAC was created by the provincial government with the ostensible task of studying the state of higher education in the province and to make policy recommendations with regard to how to improve "quality." Yet, if one examines the various documents released over the past three years, one factor becomes evident— the council never defines quality in other than quantitative terms decided by labour markets and economic growth. Its most recent report concludes that:

"Educational institutions ... ensure a vibrant and robust quality of life and economy. In every province there is a positive link between postsecondary education and labour market success, individual earnings, citizen engagement and contributions to the economy." (p.3) Note that every metric save the vague term "citizen engagement" links quality of individual life to *service to the economy*.

This reduction of educational quality to money quantity matters to the present struggle. If education is really about job training, and people are eventually getting jobs, then the educational system is working. No matter that students are graduating with ever larger debts, those who find work are able to pay them down to reasonable levels after three years. In Ontario, the average debt three years after graduation is "only" \$8800, according to the report.(p.15).

What is not asked by the report is why students in one of the richest parts of the world should graduate with any debt at all. In Nova Scotia, the administration, faculty union and students' union at Cape Breton University are currently discussing ways to effectively lobby the government to eliminate tuition fees. This alternative is unthinkable to the provincial body selected to monitor the quality of Ontario's universities, because – and this claim can be verified by reading their reports– their conclusions never contradict whatever policy for higher education the government is telegraphing.

Whatever the details of that policy, one fact about it is clear and explains why thousands of graduate assistants are on strike: the universities of Ontario will be made to fund more and more of their operations on the backs of student fees. Therefore, increases to TA salaries and reductions of tuition will have to be funded by cuts elsewhere in the budget. Since TA's are the least powerful group in the academic hierarchy, every effort will be made to split their ranks, set them against students, contract academic staff, and regular faculty.

These are not easy times to be on strike. These are not easy times to build the sort of militant, broad-based solidarity needed to make victory more likely. Nevertheless, these are important times for worker-students to be on strike in the university system because worker-students are crucial to the future direction of the institutions. Will universities continue to be not only accessible, but truly *educational institutions*? By "educational institutions" I mean institutions whose fundamental guiding purpose is the cultivation of intellect and imagination, in all the fields in which human beings are capable of exercising intellect and imagination, for the sake of exposing lacunae, contradictions, and unjustified limitations in existing social, political and scientific institutions, and putting the superior understanding cultivated to work improving the lives and life-conditions of everyone, now and into the open ended future.

Hence, the public significance of the strikes, the core issue that no one in the province can afford to ignore, concerns the future of *public* university education. Will collectively produced wealth be used to enable students to work and learn free from the burden of wondering how to pay the rent, or will it be siphoned off by tax cuts, leaving students to pay a higher bill for access to institutions whose priorities are less and less determined by academics and students and more by unaccountable owners of money-value wealth?

THE STRUCTURAL DISINTEGRATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argued that the consolidation of liberal democratic political institutions depended in part upon the formation of a literate public. “Public opinion” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the cultivated expression of the educated middle class, disseminated in quality newspapers and books, often composed of genuine argument and not simply ideological invective. It was democratic in so far as it could generate political pressure that ruling parties had to take into account, but it excluded, by and large, the rough and tumble spontaneity of the barroom and union hall- unless suitably domesticated and cleaned up.

If the problem in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was the managed respectability of “public opinion,” today the problem is the opposite. The Twitterverse of instant commentary is predictably lauded for having unleashed global democratic energies, but “democracy” is treated as a little more than a blank wall upon which everyone is invited to spray paint their tag- or #, as it were. But democracy is not a silence into which everyone may yell their opinion, it is a form of *rule* that has social conditions left unsatisfied by the garish inclusivity of #whatever. The free dissemination of opinion does nothing to contest the control over major social institutions and life-conditions generally that anchors the deeply undemocratic nature of social life today. Say what you like, but obey! Repressive tolerance, Marcuse once called it.

The short half life of ideas disseminated through social media generates intense competitive pressures to be heard. Reasoned argument, supporting evidence, and openness to rejoinder- the dialectic of social critique- is not attention garnering. *Outré*, abusive call outs and half intelligent cleverness is. And thus public opinion, rescued from its eighteenth and nineteenth capture by the polite elites, squanders the democratic potential of communication technology and devolves into a surface froth stirred up by insult and outrage, censorship and denunciation of censorship, while just below the surface, the structure of power remains unchanged.

That which is forgotten is that free speech is politically rather than personally valuable when it exposes the social causes of oppression, domination, violence, and environmental destruction. Exposing the causes, however, is not enough, which means that the political value of free speech is instrumental, not intrinsic. Unless free speech as social criticism feeds social movements the knowledge of causes they require to solve those problems, it is reduced to a protection for the abstract individual to assert whatever comes into his or her head, in whatever way he or she feels like asserting it. Invariably, the most obnoxious voices get heard, and political argument gets side tracked into debates about whether or not people have a right to insult one another. The real issues disappear.

A recent example is the banning of the Ukrainian pianist Valentina Lisitsa by the Toronto Symphony Orchestra because of purportedly “deeply offensive” comments she made about what she called government atrocities against the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population of the eastern part of the country. What are the issues here? Alleged atrocities, the causes of the Ukrainian civil war, the demands of the opponents of the Ukrainian government, the role of Western powers in installing a Ukrainian government servile to their interests, and the arrogance of those same Western powers to decide who is and is not Ukrainian. (Media outlets regularly called Lisitsa “Ukrainian-born” rather than

“Ukrainian.” This same tactic was adopted in describing the struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan against American invasion— the insurgents were never called Iraqi or Afghan, which implied that ethnicity or nationality depended upon whether one was willing to accept American domination or not.). All the heat shed no light on the political substance of Lisitsa’s comments. The entire debate swirled around the issue of whether or not the TSO was justified in banning her from performing.

Once the argument shifts from the political substance of the speech banned to the legitimacy of banning it, the real political value of free speech gets lost. Just as in the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, free speech becomes identified with the right to mock, to be obnoxious, to indulge in hyperbolic rhetorical condemnation of opponents. Free speech can and should protect both the form and content of speech— political argument need not be bloodless or never push satire beyond the bounds of boring good taste. At the same time, being abusive or insulting or making inflammatory comments without evidence or argument makes it too easy on one’s political opponents. To distract attention from the substantive claims being advanced, they object to— and generate debate around— the “hurtfulness” of the words. The ease with which this sort of distraction is created means that public opinion is never able to coalesce around demands for systemic change, but always dissolves into a kaleidoscope of opinions about the politics of giving offence.

Perhaps philosophy finds a useful role to play here. It is not beholden to grey statistics and is free to search for rhetorically pleasing arguments— but *arguments* its interventions must make. That is, philosophical interventions into the problems of the day contribute to the formation of a public sphere that is open to all— but not unconditionally. Having an opinion is sufficient grounds for the legitimacy of asserting it, but asserting it *as an argument* is a condition of its generating an obligation in others to respond to it with counter-arguments. What is lacking from the public sphere is not only (as conservatives are wont to argue), “civility,” but argument and counter-argument. Power that proves itself incapable of responding to argument with convincing counter-argument is illegitimate, and powers that appear illegitimate are ultimately rejected by people who think of themselves as free. While it might seem drawing-room dull, patient argument that avoids slurs (but not sarcasm) is radical, because only an argument can spell out the roots of problems in a way that forces the ruling powers to respond to the arguments, or risk losing legitimacy.

But spelling our arguments takes time and self-discipline, while time and self-discipline are incompatible with the power to immediately broadcast whatever comes into one’s head. The problem is not that this power has been diffused widely— that is potentially a good thing— but that it has been bound up with formats that, by their very nature, push public communication towards *ad hominem*. It is easy to call someone names in 140 characters, more difficult to explicate the socio-historical causes of the problem the target of the insult exemplifies. We are in the midst, perhaps, of the structural disintegration of the public sphere, the loss of the *publicity* of its content in favour of isolated self-reporting of how everyone *feels* about things. The motivation behind this self-reporting is to have one’s self acknowledged for one’s wit or passion, rather than a dedication to understanding and changing how the world works.

FEAR AND LOATHING IN OTTAWA

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That the Conservative Party is using the murder of two Canadian Armed Forces personnel and the Charlie Hebdo attacks as justification for their anti-terror bill (Bill C-51) is not surprising. That they will exploit the memory of these attacks to provoke mostly ungrounded fears of more in their re-election bid is not surprising. That they will invoke “jihadism” as the cause of these attacks rather than explain it for what it really is — nothing but a name signifying no unified ideological or political movement and the cause of nothing— is not surprising. When the politics that one supports regularly select for violent military attacks on countries and cultures when it serves purposes of domestic or geo-strategic convenience, one must suppress rational investigation of the complex of causal factors behind attacks like those named above. Too much analysis would uncover the fact that Western military policies in the Middle east are a contributing cause of the terrorist attacks they are supposed to be preventing.

Instead of rational investigation of causes and historically informed debate about solutions, we get what we have seen in France last month and in Canada last week— legalised assaults on the very “freedoms” the “terrorists” are supposed to hate. The so-called “trade-off” between security and freedom is nothing of the sort. Life-valuable security includes freedom as its highest goal, and is not the province of police surveillance and “preventative arrest,” but an achievement of life-coherent forms of social organization. Life-coherent forms of social organization, on the international plane, would require an end to neo-colonial domination of other cultures’ life-spaces and politics, a withdrawal of military forces and an end to cynical playing of different religious and ethical groups off against one another, and, most of all, the racist division of humanity into some lives that major global powers decide are worth protecting, and other lives that those same powers decide are expendable in the name of “security” and “sanctity of life.” On the national plane, life-coherent social organization requires the hard political and philosophical work of progressive social transformation. The priorities of that open ended struggle must be: an economics of sustainable life-requirement satisfaction, a politics of democratic self-governance that recognizes material limits to what it is rational for collectivities to choose, and cultures that are equal parts preservative and inventive of life-valuable creations, practices, and forms of human interaction and relationship.

But the hard-headed (and hearted) realist critics will rejoin: “the wolf is already at the door. The bomb is ticking. We have no time for philosophical platitudes and long term strategies. We do not have time to search out causes.” The search for causes, Alan Dershowitz once argued, is tantamount to support for the terrorists. (*Why Terrorism Works*, p.24)

But the great achievement of the Enlightenment liberal societies — the one’s whose freedoms the terrorists supposedly hate— was the courage to pursue the search for causes of injustice no matter how deeply into the halls of power that search led. Because the search for the causes of terrorism will lead back to Western imperial and neo-colonial policy since the end of World War One, people who are concerned about preventing further attacks—especially in the Middle East, where the overwhelming majority of terrorist violence is occurring— are warned off searching for causes by those who manage the

legacy of that policy. Instead, the “rational response” we are told, is to first become afraid of dying in attacks whose probability is near zero. Then, we should overcome that fear by giving up the very freedoms the fear-mongers in government call sacred. Then, we can all live happily shopping from home, safe in the knowledge that CSIS will be tracking our purchases.

If one examines the actual situation in wealthy liberal-capitalist societies, one soon discovers that no currently operating terrorist group poses any “existential threat” to them. In the United States, there are far more mass shootings than terrorist attacks, but not even the murder of dozens of children in Connecticut could motivate the US Congress to tighten gun laws. But a largely fictitious “terrorist” threat is sufficient to undermine two hundred years of constitutional government.

Thus, there is no evidence to support the claim that it is realism about threat avoidance that underlies talk of “the need to trade freedom for security.” Real realism, not the ideological sort, teaches that compromise, dialogue, admission of errors, and allowing people to find their own ways through the conflicts internal to their histories produces life-valuable security— i.e., security that does not need to be purchased at the cost of a totalitarian surveillance state. The proof of this claim is the history of Western society itself— it has struggled with racism, sexism, exploitation, intolerance, and bigotry of all sorts. All of these problems remain, but they have also been attenuated by internal struggles led by the oppressed groups themselves, and not foreign military powers arrogating to themselves the right to pick winners and losers.

So if it is not life-valuable security that is at issue in Bill C-51, what is? True realism exposes the real agenda: whenever and wherever a politician invokes a trade off between security and freedom, it is the security of the interests of his class and party that he has in mind, and it is the freedoms of everyone else— especially to oppose the interests of that class and party— that will be undermined.

In Canada, Bill C-51 reminds one of nothing so much as the famous “Law on Suspects” enacted by the Jacobins during The Terror. The law charged “Surveillance Committees established in accordance with the law of March 21st” with the responsibility “for drawing up lists of suspects, with issuing warrants of arrest against them, and with placing their papers under seal.” Bill C-51 allows our “Surveillance Committees,” i.e., CSIS and the RCMP, as well as local police forces, who, when they “believe on reasonable grounds that a terrorist activity may be carried out” can arrest any person they decide it is necessary to arrest, if it “is likely to prevent the carrying out of the terrorist activity.” (p.39). But how is it possible to prove a preventative measure actually prevented that which it claims to have prevented if the act was not already underway but only discussed? There is a great difference between word and deed. That is why it is permissible to think and write about that which it is impermissible to do. Was not the hue and cry about the Charlie Hebdo massacre all about the sanctity of freedom of thought and speech? Can we now expect Canadian editorial cartoonists who mock the excesses of Bill C-51 to be arrested? Maybe it is time for them to put their money where their *stylos* are and challenge the government to show its hand.

So far, the cartoonists have remained mostly silent but the bill has sparked widespread opposition amongst civil libertarians and extra-parliamentary critics. Sadly (but predictably, official politics being what it is— a nest of opportunism) it will likely pass. Already the Liberals have vowed to support the legislation, fearing being outflanked by the Tories on the racist fear-mongering front. The NDP have opposed it on the weakest possible terms— calling for more parliamentary-judicial oversight of CSIS and the RCMP but silent on the main problem—it is a totalitarian solution to a mostly non-existent threat.

If there is no parliamentary road to stop it, there is another tactic to resist after it has been passed. Let us assemble the abundant evidence that Western policy is the cause of the terrorism it claims to oppose. Canada has been a part of the various “coalitions of the willing” happy to destroy the life and life conditions of Middle Eastern peoples. Bill C-51 makes it a crime to support terrorist activity. I would argue that being a contributing cause to terrorist activity is a means of supporting it (on the principle that if causes are addressed, effects cease). No one in government can claim ignorance of this causal relationship: most are well-educated, have access to the relevant historical documents, as well as the media, in which attackers have tied the justification of their attacks to Western military violence in the Middle East.

So, let us struggle against the bill’s passage, but if we lose on that front then, once it has been passed, let us demand that senior members of the Conservative government be charged under it. Government supporters can either refute the charge in court, or accept the penalties for supporting terrorism under the act. I look forward to the trial.

STEPHEN HARPER: AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE

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Without positive, life-affirming values to coherently serve, our decaying “civilization” requires both spectacle and tragedy to perpetuate itself. While the nihilism of money-value rules, people are kept both entertained and terrified—neither are states conducive to thinking, understanding, or solving problems. In the past two days there have been two attacks on uniformed Canadian soldiers, the first in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec and yesterday’s more spectacular attack on the National War Memorial and then Parliament itself. In response, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a televised speech to the nation last night. I use the complete transcript as the basis for an imagined dialogue between him and myself.

My fellow Canadians, for the second time this week there has been a brutal and violent attack on our soil. Today our thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends of Cpl. Nathan Cirillo of the Argyll and Sunderland Highlanders.

There are violent and brutal attacks on individuals every day in this country that pass without any comment from you. Why? Is there a fundamental moral difference between everyday brutality and politicized brutality? If so, please explain what that difference is. If you are concerned with violence and brutality as such then you should hold a news conference every time there is a murder. Perhaps more to the point, if your concern is with violence and brutality, then you should, as Prime Minister, ensure that measures are taken, every time there is a violent and brutal attack, to understand why it happened, to grasp its specific and general causes, and then work out policies that address those causes so that violence and brutality end. Yet, consistently throughout your mandate, you have refused to address causes; in fact, you have denied that violence and brutality have structural causes. So beyond decrying violence and brutality and, worse, using it for political advantage, what are you doing to solve them as social problems?

Cpl. Cirillo was killed today, murdered in cold blood, as he provided a ceremonial honour guard at Canada’s National War Memorial, that sacred place that pays tribute to those who gave their lives so that we can live in a free, democratic and safe society. Likewise our thoughts and prayers remain also with the family and friends of Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent who was killed earlier this week by an ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and Levant] inspired terrorist.

What do you mean when you say “ISIL-inspired terrorist?” What evidence do you have to support this claim? Is there a manifesto somewhere? A note? More deeply, what sort of causal claim do you take yourself to be making? Was the inspiration direct, i.e., explicitly encouraged by someone known to be in ISIL? Or was this an act of someone who was going to act out violently for other (psycho-social) reasons and simply latched on to allegiance to ISIL as a convenient self-explanation? And then, does ramming a car into two soldiers really constitute “terrorism?” It constitutes murder, yes, but why is it “terrorism?” The word has become meaningless from overuse, so please explain what you mean by it.

Tonight we also pray for the speedy recovery of the others injured in these despicable attacks.

Fellow Canadians, we have also been reminded today of the compassionate and courageous nature of so many Canadians like those private citizens and first responders who came to provide aid to Corporal Cirillo as he fought for his life and, of course, the members of our security forces in the RCMP, the City of Ottawa Police and in Parliament who came quickly and at great risk to themselves to assist those of us who were close to the attack.

Fine, give thanks, and it is true that “first responders” can sometimes be compassionate and courageous. They can also be violent and racist, like the first responders in Saskatoon, whose preferred method of compassion for drunk First Nation’s men was to drop them at the edge of town, in minus thirty degree weather. My point is not to undermine the good work of some by the bad work of others, but rather to suggest that there is no innate goodness that drives people to become police, but rather that the nature of first responders is too often determined, in this country, by the colour of the person’s skin whom they have been called to deal with. Is the history of the RCMP a history of compassion towards people of the First Nations? Is every Ottawa police officer compassionate to the homeless, or to the impoverished street criminal? How often do they exercise the courage needed to not respond with violent force to the provocations of the enraged poor?

Fellow Canadians, in the days to come we will learn more about the terrorist and any accomplices he many have had. But this week’s events are a grim reminder that Canada is not immune to the types of terrorist attacks we have seen elsewhere around the world.

First, you have still not explained what you mean by “terrorist” or why this is being called a “terrorist attack” Was the explicit goal to achieve political aims by causing mass panic (one plausible definition of terrorism) or to kill Canadian soldiers in a more targeted way (which one might call political violence, but not terrorism). Beyond the question of definitions, and without intending any disrespect to the two soldiers killed, I must point out that quantity matters in politics. You cannot compare the deaths of two people in fairly random and not terribly sophisticated attacks using an automobile and a legal hunting weapon with the deaths of thousands on 9/11 or hundreds in the bombing of Madrid’s train station. Moreover, an unsympathetic listener might think that you are happy, in a sense, to now be able to include Canada under the umbrella of victim countries, the better to further your reactionary and authoritarian agenda. Even if you disagree with me, there is still the even bigger point: the real comparison we need to make is between singular deaths at home and millions of deaths in the 20th and 21st century in imperialist wars in which Canada has either been directly engaged or supported. I am not asserting, necessarily, that there is a precise causal relationship between imperialism and these two attacks, or, that even if there were, they would be legitimate. Progress comes by breaking out of revenge cycles, not giving in to them. But, to exploit these killings to create even more of a police state by calculated cultivation of fear that the attacks do not warrant is morally abominable- it treats these two dead citizens as tools to gain partisan advantage.

We are also reminded that attacks on our security personnel and on our institutions of governance are by their very nature attacks on our country, on our values, on our society, on us Canadians as a free and democratic people who embrace human dignity for all.

Some Canadians do in fact embrace the dignity of all, and our constitution asserts it, but our country’s history has actively denied it, for people here and abroad (and those from abroad who seek refuge here and are denied. The most stunning denial of human dignity, of course, is our colonial domination of the people of the First Nations. Have you forgotten Attawapiskat already?

But let there be no misunderstanding: we will not be intimidated. Canada will never be intimidated. In fact, this will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts, and those of our national security agencies, to take all necessary steps to identify and counter threats and keep Canada safe here at home. Just as it will lead us to strengthen our resolve and redouble our efforts to work with our allies around the world and fight against the terrorist organizations who brutalize those in other countries with the hope of bringing their savagery to our shores.

Why would anyone be any more intimidated by two isolated acts of violence than they are intimidated by any other random street crime? The brutality of terrorists is of course real, but we need, again, to understand social and historical context. ISIS(L) did not come from nowhere, they arose in the power vacuum of post-Saddam Iraq and the Syrian civil war. Again, the great unmentionable goes unmentioned- the unparalleled brutality of US wars of aggression throughout the Cold War and into the twenty-first century. Savagery is causing a tenfold spike in the cancer rates in Iraq by the use of depleted-uranium munitions.

They will have no safe haven.

Who will have no safe haven and how far do you intend to go to deny it (once you have explained who, exactly, you are talking about)? How many civilians will you be willing to kill in order to make good your challenge? Leadership is not macho tough talk. It requires the cultivation of understanding, not adolescent male posturing.

Well, today has been, without question, a difficult day. I have every confidence that Canadians will pull together with the kind of firm solidarity that has seen our country through many challenges. Together, we will remain vigilante against those at home or abroad who wish to harm us.

Let us hope that rather than herd solidarity people start to think about the reality of the global posture you have used your control over foreign policy to assume. If you maraud around the world talking tough and killing others alongside the leaders of global violence, you put your own citizens at risk of revenge attacks.

For now, Laureen, Ben and Rachel and I join all Canadians in praying for those touched by today's attack. May God bless them and keep our land glorious and free.

May God bless them after their loved one's have been killed? Did you really think about that concluding statement?

COLONIALISM AND RECONCILIATION

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There is an assumption that to acknowledge injustice is to rectify it. Too often in history, acknowledging injustice is an act of *noblesse oblige*— the powerful say sorry for their past sins, and then get back to business as usual. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a case in point. Yes, many of the perpetrators of the crimes of the Apartheid regime admitted their guilt, but for the most part, the distribution of resources, wealth, and property has not changed. Life for too many black South African's remains nasty, poor, brutish, and short.

Canada's own Truth and Reconciliation Commission has just completed its work and filed its report. It has elicited some surprising responses (Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada Beverley MacLachlan calling the residential school system "cultural genocide"), and some not so surprising results (the refusal of the Conservative government to acknowledge this truth). One wonders: By what other name could a systematic effort to destroy cultures and languages be called? That the residential school system was such a effort seems indisputable. To destroy a culture, the transmission of its traditions must be disrupted. To disrupt the transmission of its traditions, the children of the targeted culture must be prevented from learning them. If cultural genocide is the systematic attempt to end the transmission of culture from one generation to the next, and thus eliminate that culture from the face of the earth, then the residential school system was an attempt at cultural genocide.

Cultures become vulnerable when their members lose control over the lands and resources their lives depend upon. The problem with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was that it did not enable black South Africans to regain control over the resources they need to freely develop their lives. Indeed, as Makau Mutua argues, it was conceived as a part of a grand constitutional bargain which stepped back from effecting the fundamental re-division of lands and wealth that real redress of Apartheid crimes would have required. (*Human Rights: A Political and Cultural Critique*, p. 137)

Hence the ambivalent politics of truth and reconciliation: Yes, a public acknowledgement of the depth of the injustice committed against generations of First Nations people, from the kidnapping of Chief Donnacona by Jacques Cartier to the unsolved disappearances and murders of thousands of aboriginal women today is essential. But acknowledging the history of colonial oppression without concrete social, economic, and political changes to redress its destructive legacy is, for practical purposes, empty. Canada will emerge from the darkness of its colonial history when First Nations people gain control over the material resources and institutions of self-government they need to rebuild living, vital cultures, rooted in their own histories and freely developing towards the future.

It is not for me to say what these institutions will be or should look like. The struggle against oppression must always be led by the oppressed themselves. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was conceived by First Nations people, led by a First Nations judge, and allowed the survivors of residential schools to tell their story. However, the process was more than therapy. The final report makes dozens of recommendations which cut to the material heart of the oppression of First Nations people. Amongst its most transformative demands: long overdue settlement of existing land claims, nation to nation respect for treaty rights, massive investments in aboriginal education and health, the formal adoption by the government of Canada of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,

(which asserts the rights of autonomous development and self-government), formal repudiation of the European doctrine of *terra nullis*, (according to which the absence of white people in a region was interpreted to mean that the land was empty of human inhabitants), and revisions to history curriculums and citizenship education modules to more truthfully express the contributions of First Nations people to the history of Canada, and more fully explain their suffering at the hands of the Canadian state.

Making the demands is one thing. The harder part will be to generate sufficient political pressure to force the federal government to act. Many Canadians might be willing to acknowledge that crimes were committed. Far fewer will be willing to organize politically to demand a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the Canadian state and First Nations' peoples. Many will argue that the worst colonial crimes were committed long ago; that present generations of Canadians cannot be held responsible for the racist attitudes of others and the destructive practices of decades or centuries ago; that guilt is not genetically transmissible, and so that unless existing individuals have committed some offence against First Nations' people, they should not be held accountable for what was done before they were even born. Besides, many settlers did not come to Canada by choice, but were effectively deported from France and forced to help settle the colonies (like the *filles de roi*), or were themselves displaced by other English colonial projects (like the Irish).

As a metaphysical argument, it is true that guilt is not a heritable trait. It is also true, as a matter of historical fact, that not everyone who ended up as a settler did so by choice. At the same time, it is also true that a colonial project with such tenuous beginnings has created one of the most wealthy countries on earth. Much of that wealth has been created by the exploitation of natural resources which Canadians would not have had access to had the First Nations not been driven off of their lands. To the extent that one has benefitted from this wealth, to that extent one owes First Nations' people a debt. It is not necessary for one to be individually guilty of colonial violence to owe a share of this debt. Children being born right now have not contributed to the sovereign debt of Canada, yet future creditors will still hold them responsible for making payments once they have assumed leadership of the state. No one questions the legitimacy of that expectation.

My point here is not to reduce the value of land to its money value. That would be to repeat the first colonial crime— to deny that the land had any value to the First Nations because they did not exploit it for profit (“an acre of land ... in America, is .. not worth a penny, if all the profit an Indian received from it were to be valued” John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1690, p. 26). Rather, my point is to focus attention on the ways in which all Canadians have benefitted from a colonial history even if they had no direct role in the physical expropriation of First Nations' lands. When it comes to the real history of the place one lives, the fact that one's house or apartment is built on land that was once the home of a First Nation's community, abstract criticism or allowing the state to act as one's representative is not enough. One must actively contribute to the solution. And this contribution should *cost* something, so that there is active, and not simply rhetorical, payment of the debt.

One possibility would be to create a progressive surtax (the higher one's income, the more one pays) payable by all non-First Nations' individuals who file an income tax, that would generate funds in perpetuity that First Nations could then use to invest in their communities, schools, clinics, and whatever else they democratically decide to invest it in. In 2014, the Canadian government collected 130 billion dollars in personal income tax. Let us assume that the rate for the surtax is set so that, when the highs and the lows are averaged, it works out to a 1% across the board tax increase. That very minimal cost to Canadians would mean would mean a 1.3 billion dollar annual investment fund. The funds would be

transferred with no strings attached, to whatever body First Nations peoples decide should administer the fund, which body will distribute shares of the fund to different communities, by whatever formula the First Nations' work out for themselves.

This fund would be on top of and unrelated to whatever existing and future fiscal obligations the Canadian state has to First Nations communities. It would *not* be a gift from non-First Nations Canadians, it would be *repayment* of debt for wealth illegitimately appropriated and unshared over centuries. In this way, every Canadian who has benefited from the colonial origins of the country without having had to pay its costs, and not just the government of the day acting as our representatives, can take a concrete step to repaying the debt owed.

The past cannot be changed. The living must acknowledge it, but our responsibility is to building a new relationship with First Nations peoples over the open ended future of the country.

MAY DAY, 2015: FROM FERGUSON TO BALTIMORE TO ...

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Would it be an exaggeration to say that the American Civil War never really ended but has continued in a state of low-intensity struggle since 1865? Yes, the drive for Southern independence was crushed, and the African Americans held as slaves were emancipated, but they and their descendants have not been able to secure control over the resources they needed and need to live freely. From radical reconstruction, through the Civil Rights movement against Jim Crow laws, to the Black Panthers and the urban rebellions of the late 1960's, to the current upsurge of political action against police violence, black Americans have demonstrated an unsurpassed courage, creativity, and commitment to struggle against racist oppression as well as the structural inequalities of capitalism generally.

Where there is resistance, there is oppression. People do not fight for nothing. They fight to drink from the same fountains, sit anywhere they want on the bus, find housing or employment when they need it, and against being demonized, feared, and imprisoned (at 5 times the rate of white Americans). In these struggles they have often fought alone, but also together with whites (as in the union movement, which, although historically racist through the twentieth century, has also provided protection from the racism of non-union shops, and also helped improve the socio-economic conditions of African-American lives).

Undoubtedly, there have been spectacular struggles and structurally significant achievements, in particular in the legal-political sphere (the end to slavery, the end to segregation, voting rights, which in turn led to the election of black mayors, and in 2008, a black President). But life is far more than law and politics, important as those both may be for framing the context of every day life. Life is day to day activity and experience, and here the contradictions of American racism are perhaps sharpest.

The contradiction is classically illustrated in Spike Lee's film *Do The Right Thing*. In the midst of a riot against police violence, Sal's son denounces the rioters as violent "niggers." Spike Lee's character does not simply object to the offensive language, but tries to reason with the son, pointing out that many of his sports heroes are black, his favourite singers are black, most of his customers and some of his friends are black. So he cannot be the racist he presents himself as being and should stop mindlessly acting out his own ethnic stereotype—the loud mouthed and racist Italian working man.

It is a brilliant excavation of the cultural contradictions of American racism: "good blacks" in sports and entertainment are celebrated for their talent, "bad" blacks in the inner cities (or now, since the inner cities are being reclaimed by capital for high end real estate development, the urban periphery) are still regarded (as the Baltimore rioters are now being labelled) as "criminals" with "no excuse" to fight back against the police who have long targeted, harassed, and killed them; as violent gang members, drug dealers, and looters seeking to take advantage of another so-called tragic death.

Definitions are political: The breaking of Freddy Gray's spinal cord during an arrest is "a matter for investigation," a mystery; Apache helicopters, tear gas, rubber bullets, menacing phalanxes of police marching in disciplined lock-step, the National Guard, do not amount to armed state violence but "necessary steps" to "protect Baltimore" (but who is "Baltimore?" Not Freddy Gray, since he was killed, not protected). Throwing bricks and setting fires in response to the police *breaking Freddy*

Gray's spine: now that is “violent.” One asks: did the National Guard briefing sessions also refer to the Baltimore resisters as enemy forces as they did in Ferguson?

Urban rebellion against police violence and racism has been a constant of twentieth century American history. Ralph Ellison exposed its complex political dynamics in his masterful *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. What is in some sense shocking, politically, is that a set of structural problems, long-understood and long-resisted, has remained more or less unchanged for half a century. That is not to say that within the poverty and neglect there have not been extraordinary cultural achievements, remarkable local experiments in political and economic self-sufficiency (the ‘urban gardening’ movement was created in the ghettos of Los Angeles and Philadelphia), and, one is certain, sharing of the mundane joys of being alive. Rather, what I think is worth remarking upon is the almost incomprehensible power of capital to resist structural change, even in the midst of the most determined, wide-ranging, and varied struggles.

There is a parallel here with the state of what was once called the Third World. (The parallel is explored systematically in Manning Marable’s *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*— a conscious allusion to Andre Gunder Frank’s classic *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*). Looking beyond the structural economic parallels, the struggles against colonialism and racism in America trace an analogous arc: After a euphoric moment of liberation from colonial rule between the end of the Second World War and 1979 (when “Rhodesia” was liberated from British control and become Zimbabwe) the last forty years have seen little but economic and political collapse across the Global South. In America, there have been three moments of political triumph: Radical Reconstruction, when newly freed slaves, for a few years following the Civil War, gained access to land and looked poised to determine their own future; the complex period of struggle from the 1950’s to the 1960’s, in which the Civil Rights movement transformed into urban rebellion, a period in which the struggles of African Americans catalysed a decade of youth revolt around the world, and 2008, when (even though many had no illusions) Barack Obama’s election allowed many millions of African Americans to hope that finally the structural causes of their oppression would be addressed. But as in the Global South, a combination of social power, overt violence, co-optation and failures of leadership have conspired to thwart the realization of those hopes.

The conclusion that nothing seems capable of solving the structural causes of oppression: not liberal education, or civil disobedience, or armed rebellion, or social democracy, or twenty-first century socialism, or autarkic self-sufficiency, is sometimes dismissed as pessimism. I call it historical materialism, which is, after all, supposed to be a method which evaluates the real dynamics of struggle and draws political conclusions on the basis of an assessment of the evidence, not vacuous claims about how the future could in principle be different. To assert that the future can be different is to assert a politically empty logical formalism: the future is by definition distinct from the present, and all material things change, so it is the case that things will be different in the future. What the character of that world will be is the interesting political question, and all signs seem to point right now to the conclusion that the character of the (near) future world is going to be unstable, violent, radically unequal, governed by the imperative to maximise money-returns for those who control most of the world’s wealth, with any opposition threatened with immediate and violent suppression.

No doubt, there will be resistance, but resistance rapidly becomes exhausting. What the world is calling out for is a new, shared, universal political project to take the place of the now clearly dead “revolutionary road to socialism.” (If revolutions can break out across the Middle East and North Africa,

be led by impoverished young workers, if nearly a decade of austerity and twenty per cent unemployment rates in Europe have given rise to parliamentary parties of radical leftists but not in any way revitalized the traditional revolutionary left, *nothing will, and to believe that the hoped for second coming is just another crisis away is to leave historical materialism for the land of blind wishful thinking.*

Structural problems persist, and so resistance will persist. But the most important question, at this point, has no answer: What idea of a radically new society will prove capable of unifying struggles, North and South and across differences, such that we can begin to address causes rather than resist effects, with a plausible and detailed political-economic program, and not just general principles?

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The world needs mothers so that hope can be sustained even when history testifies to its groundlessness. Who but a mother could say, after her son was beheaded by ISIS militants in Syria, what Paula Kassig said: “Our hearts are battered, but they will mend. The world is broken, but it will be healed in the end. And good will prevail.” [No doubt there are other mothers, whose names we are never told, who say the same thing, looking at the broken body of their sons, killed by a weapon they never saw, in the name of a crime no one ever proved they committed, in the name of ‘our’ security]. Mothers, whoever they are and wherever they live, need these hopes so that their love does not destroy them when their children are killed or die too young.

The world needs fathers too, to demand justice and hope that death produces positive change. In the wake of the decision of the grand jury not to charge the officer responsible for the death of his son, Michael Brown Sr. argued that “I do not want my son’s death to be in vain. I want it to lead to incredible change, positive change. Change that makes the St. Louis region better for everyone.” [Think here too of the father from Gaza, who lost his three daughters in the 2009 invasion, who tried to sublimate his loss into peace, to no avail]. Everyone knows—mothers and fathers too— that a new wound will be opened as another heals, one heart will be rent asunder as another one mends, another black youth will be killed by police as the memory of a previous killing fades, another drone strike will reignite an anger that might otherwise have cooled, and good, while it might make inroads here or there, cannot prevail absolutely.

Everyone knows this truth just by virtue of being alive for a few years. We know that we cannot justify history from the standpoint of an imagined future in which all suffering has been redeemed. Unjust death cannot be redeemed because nothing can bring it back to life. One life saved cannot transform the badness of another life destroyed; the dead cannot inhabit the bodies of the living and consent retroactively to their having been made a sacrifice along the road to the final triumph of the good. Can any universe be good in which the living and blameless must be destroyed, chopped into pieces, in order for it to triumph? We must insist that the good come into being as a pure positivity and all at once, without requiring the destruction by evil means of anyone that already exists.

That seems to be what an ethical politics would require, but it is impossible. The good cannot prevail absolutely because “the rotten acts that human beings commit against each other are not just aberrations— they are an essential part of who we are.”(*Man in the Dark*, Paul Auster, p.46) Auster’s character understands that beneath the structural causes of violence lie more primal fears, protean ignorance, an unlimited capacity for inconsistency and hypocrisy, cowardice, desire, and laziness that no ideology or systematic change is capable of erasing without trace. History bears witness to the myriad ways in which we can set ourselves at odds with one another. In personal or political life, conflicts are easy to begin, difficult to control, and easy to begin again, even when all parties have claimed to have learned their lesson.

Hope and despair cannot be separated from each other. Each disaster rekindles the hope that it will be the last one. But it never is. As hurricanes develop over the Atlantic each fall, so cycles of violence

repeat themselves, even though we know, in principle, how to prevent them. Perhaps we fail because we rely too much on the social scientific hope that once we have addressed the external causes, the internal dispositions will atrophy and disappear.

Perhaps here we can locate a political function of literature— not didactic instruction on the politically correct line, not the construction of boring utopias, but excavation and laying bare of that in us which does not disappear with toppled institutions and systems, that which stands in the way of the realization of the good. Uncovering and provoking confrontation with the rottenness that lies deep within the human heart would at least undermine the self-serving belief that we can change the world *without* changing ourselves. To the extent that literature has a political task it is perhaps this: the construction of characters and narratives that evoke in us an understanding that the ambivalences, fears, and desires that are the inner causes of “the rotten acts” people commit exist *in everyone*, and not just “the enemy.” Perhaps through this confrontation we will learn to stop making exceptions in our own case, a practice which, if universalized, (and it is) entails that the inner causes of violence are never comprehensively addressed, and the outer changes our struggles achieve come to naught.

A possible principle for a political aesthetics: The beautiful is that which evokes the feeling of pain violence causes in such a way that we recognise ourselves in *both* the perpetrator and the victim. Finding beauty in the literary construction of violence is possible because literature is a series of experiments in possible modes of being in which horrendous acts can be explored without being committed to the crushing objectivity that history demands. Here we can explore the implications of action on the basis of maxims derived from the worst within ourselves without having to actually harm anyone. Literature does not offer proofs, (any art so unambiguous as to be capable of proving something would not be art, or art worth tarrying with, in any case). Rather, the aim is to provoke a struggle with ourselves to acknowledge our capacity for rottenness, in the multiple forms this rottenness can take, and to remind us that when attention is diverted from the vulnerable bodies of others, harm ensues.

PATTERN RECOGNITION

Originally Published, August 27th, 2014

Shout Louder God, I Couldn't Hear You

Maybe, apostate that I am, God is not talking to me. Either that or my hearing is not as good as I thought it was. I say this because God has been raising his voice in Missouri, but I had to find out about it from CNN. According to the Reverend Fred D. Robinson, "What God is Screaming" in Ferguson, MO is for America finally to face up to its history of structural racism. Now, one might ask a) why God would have thrown its lot in with a country premised upon the racial violence of the slave trade, and b) why it has taken so many instances of racist abuse for God to raise its voice? But who am I to question the Divine, I, who cannot even hear its voice. What I can hear and understand is the political point the Reverend is making: angry demonstrations are not accidents, or the fault of "a few troublemakers." They are predictable and legitimate responses to long-standing patterns of injustice.

Boy, Stephen Harper Dislikes Sociology

I am sure that Canada's most Reverend Stephen Harper thinks he hears the divine voice too, but so far as I can tell, in a whisper, because I cannot recall any instance of his claiming to have been publicly directed to a course of action by the Almighty. Too bad. The Eternal could have explained to Harper, as it is explaining, loudly, to Americans, that a) there are patterns in social life, and b) the existence of patterns is strong evidence that there are underlying structural causes at work. None of this sociology for our great helmsman, who boldly steers social science back through the twenty-first, twentieth, nineteenth, and eighteenth century to the fictional state of nature where there is no society, no social forces or powers, no social structures of any type, just "individuals," their choices, and their responsibility for them. Now the seventeenth century, it had a god who wore big boy pants, smiting the guilty and leaving the shouting about "causes" to the professors.

Yes, there is a specter haunting 24 Sussex Drive again, the specter of sociology. In 2013, remember, after an alleged plot to blow up a VIA rail train was "foiled," Harper warned Canadians that it was not the time to "commit sociology" by searching for underlying causes for terrorism. Last week, in response to the murder of 15 year old Tina Fontaine in Winnipeg, the Prime Minister was once again preaching against the dangers of looking for causes. There are no causes, there is no *social* injustice, there is no history of institutionalized racism against Canada's First Nations, there is no systematic threat to aboriginal women. Crime is "not a sociological phenomenon," according to Harper, in one of the most stunningly non-sensical claims I have ever heard a person with a post-graduate degree assert. Perhaps because that degree happens to be in economics he really does believe that choices arise ex nihilo from atomic selves pursuing their own interest.

That the individuals who commit crimes have made choices is a tautology. The interesting question is not : did person 'a' choose to commit the crime he committed (if there were no choice, there would have been no crime), but rather, why, if crimes are purely a function of the atomic choices of distinct individuals, are there patterns of criminal behaviour and victimization? Why are young black men in Missouri more at risk of being killed by the police than young white men in Connecticut? Why do rates of violent crime track poverty rates? Why do aboriginal women in Canada, who make up approximately

3 per cent of the Canadian population, make up approximately 10 % of homicide victims? If there is no structural explanation for that statistic, that would be an anomaly beyond belief. Clearly, the question that Canadian society has to ask itself is: what are the factors that explain why aboriginal women are in such dangerous proximity to men who choose to murder them?

Preaching, Practice

I do not know whether we need an inquiry to answer that question. But whether one favours an inquiry or not, every thinking person has to accept that there are social structures and dynamics that affect differently identified groups of people differently. If there are only individuals and choices, then holding individuals to account suffices. But suffices for what? A guilty verdict holds the individual accountable for what he did, but it does not explain why he did it. Guilty verdicts do not get us closer to understanding the causes of patterns of crime. Therefore, they do not get us closer to solving violence as a *social* problem.. There is no contradiction, (as Harper seems to think there is) between social scientific understanding and individual responsibility. In fact, the relationship is the opposite– it is only when we understand the real forces at work on individuals that responsibility becomes a meaningful category.

If all the justice system does is incarcerate particular individuals, it leaves the structures of social injustice in place. That failure to address causes guarantees work for itself as social conditions manufacture the same sorts of people who commit the same sorts of crimes. To be fair, though, it is unreasonable to expect that one social institution acting in isolation will be able solve deep-seated social problems. The Reverend Robinson is correct– Ferguson (or Winnipeg) is a test. But it is not God that asking the questions, it is the racially subaltern asking white Americans , and the people of the First Nations asking Canadians, if we will take responsibility for the history of domination we are parts of (even those of us who oppose it in theory and practice). It is amazing how quickly people who preach individual responsibility point in every other direction when it is they who are asked to accept responsibility for themselves.

Originally Published, October 30th , 2014

Stop Me If You Think That You've Heard This One Before

One of the first acts in the tragedy that has been the neo-liberal phase of capitalism was the financial crisis of New York City that culminated in 1975. As David Harvey explains, decades of de-industrialization and out-migration to the suburbs led to growing decay. This decay catalyzed the emergence of radical urban activists whose struggles were successful in securing public investment in essential services and stable, unionized municipal jobs. Then, as the stagflation crisis of the early seventies grew, the US federal government decided to pull its support for public investment in impoverished urban spaces. Understanding that crisis is a time for decisive action, a group of investment bankers (who just happened to hold a sizeable proportion of New York's debt) seized their opportunity to drive the city into (technical) bankruptcy. Bankruptcy then provided the legal pretext to strip the city of its public assets and undermine the power of the municipal unions. Harvey describes the outcome: "The bail-out that followed entailed the construction of new institutions that took over management of the city budget. They had first claim on city tax revenues The effect was to curb the aspirations of the city's powerful municipal unions, to implement wage freezes and cut backs in public employment and social provision (education, public health, transport services), and to impose user fees." (David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*, p. 45). In relatively short order, a poor but culturally and politically dynamic city, the city of Leroy Jones, Lou Reed, Martin Scorsese, and the most incredible subway graffiti the world has ever seen, became the leading financial centre and family friendly tourist paradise it is today.

If the bankruptcy of New York was the opening act, perhaps the curtain call for the neo-liberal phase of capitalism will be the bankruptcy of Detroit. We shall see. But at the moment, the script is being replayed, almost to the letter.

What is certain is that, as the court proceedings concluded in mid-October, the losers will be the people and public assets of the city of Detroit. In powerful metonymy, one of the final decisions the court made was to finalize the closure and demolition of the Joe Louis Arena and hand the lands to a private developer. Yes, yes, it is an arena mostly for white suburbanites to watch hockey and antediluvian rock bands, but its namesake, Joe Louis, was everything the 'new' Detroit is slated not to be: black and working class. (If you rotated the iconic sculpture of his fist that lines Jefferson Avenue in front of Hart Plaza 90 degrees, it would form a black power salute. Louis was not a political radical by any means, but his symbolic value goes beyond his own political commitments). Corrine Ball, a lawyer for the city, explained that the decision was a "turning moment for this area of Detroit." And indeed it was— it will be turned from a city owned asset with a unionized workforce into, first, a field of rubble, and later, no doubt, some generic condo-hotel monstrosity blocking working class Detroiters' access to the riverfront. Much has been made of the attempt to restore the city's waterfront, but from the Renaissance Center to whatever takes the place of Joe Louis, almost the entire west side of the river walk will be separated from the city by corporate castles and their security details.

Same Difference

Forgotten in the “rebirth” of Detroit, of course, are the hundreds of thousands of mostly black citizens whose perseverance is the only reason there is anything at all left on the North Shore of the Detroit River. Like the artists of Lower Manhattan in the 1980’s, they will soon be priced out of the downtown and probably (irony of ironies) driven to the (poorer) suburbs by service cutbacks (i.e., having their water cut off) and land-clearings (a new American enclosure movement). I am by no means romanticizing poverty and violence, but rather celebrating the tenacity, the ingenuity, the creativity, the love, and the struggles of the people of post-rebellion Detroit. They will not be counted amongst the “creative class” entrusted with the city’s latest transformation— from backwater of French colonialism, to the birthplace of the second industrial revolution, to the “arsenal of democracy,” to Motown, to Murder City USA, and now, no doubt, to tourist-friendly sports-entertainment-condominium-land (The developer dreamt-up name of the area where the new arena is being built —The District— epitomizes the ahistorical vacuity of contemporary urban “development”).

Whatever one could say in criticism of the social processes that led to the old Detroit, there was never any doubt about where one was when one was there. I am not talking about the “disaster tourists” who over the past decade have come to document the ruins, but rather simply being there for a drink or to see a local band or a late night gallery opening. Detroit had a feel to it, the feeling of uniqueness that is, paradoxically, shared by those spaces in cities across the world that make them worth visiting. The shared feeling of being in a unique space depends upon long-evolved local histories that are preserved— architecturally, gastronomically, linguistically, rhythmically— in an ongoing pace of life, i.e., organically, because people still live like that, and not artificially, so others can visit it. The feeling that arises in these spaces is one of being amidst a form of life that cannot be simulated, whose value is not reducible to a single abstract element but is an emergent property of the whole system of dynamic interaction in a space that has developed to satisfy local needs, as opposed to having been ‘developed’ with only land-values and tourists in mind.

The sameness of feeling oneself a momentary part of a system of evolved cultural uniqueness contrasts starkly with the absence of feeling when standing amidst the contrived differences of urban megaprojects which— like shoppers trying to buy individuality— pay the same star architects to build signature spaces which all end up looking the same. Stand in La Defence in Paris, the Canada Wharf district of London, or Bay and King in Toronto, shut your ears to the different languages and accents, and you would find yourself unable to say where exactly you are. But do the same experiment in Montmartre, Brixton, or Kensington Market and you will know you are in three very different spaces.

Yes, everything bears the stamp of the political-economic logic of the age, but that does not mean that the logic of life of local producers’ markets, local shops catering to immediate life-requirements, and local artists articulating the universal from the concrete local space they inhabit (and share) is something worth fighting to protect against the monotony of ‘urban renewal.’ What makes a city great is not its instrumentally-created signature pieces but its unintentionally-evolved historical differences— the one’s that are bull-dozed first to make way for “turning points.” When I think of what a democratic socialist city might feel like, I think of the neighbourhoods I love in the cities I have lived in and visited. Why? Concrete instantiations of community, solidarity, historically evolved identity; each is defined by the energy and struggles and creativity of the people who live(d) there; people who create(d) not for the sake of tourists but for its own sake, and to express themselves in ways that only people who make themselves part of the history of the neighbourhood can create. The living creation of worthwhile

urban spaces, (arguably, the greatest creation of the humans species – the cauldron from which the boldest experiments in living endlessly bubble forth) is the non-alienated labour that persists despite capitalism. This non-alienated labour is what struggles over urban space are really about.

TIME AND SPACE IN DIGITAL CULTURE

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In a recent essay in the *New York Time Books Review*, Leon Wieseltier brings to light the central problems the digitization of material cultural artefacts has caused: the emptying of social space of nodes of material cultural distribution, the negation of the time-structure required for the creation of insightful and meaningful work, the reduction of the qualitative evaluation of human reality to quantified analysis of statistical patterns, and the elimination of the capacity to appreciate the intrinsically valuable by the ubiquitous command for everything and everyone to be useful.

The essay begins with a lament for the changing streetscapes of America: “The streets of American cities are haunted by the ghosts of bookshops and record stores, which have been destroyed by the greatest thugs in the history of the culture industry.” (“Among the Disrupted,” January 24th-25th, 2015). That which is being lost is not so much once viable commercial enterprises, but more zones of contact between people drawn out of their homes because the acquisition of meaningful artefacts (books, records) depended upon social interaction in public space. Before the ebook and the .mp3, one had to venture forth from one’s private domicile into the streets in order to buy a book or a record. The significance of this act is only apparent now that is becoming more rare.

To stand in the midst of records or books arranged by someone else was to give oneself over to the chance encounter. One might have left home with a definite intention, but then found something completely new– or met someone completely new– simply in virtue of being in a public space whose contents exceeded– and showed themselves to exceed– one’s own initial intentions. The distribution of meaningful artefacts in material space exposed people to the interactive and interdependent logic of society. The social self develops and grows not by abstractly autonomous choices but by creative response to encounters with other subjects and objects. It is a logic of creative adjustment rather than (self) *creatio ex nihilo*.

Cyberspace abstracts from this crucial material dimension of encounters in social space-time. I am not denying that real connections can be forged in cyberspace, or that within it one cannot be moved by the unexpected. Like any technology (as Wieseltier acknowledges) the nature and implications of digital communication and distribution networks depend upon how they are used and the underlying social forces they serve. In a capitalist society, technologies are used in the final instance to increase the productivity of labour and facilitate the consumption of commodities. (And of course, record stores and bookshops also sold commodities). Nevertheless, I think there is an important difference in the way cyberspace encourages people to construct themselves. Cyberspace is seductive because it appears to abolish the material constraints on the constitution of self-identity, on choice, and (from the perspective of the marketer) the opacity of future consumer demand.

The last function is the ironic negation of the first two. With every keystroke, the virtual self hopes to define itself as someone unique, but is in fact becoming a function of pattern-determining algorithms which will increasingly *define the self*. The chance encounter is doubly negated: you become your surfing history and you allow the autocomplete to determine your future; you instrumentally select your ‘friends’ and instrumentally construct your personae, showing only what you think other people want to see and being offered for sale only what your past purchases reveal you to have wanted.

If one wants to insist that there is social being wherever there is communicative interaction, I will not disagree. But at best the on-line self is an abstraction of social being— the idea of communication without the embodiment that makes it ultimately meaningful and valuable. Caught up in the illusion of total control over self-presentation, we forget that ideas and representations must ultimately forge a material connection to be meaningful. Songs shared through speakers sound differently from songs beamed right into your ears through head phones. We read books alone, but they inform how we understand our lives, the histories from which they have derived, the goals they serve, the value of the relationships with other people we must try to forge. It is our social being and not simply our own private taste that literature cultivates; the erotic intensity of a concert can never be duplicated by watching it on line or listening alone on an Ipod. Cyberspace encourages a dissociation of the content of music and literature from the richer appreciation of the natural and social world from which that content has derived and whose value it must ultimately serve in order to be meaningful (‘liking’ something does not make it good.) The generic individualism of cyberspace, its constant enducements to “personalise” our shopping cart and then share its contents with our ‘friends’ collapses personality into consumption and instrumental self-presentation. It tries to separate the work of becoming a person from the risks, the uncertainties, and limitations of being a material being. Does it succeed?

If one is convinced that the good in life comes down to convenience and control, then one might be tempted to answer yes. But think of how much of what is good in life depends upon relinquishing control to the process or relationship in which one is involved. This point applies most of all to the process of thinking itself. While it might appear to be the case that thinking is the clearest expression of our autonomy, it is in fact an almost complete giving oneself over to form and content which one did not create. The meaning of words, the rules of grammar and logic are givens within which we work (even if we creatively work against them). More generally, the time of thought is determined by the labour of thought itself. But in cyberspace, as Wieseltier notes, “words cannot wait for thoughts.” Cyberspace is full of words, but words without thoughts are vacuous, and thoughts emerge and develop and become articulate at their own pace. Learning to think is above all learning to be patient and to follow along. “As the frequency of expression grows, the force of expression diminishes,” he observes.

But this argument matters only to people who are concerned with the quality of expression. What matters here is not how rapidly one responds to events, but how cogently one understands their meaning and implications. But Twitter and Instagram and Snapchat are about content and quantity, not quality. Nothing need be tempered by reflection, counter-argument, editing, or discriminating judgment. But the problem goes further. After all, diaries throughout the ages have contained saccharine poetry, and many a family photo album could use some discriminating judgement.

The real problem is epistemological— in this mass of words without thoughts the truth of ourselves is supposed to emerge. Big Money and Big Data collide, claiming to be able to decode the recesses of the soul in the unintentional patterns that emerge from intentional individual behaviour. The NSA and your bank are equally interested in these patterns— the truth is in the Data (as it used to be in genes, and before that in the character and influences, and before that, in the soul). But the contemporary passion for data exceeds the zeal even of the orthodox believer, who at least admitted that there are mysteries of the faith. Not so the analyst. There is no recess of the heart or mind so dark that the light of numbers cannot make it shine on the LCD screen. “There are metrics for phenomena that cannot be metrically measured. Numerical values are assigned to things that cannot be captured by numbers. Economic concepts go rampaging through noneconomic realms. Economists are our experts on happiness.” And why not, if happiness is nothing more than a mechanical function of consumer desire-satisfaction?

But as anyone who has felt the creeping boredom with the new purchase can tell you, happiness is not a function of shopping. But this does not mean— as Wieseltier argues, that happiness is not a material goal for human beings. The depth problem that Wieseltier exposes is not the limits of materialism, but rather its perversion by its standard psychological and metaphysical meanings: selfish consumerism on the one hand and mechanical reductionism on the other. According to the first, happiness is produced by the unlimited acquisition and ownership of commodities, and according to the second, the real is coextensive with the measurable elements and forces that determine physical nature.

But these are too narrow versions of materialism. Unless we believe in ghosts and spirits, there is only this universe of matter and energy that individuals inhabit for a short time. But we inhabit this universe not as machine functions, but as living social self-conscious agents who interpret the world we help build according to values we ultimately create. Our symbols, our values, are every bit as materially real as electrons and nucleic acids— they are the purposes by which we determine our goals and act in the world; and it is through our collective acting in the world that social life is created, maintained, and changed. That which is materially real is that which has causal efficacy, and it is certain that in human life, values have causal efficacy (people do something because they decide it is good, they desire someone because they are beautiful, and not because their genes mechanically determine them to survive and pass on their “genetic material”). Values and goals are the material substance of human social life. Life goes wrong when they serve the reproduction of a system that reduces its living members to mere functions of its own reproduction.

That is the problem we face. It is a problem that is exacerbated by a mathematical idealism that wants to reduce the truth of people to functions in an algorithm designed to predict (and steer) consumer behaviour. Against the multi-dimensional truth of the material universe— physical, chemical, biological, social, political, emotional, aesthetic, each layer nested in and emergent from the previous— we are left with mathematical moonscape— Wieseltier’s metrics for things whose value cannot be measured quantitatively.

The antidote to this reign of abstraction is true thinking about meaning and value, and true thinking about meaning and value can only be cultivated through humanistic and philosophical study. But the humanities and philosophy are being destroyed faster than record stores and bookshops by the relentless mantra that only that which serves the money-value system is valuable. Against the reign of money and utility, against a society which believes that the processing of information is “the highest aim to which the human spirit may aspire,” Wieseltier defends the “defiantly nonutilitarian character,” of the humanities and philosophy, the way they uniquely enable individuals to learn that there is more to things than “how [they] work, and to “develop their power of discernment and judgement, their competence in matters of truth and goodness and beauty.” He errs only in not seeing how truth and goodness and beauty, while not measureable properties of things, are essential to the material reality of *human* life. An immortal, spiritual being would neither make art nor philosophise, because it would exist outside the matrices of finitude that pose the challenges to living that art and philosophy try to meet.

THE DISPENSABLE NATION

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Foucault famously maintained that power and knowledge form an integral structure whose function is to produce compliant, docile subjects. Science is not a neutral investigation of facts and forces but a partisan in the struggle to produce people who demand only what the established society can provide. Social institutions are the materialised form of power through which this knowledge is disseminated. However influential and illuminating the idea of power/knowledge complexes has been to the explanation of social reproduction, his account is one-sided. There are indeed complexes of power/knowledge, but power is also always integrated with structures of self-delusion that blind those in power, and those who support them, to the real implications of their actions.

Let us take the on-going horror show (there seems no better word to describe it) across the Middle East and North Africa as an example. The full historical explanation of the greatest social disaster since the Second World War would have to go back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One, but let us confine ourselves to the more proximate causes of the current struggles in the late Cold War. To orient ourselves, let us begin with then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's now (in)famous claim that America was the "indispensable nation." This claim is a perfect example of the power/self-delusion complex that the ruling value system requires to convince its executors of the justice of the deadly implications of their policies.

Speaking on the Today Show in 1998 about the possible need for a ground invasion of Iraq to ensure that UN weapons inspectors had access to suspected nuclear and chemical weapons sites, she said:

"Let me say that we are doing everything possible so that American men and women in uniform do not have to go out there again. It is the threat of the use of force and our line-up there that is going to put force behind the diplomacy. But if we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us. I know that the American men and women in uniform are always prepared to sacrifice for freedom, democracy and the American way of life."

The First Gulf War, recall, had removed the Iraqi army from Kuwait, but did not topple Hussein. It did, however, unleash the forces that have culminated today in the near complete destruction of Iraqi society. All told, the sanctions regime, the First Gulf War, and the ten years of intermittent bombing and more sanctions killed an estimated one million people. The Second Gulf War and ensuing civil war have killed, to date, over 100 000 people. Not only has no American or American ally been tried for a war crime (proving that faith in international law is a paradigm case of the power/self-delusion complex), no one in a position of power in the West has learned the obvious lesson— attempts to remake ancient societies from the outside, to turn millions of lives into instruments of imperialist policy, destroys established social stability without creating the forces needed to reconstitute stability on a higher level of social development, social peace, and democratic self-organization.

With 25 years of evidence now available for public scrutiny, no one can any longer deny that American policy in the Middle East in the quarter century from 1990-2015 has been an absolute failure, on any metric one chooses. One can choose the ideological metrics of the Americans themselves— the Middle

East is not democratic and is more violent and hostile to American interests than ever. Or one can choose the life-value metrics that alone should decide the value of any political policy. On every count: public health care, social stability, education, the rights of women, democratic self-governance, control over natural resources and social wealth and their use for supporting social life-development systems, the situation today is worse everywhere in the Middle East and North Africa touched by the two Gulf Wars and then the “War on Terror.” In every theatre in which it has been fought, this war on the life-conditions of Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa has brought nothing but death and destruction of the social life fabric. Not a single country invaded for the sake of ‘democracy’ is on any trajectory toward democratic peace in any foreseeable time frame.

On the contrary, the situation continues to get worse. With the re-election of Netanyahu in Israel and the Saudi bombing (and possible ground invasion) of Yemen, the forces of anti-human repression are in the ascendant. The failure of the Arab Spring to lead to the democratic transformation of the Arab world (largely due to American and Saudi intervention) has once again allowed the anti-imperialist struggle to be taken up by the most reactionary and brutal religio-political movements in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia.

We have seen this story play out before. More than thirty years before ISIS, the Iranian people rebelled against the US-backed Shah in 1979. The ensuing revolution brought to power the Ayatollah Khomeini, but what has been largely forgotten is that there was a struggle within the revolutionary movement between a secular-left workers’ movement and the ultimately victorious Islamists (the silenced history is brilliantly told in Assef Bayat’s *Workers and Revolution in Iran*, Zed Books, 1987).

It is a common refrain amongst even progressive commentators in the West that the Arab world lacks the internal democratic-scientific-secular impetus towards social development that drove (in their view) the history of contemporary liberal-democratic-capitalism. What they ignore is both the role of imperialist plunder in the development of Western society, and the role the West played in undermining the emergence of analogous developmental forces in the Arab world during the Cold War. From the end of the Second World War until the end of the 1960’s, there was a secular left-nationalist movement in the Middle East that managed to cross the sectarian divides that are the front lines of the shockingly violent civil wars aging across the region today. What is happening today is not the result of “backward” peoples replaying ancient grievances; it is the continuation of the struggle against Western imperialism, in the absence of secular principles and movements that can connect across ethnic and religious divisions.

Those principles have enjoyed success in the region; however, they were demonized and attacked during the Cold War, destroyed by American proxies, including the Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussein, and various mujahadeen groups in Afghanistan, elements of which went on to form Al Qaeda and the Taliban. .

These are the three most important depth historical causes of the current catastrophe. In 1949 Mohammed Mossadeq formed the National Front Party; in 1951 he was appointed Prime Minister. When his plans to nationalize the oil resources of Iran alarmed Britain and the United States, the MI6 and the CIA engineered a 1953 coup, which removed Mossadeq and left the Shah in power, whose brutality ignited the 1979 Revolution.

The ascension to power of Saddam Hussein takes a similar trajectory to that of the Shah. His coup was supported by the US because he was willing to target and liquidate left-wing members of the military

who advocated the nationalization of Iraq's oil wealth. The story of Afghanistan is better known. The CIA backed any group (including Osama bin Laden) willing to fight the Soviets and their Afghan proxies. The end result of that strategy was, as Chalmers Johnson put it, "blowback" in the form of the 9/11 attacks.

Without a vital left current, Islamic forces of varying ideological stripes have filled the void with sectarianism rather than solidarity, military and paramilitary life destruction rather than political and social life-development. While it might seem preposterous to hope for the development of indigenous left-secular political movements capable of confronting both Western imperialism and Arab ruling classes (including their religious-ideological support systems), it is clear that the development of some such movement—crossing Sunni-Shi'a and national divides—is the only hope for the region. A short four years ago, just such a movement was emerging as millions of mostly poor youth rose up against the legacy of Cold War autocracy and empty religious rhetoric. In that crucible the indispensable nation made its choice—for the geriatric generals of Egypt, for murderous instability everywhere else, deluding itself and its embarrassing allies like Stephen Harper that killing just a few more of the wrong sort of people would solve the problem that more than a million dead Arab bodies has failed to solve. This mountain of bodies is the material reality of the so-called "moral clarity" which Harper believes attaches to his Middle East policy.

Until this power/self-delusion complex is deconstructed and the policies of the indispensable nation dispensed with, the people of the Middle east will enjoy no respite for the evils our "civilization" rains upon them.

THE RUSE OF UNREASON

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The Theatre of the Politically Absurd

Hegel believed that historical developments were guided by an emergent rationality operating behind the backs and beneath the conscious awareness of individual agents. Slowly, violently sometimes, but inexorably, the world was evolving towards a constitutional society whose institutions confirmed, rather than denied, subjective freedom.

That world has come, that world has gone, and without creating the conditions for the communist society that Marx claimed would fulfill liberalism's formalistic promises. In an age in which one form of social life has proven itself exhausted, but with no systematic alternative proven practically possible, a ruse of unreason seems to have taken over from Hegel's ruse of reason.

The ruse of unreason operates on two levels, individual and political. Individually, it means to act without reflection, to respond to every scenario from a script rather than thinking it through with unique attention. 'The prophet must be avenged,' 'civilization must be protected,' 'the nation must remain unified,' 'structural causes must be addressed...' This reduction of individual thought to slogan recitation produces a politics of stasis, and stasis when change is needed is the political expression of the ruse of unreason. Each new crisis produces exactly the same responses from exactly the same cast of characters with exactly the same result— the stage is prepared for a repeat performance because a globally convincing answer to the question: "What is to be done?" is missing.

Hegel saw social contradictions as learning opportunities that made novel responses to old challenges possible. Marx had essentially the same idea. The capacity to learn is one of the hallmarks of humanity— it allows for real progress in history to be made. Real progress means that social institutions cease to serve the interest of one class exclusively and instead enable all to cooperate (which is different from mindless agreement). Cooperation means allowing opposed perspectives to overcome their differences through creative synthesis rather than all-or-nothing destructive struggles. But that kind of progress presupposes openness to doing things differently when the old ways prove inefficacious.

The young Hegel argued that philosophy is needed to overcome fixed opposition— its role is thus revolutionary, to expedite a new synthesis when historical conditions proved one is necessary. If he is correct, then philosophy is needed today. The ruse of reason would ensure that somehow the arguments needed to move our world past its defining problems— neo-colonial violence, terrorist forms of resistance, unsustainable exploitation of natural resources and human labour— would be heard and heeded.

The ruse of unreason is a repetition-compulsion disorder expressed in a global incapacity to move beyond the failed forms of social, political, and economic life. Instead of creative synthesis, every side holds fast to its one-sided truth and insists that the problem lies on the other side. In their struggle to destroy each other they only end up undermining the values they claim to protect. Everyone suffers except the police, who end up as the heroes of liberal democracy.

Irony, but not funny.

Is That a Dog I Hear Barking?

No. There is no question here of cynical disengagement from the world. One hopes for a different outcome after each outrage, the unleashing of some kind of movement capable of creating the conditions for understanding the social conditions of peace, multicultural vitality, and individually meaningful forms of life. But they do not appear. Only more scripted responses (which is not a condemnation of the individuals involved as lacking intellect or creativity, but simply a recognition that there is nothing new to say, because the problems remain the same, and convincing solutions are lacking). Alternatives exist on paper, but nowhere in effective political reality. And no one knows how to produce the missing political efficacy, so they simply repeat what they said the last time ...

... and the repetition disorder sets in. One group defends (the drone strike, the shooting, the hostage taking); the opposed group condemns the same, and system critics outside the zones of institutional power and direct combat try to provide the nuanced analysis and historical perspective necessary to understand the structural causes of terrible events. But— and this is another manifestation of the ruse of unreason— no sooner is one aspect of the truth disclosed by one set of system critics than another set points out the one-sidedness of the first. Again however, no synthesis of criticism is achieved, but the potential whole disintegrates before it can form into irreconcilable camps that forget who the real enemies and what the real goals of social criticism should be.

The end result (which is just the beginning of the next act of the same drama) is that the instituted powers recite their platitudes, link arms at the front of the march, and swear by ‘liberty’ while all the while continuing to extirpate it in the name of security. At the same time— and here again the ruse of unreason rules— the legitimate demand from the colonised targets of this state violence that the right to life of everyone be respected is backed up by deranged assaults on chocolate and laughter. Such self-undermining politics can only have one effect— more closely binding potential allies to hardened ideological conceptions of “Western values” that legitimate intensified authoritarianism and military violence.

BOMBS DO NOT RAISE THE DEAD

Originally published, October 7th, 2014

Poets: More Adjectives of Outrage Please

The ideological struggle to build support for the bombing campaign against ISIS is foundering not only against the rock of The Pentagon's open admission of its uselessness, but also against the hard place of an exhaustion of adjectives of outrage that can clearly distinguish ISIS from last year's devil— Basher al-Assad, against whom ISIS was/is fighting.

Compare:

In announcing Canada's commitment to the courageous bombing of an army with no airforce, Stephen Harper castigates ISIS for "a campaign of unspeakable atrocities against the most innocent of people." Last year, as signatory to a joint declaration against Assad he condemned "in the strongest terms the horrific chemical weapons attack."

British PM David Cameron calls ISIS: "psychopathic, murderous, brutal people who will stop at nothing" and Assad's use of chemical weapons the cause of "appalling scenes of death and suffering."

Obama denounced ISIS as "the cancer of violent extremism" but warned after the chemical weapons attack that "when "dictators commit atrocities, they depend upon the world to look the other way until those horrifying pictures fade from memory."

US Secretary of State John Kerry argued that "ISIL and the wickedness it represents must be destroyed, and those responsible for this heinous, vicious atrocity will be held accountable," while a year earlier excoriated Assad for using "the world's most heinous weapons against the world's most vulnerable people." Joe Biden reiterated for good measure that the use of chemical weapons is "heinous." And John Baird, the Canadian Foreign Minister, in a speech at the United Nations denounced Assad's "brutal and repressive regime" for continuing to "slaughter ... its own people," while noting that "the United Nations continues to fail to impose binding sanctions that would stem the crimson tide of this bloody assault. Until the last syllable of recorded time, the world will remember and history will judge Member States that are allowing the atrocities to continue." Perhaps he has spent the last year trying to understand what he meant by "the last syllable of recorded time," (surely Member States, or those representatives with at least a high school education, know that time is not measured in syllables) because he has certainly not spent it thinking about the contradiction between that speech and the government in which he serves now offering to seek the permission of this same "brutal and repressive regime" to bomb ISIS.

How are spectators in North America and Europe supposed to pick sides and lay their bets if both sides are denounced with essentially the same epithets? Last year, the overwhelming moral imperative was to overthrow the Assad regime. Western leaders were more or less silent about the fact that ISIS was one of the few effective military forces in the Syrian opposition. What changed? ISIS moved into the Sunni heartland of Iraq, overrunning Kurdish forces and the Iraqi Army alike, looting American military

equipment, and then beheading two American hostages. As horrific as beheading hostages is, in the context of the unending mass killings that have characterized the Middle East for decades— primarily by America, its allies, and its proxies— they can hardly be a justifiable pretext for a bombing campaign that will only add to the body count. Moreover, as George Monbiot argues in a superb essay, the “humanitarian” case for bombing ISIS is at the same time a case for bombing almost every regime in the Middle East. If beheading is your preferred tipping point (as it seems to have been for the United States), then first in the crosshairs should be its stalwart ally Saudia Arabia, which last year alone beheaded 59 people for such scientific, twenty-first century crimes as “sorcery.”

Twenty Three Years of Death From Above

Of course, what is currently going on in the Middle East, and especially Iraq, is not humanitarian intervention. The idea “humanitarian” implies care for human life and that which protects and enables it. Since 1991, almost without pause, the United States and its allies have been systematically killing Iraqis, destroying the infrastructure their lives depend upon, and creating a political vacuum into which murderous sectarian groups can operate and gain support. By any objective measure— and they exist— the United States and its allies are the only real machine of death on the planet, and have been since the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. Bogey man after bogey man has emerged to justify the endless killing: Saddam Hussein, Moqtadar al-Sadr, now ISIS. Through it all, anti-war movements have come, burned out, and gone, but the UN and the International Criminal Court have remained— silent and useless. If the principle of Right to Protect (R2P in its Twitter and text friendly form- go ahead, hashtag it and save the world) is now a guiding principle of international law, it should mandate global intervention against the United States and its “partners,” including the disgrace of “democratic government” that currently rules my home, the dreadful Stephen Harper and his abhorrence of understanding the causes of social events. Since it is the world’s wealthiest countries destabilizing, destroying, and killing the world’s poorest people— the overwhelming majority of which have done nothing that could be construed as a threat to the West, who wish to either be left alone or emulate what they (wrongly) think its values to be— then they are the one’s, clearly, who need protection. What they need is not bombs— which sever heads, rather than restore them to those who wrongly an unjustifiably lost theirs— is a coherent plan, drawn up by the people who live in and understand the region, that will force the warring sects to sit down and work out mutually acceptable rapprochments. Can’t happen? Why not? Europe solved 300 hundred years of almost unending war (The Thirty Years’ War to World War Two) without intervention from the Middle East.

What more confirmation is needed that “Western civilization” has hit a moral, spiritual, political, social, and cultural dead end then Leon Panetta’s claim that it will take the world’s richest and most powerful armies 30 years to defeat ISIS? Militarily, this claim is nonsense. ISIS could be wiped out in a matter of twenty five minutes (as long as it takes for the ICBM’s to arc from North Dakota to Syria and Iraq). What Panetta is saying, without saying it out loud, is that if America and its allies are not engaged constantly in war, people will begin to ask questions (as they did in Occupy, as they are doing in Hong Kong) about what exactly justifies this way of life of alienation and exploitation for the many and inhuman luxury for the few? And the answer, which they fear, is: “nothing.” The only remaining *raison d’etre* of the United States is to prolong military conflicts (ruining millions of others’ lives in the process) to distract people from this world-historical fact: the enlightenment values of individual freedom, formal and substantive equality, reasoned political discourse, an end to government by superstitious idiocy, diversity, cosmopolitanism, anti-racism (read L’Abée Raynal’s *Histoire Politique et Philosophique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans des Deux Indes*, if you do not believe me), women’s equality (Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe des Gouges); those principles that

(imperfectly) animated the French and American Revolutions, are dead. Once again, irrational fear of “terrorists” and political exhaustion will prevent an effective mobilization against this fanatical desire to kill Arabs and keep their societies destabilized. As in Egypt, where the West abandoned pro-democracy activists in favour of the generals, so too in Syria, the west will opt to sustain chaos in which tens of thousands more people will die, all the while pretending to be on the side of the “Syrian people.”

We live in prisons or we live in shopping malls. And the meaninglessness of that life must not be felt, so governments continue to amuse us with the spectacle of drone attacks and fighter jets, whose exhaust fumes cloud the soul-killing emptiness which is the twenty-first century.

SHIPS: COMING FULL CIRCLE

Originally Published on April 22nd, 2015

The ships used to ply the waters in the other direction, to your shores, to corral and steal the flesh that would be put to work on ours, generating the capital that would be exported back to build the Europe that your boats are now prevented from reaching. Your bodies were once of use— as slaves— but there's no work now, so the sign says: "Closed, No Help Wanted." Stay where you are, in the ruins of your civilizations that we destroyed with our insatiable greed for your bodies, a greed that has now turned into a denial that you are bodies, suffering from a poverty and violence that did not have to be but is now so intense and pervasive that no one can prevent its ravages destroying the lives of those who remain behind. The problem cannot be solved today; tomorrow quickly becomes a new today, and the same argument applies. A new boat will fill, more bodies will wash ashore.

The injustice of individual lifetime— suffer in the present, the solution is always put off until tomorrow, which becomes another today of suffering.

But in the tale that is told it is not the poverty that we have caused from which you suffer but — as usual— the individual bogeyman. Not this time the communist, not this time the terrorist, but now the "human smuggler." He must be powerful indeed to reach back over three hundred years to organize the colonisation of Africa from which he now profits, so large as to cast in shadows the actual historical causes: the slave trade, colonialist theft of resources, ethnic-tribal divide and conquer tactics, land grabs, coups against left-nationalist post-colonial regimes, structural adjustment programs, still rising external debt, low commodity prices, the corrupt politics that poverty breeds. These causes point North, not sideways. Power does not tolerate having a mirror held up its face, so it distracts attention from systems to persons.

Your dead bodies are the strange fruit of my civilization and the impotence of its philosophy (of whose history I am part), a philosophy which Fanon once said contained the solution to the problems of all humanity. A generous and penetrating intellect, but one really has to wonder today whether he was too kind. Individuals proclaim "no one is illegal," but let us not kid ourselves: it is a cry without effect, there is not one safe shore for the 'tired, the sick, the huddled masses.' The gospel of human rights is preached, the dark-skinned speakers of odd languages have it literally bombed into them, but don't think that the right to life means those who have taken your life-requirements for themselves are going to help you live. Don't be so childishly literal. The cosmopolitan hospitality of Europe will mean, for those of you lucky enough to survive, a prison camp.

So what is left? Fascism, for the re-appearance of which you are also sometimes blamed? "We have destroyed your cultures and your societies, but that is not our problem. We're not racists, it is just that there is no room here. See, we have our own unemployed, and you have to take of your own, no?"

On the last point, maybe there is room for agreement. Maybe you need to say: "We agree, one does have to take care of one's own, so give us back what you have taken, and then go away, and with the resources you have been stealing for three centuries we will take care of ourselves, happily, and in peace.

Amidst the terror and desperation, there was one hopeful sign: the outstretched hand of a fisher from Rhodes reaching out to rescue one of you from the rocks, a hand which probably has little else to share (because those who have stolen from you steal from their own too; their greed knows no limits). But when the small person is confronted directly with threats to life it is generally the need to help his fellow human that determines his actions, not the modesty of his own resources. The rich and the powerful pontificate as they destroy. The small people are the ones who reach out their hands to their fellow human beings.

That is all that matters— the outstretched hand when it is needed, all else is just talk unless it enables more hands to reach and to slap down the other hands shoveling every scrap of earth air and water into their insatiable guts. To leave enough and as good for others, as one of our philosophers once said.

ORDINARY INHUMANITY

Originally Published, November 10th, 2014

Agape in Theory, not in Official Practice

“Arnold Abbott handed out four plates of food to homeless people in a South Florida park. Then police stopped the 90-year-old from serving up another bite.

“An officer said, ‘Drop that plate right now — like I had a weapon,’” Abbott said.

The officer was enforcing a law passed in Ft. Lauderdale against feeding the homeless.

“Just because of media attention we don’t stop enforcing the law. We enforce the laws here in Fort Lauderdale,” said Mayor Jack Seiler.”

A working definition of Totalitarianism: The promulgation and enforcing of laws conceived of in opposition to the requirements of the embodied human being, and the justification of the consequent suffering as good for the victim who suffers.

His Worship continues: “I’m not satisfied with having a cycle of homeless in the city of Fort Lauderdale,” Seiler said. “Providing them with a meal and keeping them in that cycle on the street is not productive.”

A working definition of productivity: To be useful as an exploited body to capitalist industry.

Hence, Totalitarian Productivism= a unified body of violently enforced social policy and law which restricts legitimate human activity to those forms of exertion that produce money for private accumulation by the owners of capital.

You can serve, or you can starve, the mayor is saying, giving voice to the real secret of capitalist society, while thinking he is an independent thinker uttering a profound moral truth.

Starting From the Body, An Opening Towards Freedom

One imagines the well-fed men of Fort Lauderdale, standing on the steps of a well-financed church, cigars protruding from their over-tanned orange faces, basking in another warm Sunday afternoon, congratulating the mayor for his tough-mindedness.

Perhaps they even listened to a sermon on how the Gospels are to guide Christian life by disclosing some abstract duty towards God. But there are no abstract duties to God (What exactly do people think could be owed an omnipotence)? The relevant duties are concrete, and owed to each other, on earth:

“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. Then the just will answer: Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you? ... The King will answer them, “I tell you truly, in so far as you did it to one of these my brothers, even to the least of them, you did it to me.” (Matthew, 25:35-41)

Attend first to the needs of the human body— that is the starting point of all ethics and law. Pastor or atheist, the starting point is the same: the action you can take now to alleviate the suffering of the deprived flesh. There is no revolution worth pursuing without attentiveness to the evil of suffering deprivation of the necessary and to the goodness of being full of what we need

Imagine now the homeless person, reaching for a plate of food only to have it smacked away by the police. When I try to put myself in his place I do not feel hungry, but a profound loneliness, an emptiness at the intentional destruction of caring contact with another human being, and for no reason other than to uphold the law because it has been decreed that hunger that you cannot pay to satisfy is illegal. What else can the starving man conclude when armed force intervenes to prevent him from eating than that his existence does not matter? And what is worse for a being conscious of his own existence— conscious of his own mattering— than to feel that mattering negated by those who are supposed to uphold the law, a force which, one presumes, ought to protect people.

The law either serves this fundamental goal or it must be abolished in favour of a new law: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27). That is, the law exists to satisfy the requirements of good human life; good human life is not a function of satisfying the law, come what may for our own existence. A law which makes eating illegal has become unhinged from the human purposes of law and annexed to the Totalitarian Productivism that determines life space and time everywhere. When it becomes a crime to feed the poor because it has become a crime to be poor because the poor have become manufactured in such numbers as to become both a nuisance and a threat to the rich we have reached a civilizational turning point. But while the values we need to criticise are ever present, (whether one assigns a material or a religious foundation is not important) the organizational forms needed to make them realities are lacking.

And the consequences: piles of unfed and unclothed bodies, thousands interred in squalid migrant camps along the periphery of Europe (can anyone in Europe really ignore the historical analogy staring everyone in the face- racially demonized others ‘concentrated’ behind barbed wire and blamed for their misery?); uncared for sick, expelled from hospitals even where these are supposed to be a publically funded good; the aged lying ill and alone, unvisited, uncared for, but as yet undead, and crying out, but the earphones on everyone’s head drown their feeble voice; and for the lucky, the working ones, they get to enjoy the cell by cell destruction of their stressed, working bodies stretched across the abyss of a pensionless future with no net to catch them when they fall.

But the law is upheld.

SYRIZA AS TURNING POINT?

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It took less than 24 hours for the warnings and fear mongering to begin. This is what happens when you elect a party whose English name means Coalition of the Radical Left— you are lectured by the likes of David Cameron and Angela Merkel about being a de-stabilising force. Destabilising indeed. But what are the values of human beings that would not *welcome* a party that is promising to de-stabilise a system that has raised the unemployment rate to 28%, has cut the elderly off from their pensions and health care, and has raised the suicide rate by 30%? Money-values. Cameron and Merkel fear the destabilization of money flows from Greece back to German and European banks; the destabilization of a “bail out” composed mostly of loans that allow Greece to pay the interest on its debt. So they hope to destabilise the destabilisers before they can have any positive effect and inspire other movements across Southern Europe to repudiate debt and begin the real task of building an alternative democratic life-economy.

If it achieves nothing else, Syriza’s victory in the Greek election on January 25th, 2015 at least exposes the absolute contempt for democracy and life-value that the maintenance of capitalism actually requires. Just as free speech ends where the sacred cows of the ruling class begin, so too democracy extends only so far as rubber stamping debt-servitude and exploitation. Elect a government that promises to end the subordination of life-requirement satisfaction to money-value and the ruling class begins to organise its forces for a coup.

However, Syriza’s capacity to make a difference is threatened by internal dangers as well. In general, Syriza finds itself facing the double bind that all parties and movements to the left of moribund social democrats face. On the one hand, they could run on a promise to implement their radically alternative economic model and risk losing out on a chance at power because too many people lack confidence that the alternative model can be realised. On the other hand, they could focus narrowly on the promise to manage the economic crisis differently, drive a harder bargain with the European Union and its central bank, offer the Greek people immediate relief while leaving the structural problems of *capitalism* (and not just Greek capitalism) unaddressed, but gain election. In the end, the later course has been chosen.

Having chosen the narrow road, Syriza must now confront the particular dangers of compromise, of which two very significant ones have already arisen. First, because they won “only” one hundred and forty nine of three hundred seats, the party was forced into an alliance with the right-wing nationalist Independent Greeks party in order to govern. Second, their choice for finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis, is a very far from radical left academic who has said publically that Syriza’s program for systematic economic transformation is “not worth the paper it is written on,” and seems exclusively concerned with renegotiating the terms of debt repayment.

That Syriza has chosen an vitriolically nationalist party as an ally of convenience should be of concern to its Greek and international supporters. In giving the Independent Greeks an effective veto over government policy, Syriza has virtually guaranteed that it will not be able to implement the more structurally transformative demands of its program. In the most likely scenario, the government will use its mandate to try to renegotiate the terms of its debt repayment, but unless it decides to leave the Eurozone, which Varoufakis has ruled out, it has little leverage in *talks* and thus little chance of

succeeding if it sticks to the road of negotiation. Judging on the basis of just these two initial compromises, it is little wonder that critics like Panagiotis Sotiris were worrying even before the election about the rightward turn of Syriza's leadership.

Still, we are only a few days into their mandate. Let us imagine another set of possibilities. Millions of Greeks have just voted for the "Coalition of the Radical Left." They have tasted the poison of capitalism in crisis. They have experienced their lives and livelihoods attacked and dismantled so that money that could support life-productive enterprise can be shipped to banks to be turned into more money for the bankers. They are ready for a fight. Let's assume that the holders of Greek debt are unwilling to make anything more than cosmetic changes to the Greek debt. What then?

Capitulation is a possibility. But so too is a fight, a fight that would have to be mobilised in the streets. I do not mean an afternoon of demonstrations after which everyone goes home, but a disciplined and organized extra-parliamentary movement that can push Syriza to implement its full program—strikes, demonstrations, occupations, teach ins, factory take over, land reclamations, all co-ordinated with the left of the party. All of this would have to be defended on the basis of a different value-system—the priority of life and life's development over money accumulation in private hands. And then this movement would need to be spread to Spain and Italy and everywhere else the 'austerity agenda' is undermining public institutions and their life-serving function. That includes Canada.

As in the whole history of socialism, the national struggle will either succeed in sparking international mobilization, or it will die in the nation state that tries it first. Venezuela has survived as long as it has because it spread the movement to Bolivia and Ecuador and (to a lesser extent) Nicaragua and (to a lesser extent still) Brazil, and had an ally in Cuba. The concrete reality of internationalism is political control over national policy; the condition of successfully transforming national institutions is international allies and counter-institutions of credit and finance that free governments from dependence on predatory capitalist banks and international institutions like the IMF. The problem, of course, is that those counter-institutions either do not exist (in Europe) or only in early, embryonic form (in South America). But unless Syriza plays offence and actively builds a mobilization in the streets of Greece and inspires the streets of Madrid and Rome, it will find itself overwhelmed at the conference table. But the streets of Madrid and Rome are ready for anti-austerity mobilization, and if they start to move, then Syriza's election could be the turning point the left has needed for thirty years.

SELF-DEFENCE, DEMOCRACY, AND MORAL EQUIVALENCE

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As with the past two Gaza invasions, supporters of Israel have relied upon three central arguments to justify the destruction of Palestinians' lives and means of life. None are sound and all need to be publically contested.

The first and most widely deployed argument is that Israel is simply exercising its right to self-defense. This is the most common argument because it is the most plausible, seems to conform to international laws and norms, and involves the fewest number of odious moral implications. Here is the argument: Hamas is using Gaza as a base to launch rockets at Israel. Israeli cities and civilians are endangered by the rockets. As a sovereign nation Israel has the right to self-defence. The right to self-defense includes the right to decide the most efficacious means of self-defence. Only a ground invasion can ensure the safety of Israeli civilians from Hamas rocket fire. Therefore, a ground invasion is necessary.

A corollary of this argument relates to the civilian casualties in Gaza. The corollary asserts that Hamas is responsible for all Palestinian deaths, because Hamas started the conflict.

This argument appears sound because there is in fact a right to self-defence under international law. There are also norms concerning proportionality, however, which the scope and violence of Israeli operations arguably violate. However, arguing about the finer points of international law is not the most effective line of criticism, because, as history proves, international law in effect means whatever those with the power to enforce it decide it means. Hence, we need to expose the problematic assumptions that underlie the right to self-defence argument.

The first assumption is that Hamas is the cause of the conflict. Hamas is not the cause of the conflict; they are not initiating military operations, they are *reacting* to an embargo on life goods and the imprisoning of an entire people by Israel. They have said that their goal is to end the siege of their life space. No people could reasonably be expected not to resist conditions such as Israel has imposed upon the people of Gaza. One can debate both the wisdom and the legality of rocket fire into the territory of a militarily superior nation, but it is not possible to plausibly deny that the cause of the rocket fire is the inhuman conditions of life that the Israeli blockade imposes on Gazans. People are safest when they give their neighbours no cause for violence. I am much less likely to fight with my neighbour if I do not barricade his driveway. If I barricade his driveway, beat him up the first time he asks me to remove the blockade, reinforce the blockade with concrete the second time he asks me to remove it, and burn his house down the third time, I could hardly pretend to not be responsible if he should, the fourth time, decide to respond more forcefully towards me. I might plead self-defense, but really, I am defending myself from the predictable consequences *of my own actions*. Hence, because the blockade is the real cause of the violence, and Israeli's have built and maintained the blockade, they bear ultimate responsibility for the state of war between Gaza and Israel, the self-defence argument fails. If the blockade were ended (and a comprehensive peace agreement reached) Gazans and all Palestinians could get on with building intrinsically valuable lives in which the energy used to sustain historical enmities and hatreds is sublimated. Israeli's too, for that matter.

The second argument is far more problematic, but much loved of Canada's Minister of Foreign Affairs, John Baird. Baird often argues that Israel should never be criticized, whether for its military incursions, its apartheid wall, its collective punishments, its detentions, or any other indignity or abuse it decides to heap upon the Palestinians, because it is a democracy. This argument rests on a category mistake. The category mistake is that Baird uses a *political structure* as *moral justification* for life-destructive outcomes (the death of Palestinian children) that would otherwise be judged immoral and criminal. Democracy is nothing but a form of government, a structure of rule, a way of taking collectively binding decisions. It is not, in and of itself, a justification for the outcomes of the decisions it takes. If the mere fact that a decision were taken democratically were sufficient justification for its outcomes, then nothing that a majority supported could ever be morally wrong. But the justification of political decisions, their moral legitimacy, depends upon the life outcomes for the people affected. A decision to bomb and shell densely populated areas in full knowledge that there will be innocent civilian casualties is wrong because it knowingly and necessarily destroys innocent life. That it has popular support does not make it morally correct. Democracy is a political form, whether it is good or bad depends upon the degree to which those affected by its decisions are enabled to lead good human lives.

Two brief addenda. It is questionable whether Israel can be both a "Jewish state" and a liberal democracy, at the very least religio-ethnic exclusivity is in tension with the liberal ideal of equal citizenship. Arab citizens have the same formal rights as Jewish citizens, but how can they be equal in a state that identifies itself as essentially Jewish? The issue is complex and I leave it to others and to a different time to resolve. My point is only that the issue of Israeli democracy is more problematic than it might appear. If the question of Israeli democracy is more complex than it first appears, then the question of Hamas' political illegitimacy is even more so. The Western media typically play down the fact that Hamas was democratically elected in the 2006 elections to the Palestinian parliament. So maybe it is not true, for either or both of these reasons, that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.

The final, and by far the most odious and dangerous argument in support of Israel asserts that there is "no moral equivalence" between Israeli deaths from Hamas rocket fire and Palestinian deaths from Israeli fire. The only way this argument could be true is if Israeli lives are worth more than Palestinian lives. Equivalence implies equality of value. By definition, then, inequivalence (which is what "no moral equivalence" entails) means inequality of value. Inequality of value means that one of the two poles of comparison is worth more than the other. If there is no moral equivalence between Palestinian and Israeli deaths, then Israeli deaths are worth more, i.e., are morally worse than, Palestinian deaths. If death is bad because life is good, and some deaths are worse than others, then, by implication, some lives are better than others. If the living and the dead are sorted into reified groups ('Israeli,' 'Palestinian') and this sorting is mapped onto the inequivalent valuation, then the conclusion is that Israeli lives are worth more than Palestinian lives. And that is, quite simply, a repetition of the most odious and inhuman racism that has periodically infected human history.

Let us now put all three arguments together and see the hell to which it leads. If we accept that a) Israel has an unlimited right to self-defence, b) whose exercise is legitimated by its being a democracy, and c) is therefore entitled to kill Palestinians whose lives are worth less than Israeli lives, then we are led, logically, to the conclusion that if a majority of Israelis so agreed, their right to self-defence would entail the right to destroy the entire Palestinian people (their lives are not worth as much as the lives of Israelis they might kill, the right to self-determination is not constrained by extraneous factors but only the democratic decision of the people of Israel).

Sadly, political discourse in Israel is degenerating towards such conclusion. An Israeli news outlet reported that Knesset member Ayelet Shaked: “a well-known Israeli politician and parliament member, recently said mothers of all Palestinians should also be killed during the Israeli assault on Gaza. She called for the slaughter of Palestinian mothers who give birth to “little snakes.””

If, as I hope, you reject the exterminist logic implied in Shaked’s comment, or openly asserted in a ruling of Rabbi Dov Lior, reported in Haaretz, that ” “deterrent measures to exterminate the enemy” were allowed by Jewish religious law, then you need to rethink the soundness (should you have been tempted by them) of the 3 arguments above that open the door to it.

THE VALUE AND CONTRADICTIONS OF SELF-DETERMINATION

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If you imprison and humiliate an entire people, let them live (at your discretion) but not make the sort of living that human beings are capable of making for themselves when they control their means of life, they will, eventually, fight back. If you humiliate them deeply enough, if you build roadblocks in the way of every political solution, if you pontificate whilst raining death at will, the humiliated will lash out in anger and call for your destruction, even though they and you both know that will never happen. If you also control the means of communication, if you can get journalists to tell a ‘balanced’ story by focussing on ‘rockets’ in abstraction from historical realities like colonization and inhuman blockades of life-necessities; if you can prevent the obvious question from being asked: what group of human beings would not fight back under these conditions (if they did not fight back, they would not be human), then you can make yourself appear the victim, you can get everyone to sing same from the same hymn-book of the ‘right to self-defence.’ Better, you can kill and destroy just enough that there will be a bit left over to justify the next year’s bombing mission or invasion, to sob that you have ‘no partner for peace,’ to hypocritically moan that the people you torment and abuse and humiliate do not recognise your ‘right to exist’ (while openly announcing that [you will never accept](#) the one thing that might bring peace, a Palestinian state). And so it goes on (forever?), Israel, the world’s last colonial power, claiming the right to determine its collective future by denying the same right to others.

Such is the contradiction the universalization of the right to self-determination causes. If the ‘self’ refers to singular peoples each struggling as ethno-national wholes for exclusive control over the same territory, then the result can never be self-determination for each, but either war or subordination of the weaker to the stronger. It is impossible to satisfy the geographical conditions of self-determination for each group, since that over which exclusive jurisdiction is demanded as a fundamental condition of self-determination cannot be shared.

One way of resolving this contradiction is to argue that ethno-national groups (or their sectarian-religious analogues) are anachronistic, not to mention atavistic, xenophobic, and chauvinistic. Even at their least violent (as in Scotland or Quebec) they seem, at best, a faint echo of a now impossible (and unattractive?) Romantic idea of the nation as the expression of a unique popular culture. Since there is no avoiding the danger that struggles for *self*-determination focus only on the well-being of one group at the expense of the other; the goal of territorial security should be abandoned as an artefact of the ‘tribal’ past.

At the same time, however, as the case of the Palestinians proves, the struggles of particular nationals selves for self-determination remains of universal value. Stateless people are profoundly vulnerable because they are denied control over even the most basic elements of being alive— accessing water supplies, having secure access to agricultural land. We are not in the age of Deleuzian ‘de-territorialized flows.’ Resources and money flow from one territory to another territory, and controlling those flows are named entities— Israel, America, the European Union, the “global North.” In opposition are not Hardt and Negri’s ‘multitudes,” but again, people with names: Palestinian, Uighur, Kurd. People still name themselves and the places they live, and assign preponderant political value to protecting both, not necessarily on chauvinistic grounds, but as a basic condition of life-security. Life grows from

the ground up. If you do not control that ground, you live only at the pleasure of the group that does. That is not a situation in which human life can flourish.

The problem with cosmopolitan alternatives (liberal or socialist) to the ethno-nationalist form of struggles for self-determination is that people must *live* someplace rather than another. Even nomads stop their journeys and camp for a night, a week, a season, and their wanderings are limited to a territory that they regard as their own. No one can live everywhere; a cosmopolis, a world city, is, as Kant stressed, an ideal to regulate the intercourse of strangers (welcome everyone everywhere in shared humanity) but it is not a home or a possible political structure in which its citizens collectively determine their lives. Yes, all states are situated on planet earth, and yes, we do have shared concerns as human beings, but day to day politics needs to regulate day to day life, and day to day life plays out in a locality. Humanity is a concrete, not an abstract, universal. We are human in virtue of the actual identities we build for ourselves. Localities have boundaries that not only separate life spaces from one another, they define the familiar and the shared (and of course all the problems intrinsic to human societies). These boundaries should be porous and people should cross frontiers, intra-national problems are not solved by nationalist means, but the historical reality is that when a people does not control its own basic conditions of life some other people does, and has used this power to make the dependent their servants, not to mention objects to be destroyed when the subordinate insist upon their humanity and thus their right to self-determination. Behind the demand for ethno-nationalist self-determination is the truly universal demand to control life-requirements for the sake of living as free human beings.

People do in fact identify themselves by a name they share with some but not with others. Yes, the communities in relation to which these identities are forged are largely imaginary (Benedict Anderson), but the imaginary is made real by political commitment and history. Part of what motivates political commitment to an imaginary community is the very real material violence that indigenous and non-European identities have suffered over the past three or four hundred years at the hands of colonising, imperialist forces and their regional allies. Not only has nationalist struggle been the primary form of opposition to imperialism, it has also bound different people together across borders in a shared, international struggle. Victory in those struggles is protective of the local identities out of which creative hybrids are built. Struggles for secure territory are not *necessarily* chauvinistic and violently exclusionary, they can be the starting point for new, multicultural constructions.

The ultimate implication of the demand for self-determination is the expansion of the 'self' beyond national identity to new forms of global sharing of life-space and life-resources. But the historical reality of the world is distinction into stateless and citizens, colonisers and colonised, rulers and ruled. Palestinians, Israelis, Iranians, Americans all have the same fundamental conditions of being alive and acting freely, but not the same power to procure the resources that would satisfy those conditions. In the given historical moment, a national state is an essential step in the direction of the universal sharing that would finally solve the problem of subordinate peoples, because the achievement of a national state presupposes a political victory over the forces of domination.

Still, when the struggle for territory occurs between two groups who both claim the same territory, as in Israel-Palestine, the conflict can very quickly lose all connection to the struggle for the material conditions of self-determination and appear as an irreconcilable conflict fueled by fictional histories purified of the truth of contradiction and complexity the existence of the other interconnected history necessarily introduces. The starting point to resolving the contradiction of competing struggles for self-determination is to acknowledge the existence of the other self and that there is no singular

history, but that the history of the one identity is bound up with the other and vice versa. How far the world can develop beyond borders is an open question, but the importance of establishing them in cases where peoples have historically been subordinated to the rule of other peoples (as still today in Palestine), seems indisputable.

POLITICS. AMBIVALENCE.

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Even by the standards of *real politik* it is extraordinarily cynical to use the nightmarish crash of a passenger plane as cover for an invasion. Yet it happened: as the world watched in astonished horror the burning wreckage of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, aflame in a field in Eastern Ukraine, Israel launched its anticipated ground assault on Gaza. In reaction, Hamas turned to its well-worn repertoire of promises to “exact a heavy price” from Israel, but we all know how this will end. The smaller man sees that there is no avoiding the fight now, so he resists with the only weapon he has left— his mouth. But it will not save him from having his teeth knocked out.

Perhaps it is time to abandon tough guy politics. The tough guys in eastern Ukraine have now, probably inadvertently, (but what is the difference?) killed 295 people on a 777. The tough guys of Hamas have gotten themselves into another war with Israel that they cannot win. The tough guys of Israel have killed over 200 Palestinians, mostly civilians, all the while claiming not to be tough guys but forced into the fight by the mouthy little guy they regularly beat up. The tough guy Putin scrambles for excuses— had there not been a war in Ukraine, the plane would not have been shot down, which is rather like saying that if a person did not need to breathe, they would not have drowned. True, but rather too abstract as an explanation. Punch, counter-punch, counter-counter-punch...

It is quite the show, and a good thing too, since the World Cup just ended. Those with a front row seat are enjoying it most. While the world is told by the Western media that all of Israel is cowering from the rockets of the mighty Hamas, CNN cameras infelicitously caught a large group of Israelis sitting on a hill, only a few miles from Gaza, cheering the show as Israeli guided missiles lazily glided towards their targets (there is no rush when there are no defenses to skirt).

The reality of a neighbour’s house exploding or bodies falling on my patio from the sky are too impossible to imagine. Across the street, some kids are joking in the late afternoon sunshine. I think— “but don’t they know what happened?” But even as I think that another voice is saying “if they do know, that is no reason to not enjoy the evening.” I look into the garden. The gently fading sunlight has dulled the green of leaves and creeping charley and brightened the reds, yellows, and purples of the crocosmia, lilies, and echinacea. I can sip my beer and ponder the miseries of the world at leisure. I think back (more than twenty years) to a poster on the wall of my old comrade Peter’s basement apartment on Lansdowne Ave. It was a quotation from Trotsky, in exile in Mexico City, remarking on the pleasure he felt looking into the garden, through the window his wife Natasha just opened. I only remember the final line: “Life is beautiful. May future generations enjoy it to the fullest.”

Ever the revolutionary, he speaks of the future, but he enjoyed his present in Coyoacan as well. He enjoyed his garden, and he enjoyed the even more beautiful garden of Frida Kahlo’s Casa Azul, (not to mention Kahlo herself), only a few blocks away. The only justification for struggle is to enable everyone to enjoy the beauty of life, but the means of struggle must be such that the inner capacity to value life and beauty are not destroyed. (I think Trotsky, former commander of the Red Army and proponent of the politics of ‘liquidating the class enemy,’ once on the run from Stalin’s homicidal mania, came to understand this truth). Whether true or not of Trotsky, the principle does emphasize what might be the worst, cruelest irony of all- the more intransigent the opponents of justice,

the more violence they are willing to use, the more those fighting for their humanity are forced to adopt inhuman means, killing in themselves that for which they struggle- liberation of the capacity to fully enjoy the beauty of life.

The comfortable can wish for the democratic mass movement that can conquer oppression through solidarity, commitment, and militant but non-violent struggle. Perhaps they think back to their support for the struggle against apartheid, but their recollections probably pass over Umkhonto we Sizwe. Nevertheless, there is a lesson: there was armed struggle against apartheid, but the ultimate victory was secured by political power, not military maneuvering. It was the political wing of the ANC, in combination with the Communist Party of South Africa and the millions of militant workers of the Congress of South African Trade Unions that brought white rule to an end. The Pan African Congress and its slogan “One settler, one bullet” have been forgotten. The socio-economic problems that beset apartheid South Africa remain, but so too millions of black workers alive to continue the fight.

I know that no one has the map we need to find our way out of the morass we are in, but there is no excuse, at this point in history, for persisting in means of struggle that we know not to work. Shooting down aircraft, plowing them into buildings, lobbing rockets in the hope of killing someone, anyone, accomplishes nothing, save giving your oppressors the excuse they need to step on your throat all the harder. Others have to help remove the boot, which is why, I suppose, those not in immediate danger shouldn't laugh or enjoy the lazy summer twilight. But that does not mean that the laughter and light are not beautiful.

POLITICS OF/AND REALITY

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“All men by nature desire to know,” begins Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, which presupposes that we do not already know. (*Metaphysics*, 980a19) The system of the world is independent of the unreflective contents of our minds, and so we must discipline our thoughts, conduct them methodically, if we are to satisfy the desire to know. Aristotle assumes that thought, properly conducted, will conform to the truth of objects, which further presupposes that people will let their preconceptions go if they should turn out to be disconfirmed by the world. In the case of conduct as well as science, classical philosophy assumed a basic material rationality on the part of people: if people understand reality, they will normally act in a way that conduces to their survival and happiness. One may wish to fly by flapping one’s arms, but one will not thereby overcome the force of gravity. One can still try, of course, but (depending upon one’s starting point) the consequences could prove fatal.

Perhaps surprisingly, the lethality of acting upon materially irrational opinions has rarely proven an obstacle to people’s conduct. Why this seemingly anti-evolutionary drive to act according to desires either not grounded in or hubristically dismissive of objective reality has also long been understood. Perhaps its first systematic elaboration was in the Antilogic of Protagoras. According to contemporary reports, the antilogic taught students “that there are two mutually opposed arguments on any subject.” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*). There may be a truth of the matter (an objective state of affairs), but well-conducted arguments can make it appear that the opposite of what is in fact the case is the case. Since human beings are not mechanically determined to act, but move themselves on the basis of their own interpretations of the objective world confronting them, they can be persuaded to act even contrary to what is in fact the case. “Human beings are the measure of all things—of things that are, that they are, and things that are not, that they are not,” Protagoras argued. (R.McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, p. 379). Note that he does not say that human beings are the *creators* of all things, but the “measure” of all things. That there is a world of objects independent of human beings Protagoras does not deny. What he claims instead is that what things are or are not apart from human evaluations is of no consequence, since we act according to our judgements and interpretations, and these (as the antilogic teaches) in no way need to accurately reflect a “mind-independent” reality in order to be convincing.

However much it might offend classical philosophical reason and its commitment to the truth come what may for self and factional interest, one cannot survey human history and fail to acknowledge that Protagoras has expressed an essential truth of political action. Politics, in the Protagorean view, would be the art of constructing through argument a reality that suits and justifies factional purposes. In human affairs, *appearance* of being the stronger argument and *being* the stronger argument coincide, because the *stronger* argument is the one that people act on, and the one that people act on is clearly not always the one that best models empirical reality or best serves long term interests. Consciously or unconsciously, Karl Rove, in his much mocked dismissal of Ron Susskind of the New York Times and the “reality based community” in which he mockingly included Susskind, was echoing Protagoras’ insight. Susskind relates the story: “The aide [Rove] said that guys like me were “*in what we call the reality-based community,*” which he defined as people who “*believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.*” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. [Rove] cut me off. “*That’s not the way the world really works anymore,*” he continued. “*We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re*

studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." Whatever one thinks of the politics of Karl Rove and the Bush regime, his arguments should be taken seriously, because they contain an important truth (although the implications of that truth are the opposite of what Rove thought).

The truth, to reiterate, is that human society is not the mechanically determined result of objective physical-chemical-biological-genetic-psycho-physiological processes, but the ever-constructed and reconstructed product of human actions. These actions presuppose the whole history of the evolution of matter-energy, but they are not determined in any direct way by those laws, because actions follow from interpretations and evaluations whose efficacy as motivations is by no means contingent upon their being objectively true. The implication of the fact that we construct social-political reality from interpretations and evaluations, from Rove's (and Protagoras') perspective, is that those with political power can construct and reconstruct reality to suit their purposes. If reality can always be reconstructed to suit the purposes of the powerful, then it is impossible for critics to establish objective foundations for their criticism, which can always be rejected as merely a contrary opinion.

The real implication, which Rove misses or ignores, is that the empire builder's construction of reality can ever be stable or permanent so long as it has not completely overcome or wiped out these contrary opinions. Behind these contrary opinions is the material reality of opposed political forces, whose resistance to empire's construction of reality contests the truth that ruling power seeks to construct. The power to construct reality and define the truth is always a power that is contested. In order to successfully establish their "truth," the empire builders must refute their opponent's claims. So long as there are opponents, there will be disputes, and material reality (that which is objectively the case) appears able to re-enter the argument as *the matter in dispute*. The matter in dispute between the ruling powers and their targets is whether and for whom the real life consequences of political actions are good and bad.

In order to find the 'real-life-consequences' beneath the opposing arguments we have to isolate and focus upon the points where the arguments contradict each other. It then seems to be an easy matter to resolve the contradiction- we examine the real event around which opposed interpretations are built and determine which the available evidence better supports. The problem is, however, that even in cases where the evidence is not disputed, the meaning or the ethical-political value of the evidence can be (and always is) contested. We get back to material reality only in order to have it slip away again.

As a result, and despite the hopes of "enlightenment principles," political conflicts are almost never resolved by the force of the better argument. People do not consider evidence apart from the question of what the evidence is supposed to support, with the result that the same empirical evidence can be cited by opposed sides as proof of opposed judgements. To take a generic example from the 2014 Gaza war, the same pile of bodies can be cited as evidence that Israel is committing war crimes, and that it is doing everything it can to avoid civilian casualties. The unlimited multiplication of testimonials and perspectives made possible by social media does not help resolve the argument. It does not matter how much evidence there is if that evidence is always going to be interpreted relative to a political position whose truth is treated as absolute. No matter how high the pile of Palestinian bodies grows, it will always be interpreted by the Israeli side as proof of the savagery of Hamas. It is not that people deny the existence of the objects cited as evidence, but (worse) that the meaning of those objects is always taken to confirm the truth of one's own position. No evidence is ruled out of court, but it is always spun

so as to support one's own position. The goal here is not necessarily to win the argument outright, but to keep it going forever, thus preventing an effective judgement being passed against one's own side (ever being convicted of war crimes, to continue with the example)

The opponents of empire might respond: so what, enlightenment reason is at best naïve and at worst complicit with the structure of power which is the problem. I do not think the political implications of the incapacity of knowledge and reason to overcome ruling power is so happy. If rational persuasion and objective evidence fail to constrain the ruling powers, there is only force of arms left. The fight may be dignified and justified, but comes at extraordinary cost (as Gaza is again proving) and without compromising in any serious way the structure of power and violence it opposes.

AGAINST THE POLITICS OF PUNISHMENT

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The main challenge faced by any social philosophy or theory that tries to uncover structural causes of oppression and violence is that they complicate the grounds upon which individual blame for particular oppressive or violent acts can be legitimately assigned. If class exploitation is a necessary structural feature of a capitalist economy, can the boss be blamed as an individual for laying off employees? It would appear not, if the Marxist analysis of market competition is correct. By like reasoning, if we live in a sexist rape culture, as many feminists maintain and abundant evidence supports, to what extent can individual men, who have been raised since infancy surrounded by images of women as sexually subservient to men's desires, be held accountable for sexist attitudes and violence against women? If it really is the structure that causes the behaviour, then it would seem that the structure, and not the individual, must be held accountable.

The problem with this sort of structuralist functionalism is obvious: structures do not act and they cannot be held accountable in the immediate aftermath of a damaging assault. Being held accountable means having to answer for your actions, and structures do not act, and they cannot answer. Only individuals (or groups of individuals) can act, and only individuals (or groups of individuals) can be held accountable for their actions.

While it is true that only individuals and groups can be held accountable, it is equally true that individuals do not act in a vacuum; they become the people they are in definite familial and social contexts. Notwithstanding the achievement of formally equal rights between men and women, the dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity remain contaminated by the association of masculinity with dominance and femininity by subservience. Those constructions in turn deform the relationships between actual men and women. As Nancy Hartsock argued, the consequence of the way men are raised in patriarchal society is that they construct their sense of self "in opposition to unity with the mother" which then "sets a hostile and combative dualism at the heart of both the community men construct and the masculinist worldview by means of which they understand their lives." ("The Feminist Standpoint," *Feminism and Methodology*, p. 169). If that analysis is correct, then individual men are born into social relationships over which, as infants, they have no control, and assimilate, before they are capable of critical consciousness, destructive forms of masculinist self-understanding.

The search for social causes for individual action thus seems to run into a contradiction between theoretical truth and practical justice. Understanding the *social* causes of action undermines the legitimacy of punishing *individuals* for the harm they cause to others, but failing to punish individuals for the harms that their actions causes leaves them unaccountable for events that issue from decisions they have made. The victim is re-victimised the victim as she must listen to the perpetrator employ a discourse meant to further understanding be misapplied as an excuse. It does the victim of crime no good to inform her she was, in fact, the victim of social structures and not an individual criminal. The particular person has been the victim of the actions of another particular person, and justice seems to demand punishment.

This response is understandable, both psychologically (the victim desires that the perpetrator pay) and sociologically (social stability seems to depend upon punishment as a disincentive to crime and

violence). However, if the society that is being reproduced is itself, in its depth structures, the cause of individual violence, then system critics cannot support its reproduction, but must demand that it be changed. If society is exploitative and oppressive, then it does no social good to simply punish the individual without working to change the structures and dynamics that damaged those individuals in the first place. Everyone knows that prisons do not solve the problem of crime.

At the same time, individuals are not mechanical products of circumstances. Although individuals develop within social structures and symbolic cultural codes, they are not inert registers of those external forces, but thinking, reflective agents who interpret and respond to context in distinct ways. Not every man who grows up in a sexist culture is overtly sexist. Every man's attitudes may be marked in subtly sexist ways, such that even the best of men display traces of the culture in which they grew up, but when these traces are pointed out and men made to publically account for them, they can work to overcome them. In other words, people come to bear responsibility for their actions the more they become aware of the forces acting on them. People whose behaviour helps to reproduce sexist or racist structures, or who harm others through criminal acts, need to be held accountable for their actions, but in a way that enables them to understand (and then work to change) the social forces acting upon them. Punishment rarely accomplishes this end.

By "punishment" I mean the infliction of negative sanctions on an individual with the intention of making the person suffer for the for his actions. Punishment assumes that agency is absolute; that actions originate in the mind of the actor *ex nihilo*, with no external causes whatsoever. Individuals are assumed to be uniquely responsible for their actions, and thus whatever harm they suffer in punishment for those actions is justified.

In contrast, being held accountable in ways that promote self and social transformation holds both individual and the social structures within which people develop and act responsible. The perpetuation of oppressive systems through individual activity is not an abstract moral failure on the part of those individuals, it is a sign of social failure as well. There is responsibility here, but it is shared between the individual as a socially self-conscious agent and society as a network of institutionally mediated social interactions which produces the individuals who act within it. The goal in making people answerable for their actions is not to harm them, but to increase their capacity for a form of self-determined action that takes into account, in the very conception of the goal, the interests of other people.

What is most important in terms of addressing the causes of harm and violence is thus not punishment, but accountability. There must be consequences for harming others, but those consequences need not involve harming the perpetrator in turn. Contrary to Plato, punishment is never good for the one punished, because it typically only makes him angrier further alienates him from society. Punishing individuals doubles the harm without exposing the social dimension of the causes of the actions for which they are punished. It thus leaves one half of the problem unaddressed.

I raise these issues in the context of the debate surrounding what to do with the Dalhousie dentistry students who started the misogynist Facebook group. Many students and faculty are calling for their expulsion, and for understandable reasons. All student, faculty, and administrative conduct must be governed by the principle that the classroom is a space in which everyone feels secure- fear is the enemy of learning. If it is the case that the women who were named in the Facebook posts can no longer feel secure in the midst of classmates who objectified them in ways equal parts puerile and threatening, then the administrative response must ensure that their fears are removed.

But does removing the fear require removing the members of the group through expulsion? Perhaps not. A recent post by some members of the Dalhousie faculty, without ruling out expulsion, (or mentioning it by name) argues for “an integrated approach to the problem of sexualized violence on our campuses – an approach that (i) responds to the specific harms caused by incidents that have recently been reported that reflect a pervasive culture of misogyny and disrespect for women and sexual minorities and (ii) addresses the underlying systemic causes.” The faculty statement grasps the complexity of the (specific and general) problem, and implies a dialectical understanding of the relationship of the kind I sketched above between perpetrators and victims as individuals and as members of a society that is still structured by sexist practices and representations of women.

A complete solution to this particular issue needs to involve the perpetrators in a process through which they come to understand the harm their “private” Facebook group caused. Quite often in cases of sexist abuse in which no one is directly and physically harmed, the perpetrators respond to criticism and the threat of sanctions with the generic response that they were “only joking,” and often they mean it. Punishment satisfies the desire for revenge, but it does not generate a learning process through which the perpetrator gains insight into the reasons why the behaviour was unacceptable. It thus misses an opportunity to turn someone from being a perpetrator of sexist stereotypes into an opponent of them.

Two years ago I was involved in an analogous situation at the University of Windsor. The issue here involved an announcement for a student St. Patrick’s Day Party advising attendees that “rape juice” (a nickname for a vodka-based drink) would be served. The announcement was brought to the attention of the senior administration, other faculty, students, and the human rights office. The young man who posted the offending comment, along with many of his friends (including women) responded to the storm that ensued with the argument that the comment needed to be interpreted in context. They maintained that everyone for whom the post was intended would understand that the comment was made in jest, that there was no intent to incite actual rapes. While a few people called for the student’s expulsion, which would have punished the individual but left a deeper exploration of the core issues unaddressed, a more productive strategy was pursued. The human rights office arranged a meeting with the student who posted the offending message at which the underlying issues were discussed: the impossibility of communicating humorous intentions in uncontrolled on-line environments and the reasons why the extreme violence rape involves renders it an unfit subject for joking. In sum, the approach to the problem was not to punish or lecture from above, but to engage in a sharp but respectful argument through which the person himself came to see the problem with his actions.

One might object that such a response places undue, even authoritarian, limits on humor; that humorous intent changes the meaning of words such that statements that would be harmful or disrespectful if meant literally are not (or ought not to be) if meant in jest. I believe that this point is true as a general epistemological claim about language use and meaning, but it does not apply in the Dalhousie (or any analogous cases) in which the ‘joke’ involves the targeting of specific, named others for sexual (or other forms of) violence. While the members of the group may have thought they were being funny amongst themselves, they were in fact naming potential victims who were not part of the conversation and could not (even if they wanted to) ‘play along.’ Lines of good taste can be crossed amongst good friends when everyone knows the aim is playful, but threatening violence (even if not seriously intended to be put into practice) behind the backs of the targets is a different situation entirely.

At the same time, it is important to point out that odious as the comments were, no actual violence was perpetrated. Hence, the way is open to enlighten rather than punish through expulsion, to ensure that

these students do not become a real threat to their female classmates by ensuring that they change themselves, with whatever institutional support and monitoring and enforced public explanation and proof of change is necessary. The goal should be to use institutional power to create a desire within the perpetrators to change themselves and prove to their classmates, and the wider community whose trust they will have to earn as dentists, that they have changed. Such an approach to wrongdoing politicises rather than demonizes, but also insists that individuals acknowledge, understand, and explain the problem with their behaviour. Changing one person or a small group does not change the world, but it does change a small part of the world, and turns vectors for the perpetuation of sexism into vectors that challenge it.

HISTORY AND THE BURDENS OF AESTHETIC JUDGEMENT

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Let us start from the assumption that aesthetic judgements that become normative for a society reflect the prejudices, material and ideological interests, and cultural biases of the ruling group with the power and wealth to assemble the collections that express those norms. Does it therefore follow that all major collections of art are *nothing more than* the combined prejudices of the wealthy patrons who assemble them, and that different people, differently situated, with a different identity and different material and ideological interests, would construct radically different collections, in which that which is regarded as masterpiece today would be relegated to the status of minor work, and outsider pieces not even considered for inclusion would be celebrated as masterpieces? Or does the fact that certain works of art are able to re-establish consensus around their excellence in different social and historical contexts suggest that history allows art to overcome the role of social power in the determination of taste?

One cannot exclude the first scenario as possibly the truth. One way of reading the history of art over the past two hundred years is as an on-going opening to new genres, new materials, new artistic subject-positions and identities, and new relationships between artist and audience. This on-going opening has been made possible by political struggles against the established ruling powers. That which was formerly dismissed as non-art created by people counted as non-artists by the cultural authorities has forced its way to inclusion. That which is today regarded as masterpiece (say, the best of the Impressionists) was once regarded as scandalous rubbish.

As the content of any serious public contemporary collection testifies, these struggles have been, overall, successful. At this point in history, the dialectic between a ruling aesthetic consensus and a heterodox outside struggling for recognition is little more than a caricature– the principled battles by women, African-American, non-European, and gay and lesbian artists for recognition *as artists* has long been won.

(The principled victory, of course, does not mean that there are no particular problems faced in particular instances by non-white, non-male artists, but no one, I take it, would, say, publically dismiss all art by women as mere handicraft while reserving the honorific ‘artwork’ for the creations of men only).

Yet, despite the on-going opening towards new artistic practices, the recognized masterworks remain more or less unchanged. Is that reality attributable solely to the fact that the world is still ruled by a class of mostly white men? While the political claim is true, I do not think that the aesthetic judgement follows from it. To understand my position, we need to examine this issue from a long-term historical perspective.

Let us take, for example, the masterworks of the Renaissance. First assembled into private collections by monarchical and Church authority, they have survived liberal-capitalist revolutions and remain recognized as masterworks today. When the Jacobins seized the lands of the Church during the French Revolution, they could also have repudiated and sold off or destroyed the Church’s collection of art. But they recognized a value deeper than its confessional content and preserved it. Likewise, during the Russian Revolution, Lenin and Trotsky defended the historical and aesthetic value of ‘bourgeois art’

even as radical new experiments with artistic form and content were emerging. Today, despite cyclical and predictable attacks on the gallery system and the need to free artistic practice from its confines (most often expressed in a gallery), no one has ever seriously urged the destruction on grounds of cultural irrelevance of the masterworks of history. John Baldessari burned his own works, not Giotto's. Why not?

Let us set aside the commercial value of these works as a problem analytically distinct from their aesthetic value. These works have been preserved, even across the gulfs of revolutionary violence and transformation, because a commitment to preserve them has been renewed generation after generation. In principle, it would have been and is always possible to repudiate this heritage. That it is not repudiated, even by most of the most radical critics of the underlying value system these works often reflect, must mean that something in those works called "classic" or "masterpiece" is able to speak across differences to new generations of people.

Let us take another example, this one more concrete. Fra Angelico's frescoes at the Convent of San Marco in Florence were not 'art works' when first painted, but devotional images intended only for the eyes of his fellow monks, to help them in their prayers. There are no monks there anymore, and so, if *all* that these paintings were was devotional representations, they might well have been bulldozed once the convent ceased to function as a monastery. But people saw something more in them once the immediate religious context of their creation disappeared. The instrumental purpose evaporated and their *beauty* as inquiries into the meaning of sorrow, loss, love, and redemption appeared.

Of course, it is always possible for things once regarded as the highest expression of a given practice to cease to transcend the context and fall victim to indifference— architecture must be the saddest art for just this reason, exemplary creations are regularly destroyed to make way for new buildings and no one— or too few— see this destruction as desecration. At the same time, some works, not only in the visual arts but also literature and music, are able to reinvent themselves from era to era, framing what it is we think about artistic power and achievement, not as an ideal to be emulated— art develops by differentiating itself from its past— but as foundation stones which, were they ever destroyed, would pull the entire edifice down. No artist, no matter how orthodox, could be safe under a regime like the Taliban, who destroyed the giant Buddhas of Afghanistan to prove that what mattered to them was not art of any sort, but ideological purity. Contemporary artists may contest and question and interrogate and problematize the canon all they like (and they should), but they do so as contributors to a tradition in which those works judged canonical have had to repeatedly prove themselves in the judgements of an ever new set of contemporaries. If the great works of the past were *destroyed* in order to make way for the ideologically or positionally new, the tradition of artistic creativity would also be destroyed, thus depriving the iconoclasts of the legitimating foundation of their heterodox practices. Artistic revolution widens the space of the artistically possible, building upon (even if against) the achievements, not the rubble, of the past. The best of those works repeatedly selected for preservation speak to universals of human life— love, death, sorrow, joy, desire, pain, terror, hope, struggle— that even the subaltern as human must identify with as the foundation of their struggles, political and artistic. That which gives voice to nothing but a contextually determined problem or experience will disappear once the context changes (as it must).

Viewed in this light, artistic (or, for that matter, philosophical) tradition is not a filter which selects against and screens out the new, not a servant of conservative forces, but an emergent collective intelligence in which that which is of universal significance (i.e., not a tool of class or racial or sexual

power) is recognized. Tradition is not a thing of the past, over and done with, but rather of the future, in that classics must continue to prove their excellence, or be forgotten (thus refuting their claim to classic status).

There is another dimension to this problem and it concerns the evaluation of contemporary art. It struck me recently (at the New Museum in New York, while looking at the works comprising the latest triennial exhibition organized by the gallery) that there is an inbuilt injustice to looking at new art. Lacking a tradition of critical interpretation, a new work poses challenges to understanding and appreciation made worse by the short time frame of most encounters with it. Artists' statements and curatorial notes about new work rarely contain more than jejeune political commentary about how the given piece is interrogating or contesting something or crossing some border or other. The words soon become predictable in the way a genuine encounter with aesthetic meaning is not. But to be able to say anything of value about a work with which one might spend five minutes is almost impossible, not only because one does not have time to really study the nuances of a piece, but because the piece itself has not had time to reveal its full content.

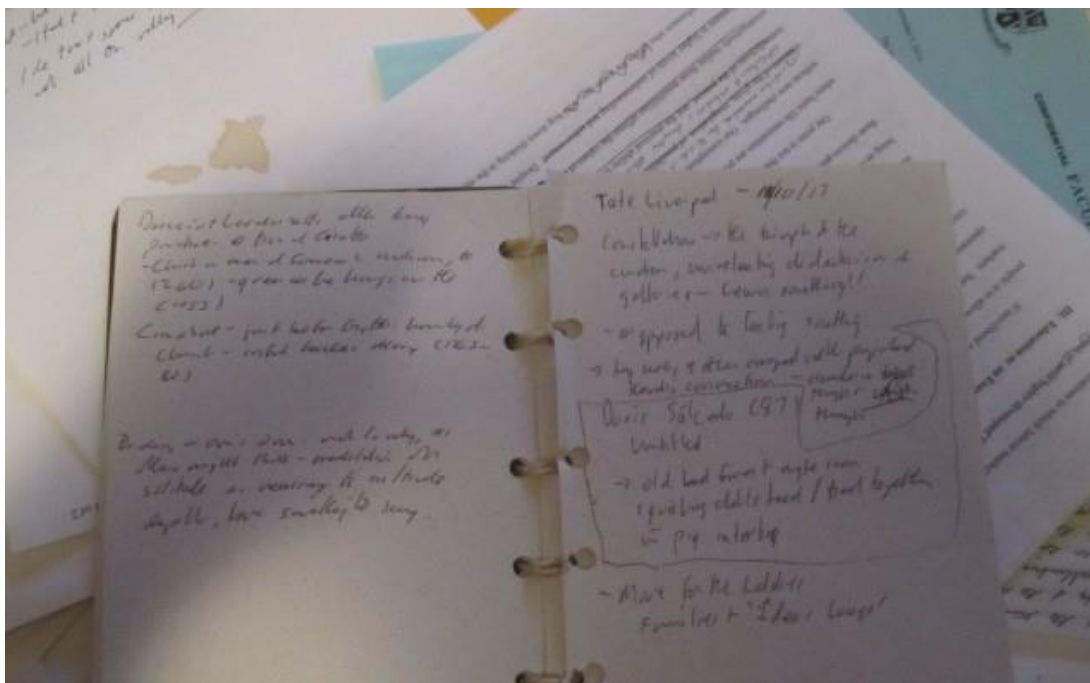
In a real sense, it is always too early to say what it is one is looking at (or reading, or listening to) when one looks at new work. Art must reveal itself over time: the truly great works are those which prove capable of speaking throughout history, the contextually excellent to their own time, and the derivative to no time and no one at all. There are no "masterpieces of contemporary art" not because of any in-built conservatism in the building of public collections or the curating of shows (which are now always scrupulously representative of the diversity of positions from which art can be made), but because it takes time for the world-historically great to emerge. Some of the work on display at the triennial right now will be on display somewhere else in three hundred years, but it is impossible to say today which work(s) will prove capable of transcending the moment of their creation. Those which fall into irrelevance are not bad for that reason, just too much of the moment, incapable of speaking anything but the language of the now. The works that will help extend the range of "masterpieces" is a problem to be worked out over the coming decades and centuries. *Ars longa, vita breva.*

THE METAPHYSICS OF PAPER (AND PEN): BRANCHING OUT FROM PAUL AUSTER

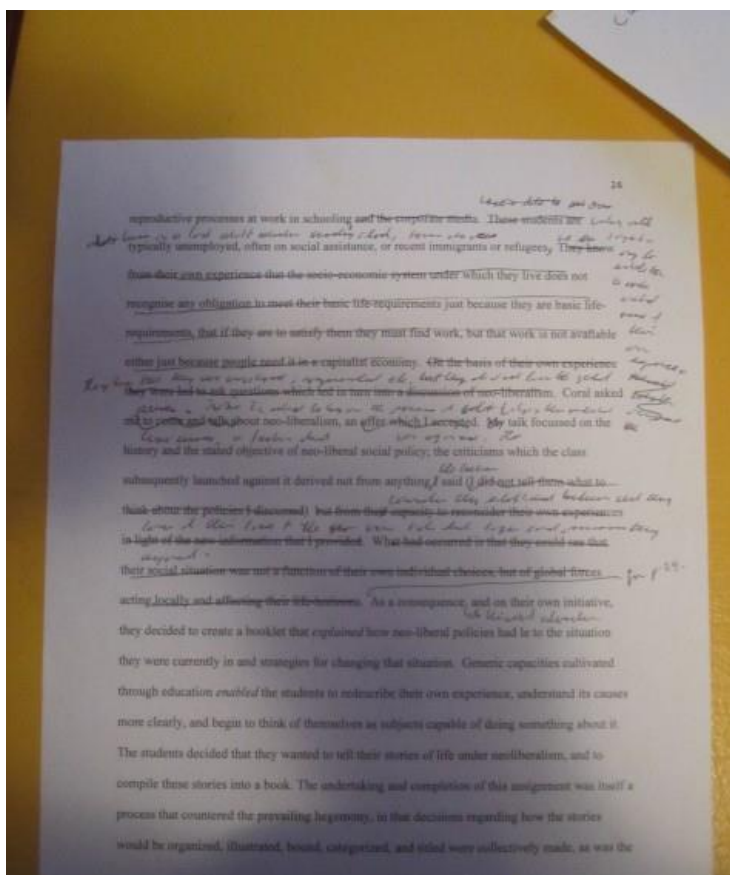
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“What kind of a stationary owner was this, I wondered, who expounded to his customers on the metaphysics of paper, who saw himself as serving an essential role in the myriad affairs of humanity.” (Paul Auster, *Oracle Night*).

The blank page, indeterminate, yet also a frame of fixed dimensions, a field of possibility and a constraint, an invitation both and at the same time to the freedom of the imagination and the discipline of the understanding. But also: the hand. Working in pen and ink affirms the unity of body and mind. But also, the mystery of consciousness and meaning. Neural circuit to nerve impulse to hand movement to ink on page; then, reflected light to nerve impulse to neural circuit. Yes. But also: idea to desire to writing; then, reading, to interpreting, to responding.



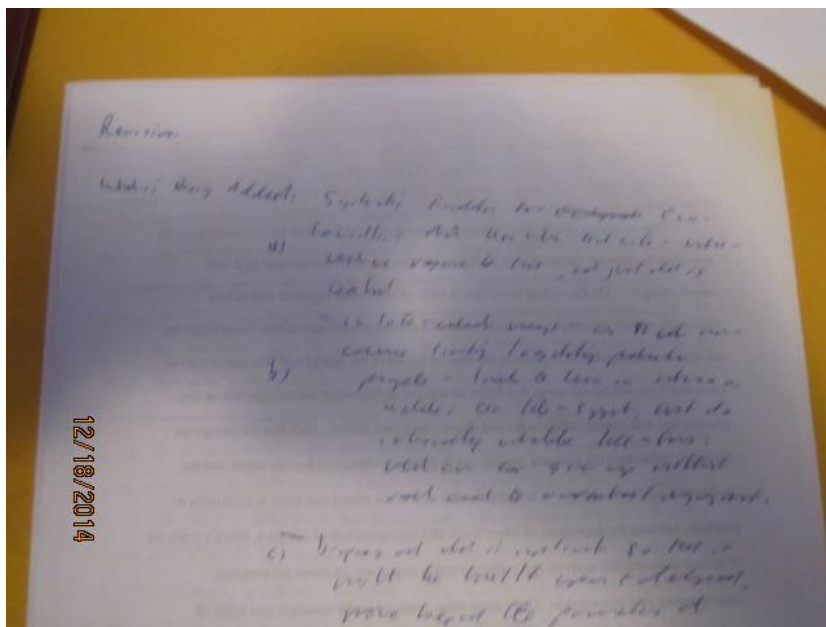
But at first, the blank page and the unformed thought. Where to begin? Always in the wrong place: “I begin by painting a series of mistakes.” (Robert Motherwell). I begin by philosophising a series of mistakes. The paper bears witness to the erroneous beginning. The wrong word, the wrong phrasing, the fallacious inference there for everyone to see, scratched out, still present.



In classical philosophy from Plato on, the real existence of the negative is denied. Evil, ignorance—mistakes— have no substantial reality. Evil is not a real force in the order of things, simply the absence of Good. Ignorance is not the product of some special mental faculty, just absence of knowledge.

The metaphysics of paper: a field on which the substantial reality of the negative, the mistake, the false (true) start is permanently inscribed, never to be hidden, erased, deleted. It endures, beneath or below the revision.

Which means: the good (the proper thought, the sound argument, the convincing speech) takes time. The argument does not arrive fully formed. Working through the mistakes is the condition of its being. The body of work of the mind appears clean to the reader, but no work is clean. The paper and ink are the chaotic materiality of the thought that becomes the finished piece. Consciousness might be a stream (William James), but thinking is an unpredictable strobe, off for the longest time, then a flash, a sudden realization given shape as a desperate note in the margin, an illegible superscript in between lines— testimony to the randomness of insight that becomes coherent structure.



The history of errors that the paper faithfully records contains the real lesson for anyone driven by the imperative of intellectual creation. The truth is not in the finished product but in the uncertainties that never go away and must constantly be surmounted. Thinking is working them out, over, through, and then again. The result is a (perhaps) pleasing veneer into which the effort has disappeared. The paper on which it was first worked out, a material history of the coming to be of the thoughts it expresses, structures, communicates.

There is a difference between archiving on the one hand and storage capacity on the other. Yes, computers have "memory" and the internet (so it is said) never forgets. But it is still scraps of paper, the first draft, the printed version, the marginal note, the book, the things it takes effort and discrimination to "save," that attract me.



A cloud cannot bear weight; it is libraries I trust: paper, ink, bindings, spines; the unexpected find while breathing in the dust and smell of the history of thinking; the fact that it occupies real space into which I and others can enter and share, and , most of all, that it requires human minders, for paper, like truth, is fragile and needs care.

THESES ON PHYSICIAN ASSISTED SUICIDE FROM A LIFE-VALUE STANDPOINT

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On February 6th, 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that sections of the Canadian Criminal Code banning physician assisted suicide violated Section 7 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms which asserts the rights to life, liberty, and security of the person. The Court reasoned that a) to deny a person with a terminal or chronic illness that is causing them unrelievable pain the right to physician assisted suicide is tantamount to forcing them to commit suicide on their own (and is thus a violation of their right to life), and b) a violation of the values of autonomy and dignity that underlie the right to security of the person.

The judgement reads: “Insofar as they prohibit physician-assisted dying for competent adults who seek such assistance as a result of a grievous and irremediable medical condition that causes enduring and intolerable suffering, ss. 241 (b) and 14 of the *Criminal Code* deprive these adults of their right to life, liberty and security of the person under s. 7 of the *Charter*. The right to life is engaged where the law or state action imposes death or an increased risk of death on a person, either directly or indirectly. Here, the prohibition deprives some individuals of life, as it has the effect of forcing some individuals to take their own lives prematurely, for fear that they would be incapable of doing so when they reached the point where suffering was intolerable. The rights to liberty and security of the person, which deal with concerns about autonomy and quality of life, are also engaged. An individual’s response to a grievous and irremediable medical condition is a matter critical to their dignity and autonomy. The prohibition denies people in this situation the right to make decisions concerning their bodily integrity and medical care and thus trenches on their liberty. And by leaving them to endure intolerable suffering, it impinges on their security of the person.”

While to some people the ruling is obviously correct in its underlying moral foundations and practical implications, the decision has, unsurprisingly, proven politically and ethically controversial. As so often in the age of instant reaction and commentary, the critical responses generally worry that “the sanctity of life” will be compromised if Canada allows rational adults to choose to end their lives rather than continue to exist only to writhe in pain. What is meant by life and its sanctity, however, is typically assumed rather than explained. The sanctity of life is indeed a bedrock moral principle, but, as the following theses hope to prove, is not in any way threatened by the principle (and carefully governed practice) of physician assisted suicide.

1) Life is the foundation of all value in the universe. If there were no living things conscious of their existence and their environment as a field of life-support, the universe would not *matter*, because there would be no creatures capable of valuing it as the origin and basis of their lives. Once there is life, there is striving to continue in existence, and therefore valuation: of life as such, of that which supports life, and of the universe as a whole as the ultimate source of that which sustains life. With the emergence of life, material nature is transformed into what McMurtry calls the “life-ground of value”: “the connection of life to life’s resources as a felt bond of being.” (*Unequal Freedoms*, p.23).

2) The objective value of life is thus proven in the first instance not by philosophical argument (or religious belief) but by the actions, interactions, and struggles of living things to survive and reproduce

their lives, and to maintain and improve (to the extent that different species are capable) their conditions of life, in a present which opens onto an open-ended future.

3) The value of particular lives is not a fixed quantity but increases or diminishes in accordance with the quality of the activities through which it is expressed. Since human beings have a greater range of life-capacities than an amoeba, our lives are, correspondingly, more valuable. That is not to say that the amoeba is without life value, but that the life of an amoeba would not be tolerable for a human being. As the distinctive features of human life: social-self-conscious agency, community engagement and connection, a wide-circle of care and concern, the capacity to love and be loved in turn, the capacity for creative work that contributes to the satisfaction of other people's life-requirements- degrade and disappear, that life loses life-value.

4) That which is often referred to by the vague phrase "quality of life" is the range, depth, and life-value (for self and others) of the expressed life-capacities of human beings. Quality of life may be determined by application of McMurtry's Primary Axiom of Value to concrete cases. The axiom reads "X is value if and only if, and to the extent that, x consists in or enables a more coherently inclusive range of thought/feeling/action than without it; where these three ultimate fields of value are defined as: *thought* = *internal image and concept* (T), *feeling* = *the felt side of being* (F)/ senses, desires, emotions, moods, *action* = *animate movement* (A). (*Philosophy and World Problems, Volume 1: What is Good, What is Bad: The Value of all Values Across Time, Places, and Theories*, p. 213) By stipulating that the growth of life-capacities must be "coherently inclusive," the axiom rules out forms of life-capacity expression and enjoyment that unsustainably destroy the natural environment or depend upon the exploitation or oppression of other people. Any form of enjoyed expression of such capacities are not life-valuable, but rather *exclusive* and *destructive* forms of individual self-maximization rooted in a confusion between the desires of self that ignores its dependence on nature and interdependence with others in society.

5) Human individuals are not isolated atoms but socially self-conscious agents who must reflect continually upon their needs for resources and people outside of themselves as well as the future implications of their individual activity. Not everything that it is possible to do is good to do. When that which it is possible to do would damage life and life's conditions, either our own or others', the materially rational and life-valuable choice is to refrain from doing it. Just because metabolic activity can be sustained by mechanical means does not entail that the life that remains retains any value, much less sanctity.

6) Materially rational decisions require the adoption of a philosophical disposition towards life. The proper course of conduct is rarely obvious, but demands inquiry into the forces determining any choice-space and the range of alternatives available. This philosophical disposition must be cultivated early. Because the need to make hard choices can arise at any time, people must constantly reflect on the fundamental principles that make a good life possible, and prepare themselves to make the life-valuable decision in any situation.

7) All human choices are framed by our mortality. The most general fact about individual human life is that it will end in death. Of all the things a philosophical disposition towards life must comprehend, the inescapability of the death is the most important. "We must live each day as if it were our last," goes the cliché, and like all clichés; it contains some truth. The truth it contains is that we must always strive to make the right decision and live according to the right principles, so that, when we die, we have made

ourselves into the best person we could have been; that is, we have created a life that was valuable to ourselves and valued by others as having made real contributions to their development and enjoyment.

8) The best person is not necessarily the longest lived. There is no essential connection between a good life and a long one, although, other things being equal, a long life is better than a short one. Nevertheless, to believe that maintaining mere biological functioning is the same as living a meaningful and good life is a failure of philosophical reasoning. Once our capacities for sentient experience, animate motion, thinking and imagination, and mutually rewarding relationship have been destroyed by disease, meaningful life has ceased (even if assisted respiration has not).

9) It does not follow from this claim that the lives of those with disabilities are without value. Ability and disability are two ends of a continuum along which all real people lie. All living beings face limitations, but the power of human beings to invent forms of life-valuable expression is such that people with physical and developmental disabilities can—provided social resources are used to create accessible environments—find innumerable ways to express and enjoy the capacities they do have and thus to create lives as valuable as any other. Disability alone is thus not grounds for suicide—physician assisted or otherwise, because it is not the total negation of life-value. Only once bodily damage has passed the point where further human activity is impossible does suicide become a life-valuable option.

10) In this context, Socrates' claim that philosophy is a preparation for death takes on a new meaning. (*Phaedo*, 64a-b) Once we have properly understood life-value, it becomes clear that with the on-set of a debilitating, excruciating, incurable illness, the choice to commit suicide, with or without the assistance of a physician, is a life-valuable choice, even though it ends one's life somewhat sooner than otherwise. By understanding life-value as expressed and enjoyed activity, experience, and relationship that contributes to others' capacities for the the same, we realize that we do not lose anything by committing suicide, but remove a source of real life-disvalue — irremediable suffering of oneself and one's loved ones.

11) That dying often entails prolonged suffering (for the self and one's circle of intimates and friends) and, in private (or poorly resourced public) health care systems, enormous expenses does not generate, as John Hartwig argues, a duty to die. There *is* a responsibility to reflect upon the limits of human life, the fact that everyone must die, and to prepare oneself (as far as one can be prepared), to make rationally informed decisions about end of life care. (*Is There a Duty to Die?* pp. 126-7). One legitimate decision can be to die sooner than if one simply let the disease 'run its course.' But this is a decision that the dying person must make (in dialogue with whomever she feels needs to be involved), and not one that can be imposed by a generalized duty to die so as to relieve others of suffering or spare families the expense of prolonged treatment. The later problem can be resolved by adequate public funding of health care, the former is a cross that some people and families may legitimately choose to bear.

12) By like reasoning, there is no duty to prolong one's life past the point where one's existence is nothing more than pain making life-valuable expression of human capacities impossible. There is nobility in suffering, as Nietzsche argued, but only in such suffering as one chooses to endure. (*Beyond Good and Evil*, p.171). To be forced to suffer prolonged agony by the law is tantamount to torture—knowingly and systematically inflicting needless pain on another human being. Everyone can bear the cross he or she chooses; no one should force another to carry one whose weight he or she rejects as too much.

13) By like reasoning, no one may relieve another of the burden of suffering if that person has chosen to bear it, *or* if they have not clearly expressed their preferences on the matter before hand. The disabled community— long treated as objects by scientific medicine and the broader community— has good historical grounds to worry that this decision could make their lives more vulnerable to doctors and even family members who *decide for them* that their lives are not worth living. The Robert Latimer case looms large in their concerns. Their worries can be obviated if the letter of the Supreme Court's judgement guides the writing of the new law. The Court is clear that only competent adults may choose physician assisted suicide *for themselves*. Unless, therefore, there is a clear and unambiguous written or verbal choice to die, there can be no physician assisted suicide. By its very definition, "suicide" means "choice to take one's own life." If there is no choice, there is no suicide, but rather homicide, which is not, obviously, what the Court's decision, allows.

14) Every attempt to translate principle to practice involves hard cases which opponents will try to exploit as reasons that invalidate the principle. Sufficiently clever people with enough time on their hands can always think up slippery slope arguments. For example: what about the case of a person who is in a near vegetative state but who can still communicate with hand gestures. His care giver asks: "Do you want to die by physician assisted suicide?" He gives the gesture he had been giving for 'yes.' The court accepts the gesture as a sufficient expression of consent. But now we have a form of consent that is neither verbal nor written. This opens the door (here is the slippery slope) to people claiming, like Robert Latimer claimed about his daughter, to "know" what the person would want even in the absence of any capacity on their part to express their preferences. And thus we have other people choosing death for those who cannot speak for themselves. Hard cases like this one are important means of testing the implications of principles, but the slippery slope arguments derived from them are fallacious. The fact that a worst case scenario can be imagined does not prove that it will arise. Hard cases should not undermine principles that are otherwise life-valuable, but make us attentive to the possibility for mis-interpretation and abuse.

15) The argument that physician assisted suicide violates the sanctity of life because it interferes with death as a natural process is absurd. Every living organism is threatened by death every moment. If life-value requires accepting death as a natural process, then it follows that no organism should ever do anything to prevent its own death— any interference with it being, on their argument, unnatural. As Hume pointed out more than two centuries ago, if suicide is morally objectionable because it is an "unnatural" shortening of life, then so too is medicine morally objectionable as an "unnatural" prolongation of life. ("Of Suicide," in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, p.100-101). It is beyond comprehension how people who proclaim the sanctity of natural death (by which they sometimes mean death when "god chooses") can reconcile their absolute subservience to mechanical means of prolonging biological functioning (and/or chemical means of reducing pain) with their conception of "natural."

16) The death of individuals is not bad in and of itself and therefore need not be fought against as one fights against an unjust enemy. All things which are— and not only living things— come to be and pass away in time. Not even the universe is immortal. All individuals have valuable capacities to share with others, capacities which, when realized in coherently inclusive ways, make life good. But the future belongs to those who are not yet, and all people must at some point stand aside so that new perspectives on the universe— new beings—can come into existence and feel and see and think and act and connect and create in ways that would never come to pass if those new individuals were not born. The deep reflection required to ask for help dying once one's potential for life-valuable activity has been exhausted affirms the value of *life as enjoyment and contribution*. The sanctity of life is not a

biological fact but a value which we honour by living well, striving to ensure there is a future for new life, while accepting the limitations of our own.

Readings



READINGS: THOMAS PICKETTY: CAPITAL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Originally Published, August 16th, 2014

As a book-object, Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* reminds me of nothing so much as my Progress Publishers hardcover and onion skin edition of Marx's *Capital*, which I picked up for a few dollars when the Communist Party of Canada liquidated its warehouse on Spadina Ave. 25 years ago. Harvard University Press has produced a handsome tome indeed, and there can be little doubt that the marketers hoped to play on the shared title to help move the product. On the dust-jacket, "Capital" is three times the size of "In the Twenty-First Century." Stylistically, too, the book, with its expansive historical vistas, its personal digressions, its illustrations drawn from literature, and its rhetorical positioning of itself as the antidote to collapse, reminds one of its namesake. Picketty the writer lacks the power of Marx's poetry. But there is a Marx-like commitment to science for the sake of social action, a disdain for academic hairsplitting and obscurantism, and an honesty about the severity of the problems the world faces.

But capital in the twenty-first century is no Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. As Marxist critics like David Harvey and Tomas Tengely-Evans have noted, Picketty is not a critic of capitalist society as a whole, or the basic assumptions about the nature of capital, or the legitimacy of private property in universally required natural resources, or the meaning and value of economic growth in capitalism, or markets as resource distributors, or the exploitation and alienation of labour. The book is a very much needed demonstration, against prevailing economic orthodoxy and neo-liberal ideology, that capitalist markets do not produce prosperity for all but ever widening inequality (as Marx also argued, albeit in different terms). But it does not question the ruling money-value system of the capitalist economy, or focus on the material impossibility of limitless economic growth. It does not offer, in other words, a comprehensive and systematic alternative to capitalist society. Still what it does offer is of signal importance to anyone who is theoretically and practically engaged in the task of trying to reconstruct such an alternative. Socialists of the twenty-first century need to read *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and learn from it.

The Argument

This is a large and complex work divided into four Parts. The first explains the difference between income and capital and the relationship between them. This section lays the theoretical foundation for the substantive arguments of Parts Two to Four. Part Two examines the historical evolution of the capital/income ratio. Understanding the forces that affect this ratio is essential to Picketty's main aim, elaborated in Part Three, of explaining the patterns of inequality he observes from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. Finally, in Part Four he makes concrete proposals for reducing the growing inequality he observes. I will not comment separately on each part but instead construct an overview of the argument as a whole.

To begin, we need to understand what Picketty means by income and capital. Income is a flow that "corresponds to the quantity of goods produced and distributed in a given period." (p.51). Capital he treats as a stock, "the sum total of f nonhuman assets that can be owned and exchanged on some market."(p. 46) On first glance, there seems to be an insurmountable difference between what Marx's and Picketty's definition. As both Harvey and Tegely-Evans point out, for Marx, capital is essentially a

process. Firms exploit labour to produce commodities which, when sold at a profit, realise the surplus value labour produced. This money is then re-invested to expand the cycle of production. That is why Marx called capital value that creates more value. For Picketty, profits are not counted as capital, but as income. That which he calls capital Marx would have viewed as accumulated capital– dead labour, in his terms. The difference, however, while significant, is not absolute, because Picketty discovers a dynamic at work similar in the most important political respects to what Marx observed. Unless there is consistent real growth of output, “capitalists do indeed dig their own grave: either they tear each other apart in a desperate attempt to combat the falling rate of profit ... or they force labor to accept a smaller and smaller share of national income, which ultimately leads to a proletarian revolution.” (pp.228-9) Picketty is talking about the past, but he does not them as possible futures.

These are futures that he thinks can be avoided because he is hopeful that it is always possible “to find new and useful things to do with capital.” (p.221) Thus, he believes that constant real growth is in principle economically possible (whether it is materially possible is a question he touches on only in passing, and a problem to which I will return in my conclusion). So long as there is growth of productivity, capitalism can survive. “To sum up, modern growth, which is based on the growth of productivity and the diffusion of knowledge, has made it possible to avoid the apocalypse predicted by Marx and to balance the process of capital accumulation.”(p.234). On the other hand, just because the apocalypse has been prevented, it does not follow that it will be staved off forever, as Picketty reminds the reader. However, the horseman is more likely to be levels of incompatible with cohesive democratic societies than the falling rate of profit. The central economic argument of Picketty’s book is to explain why growth of inequality is not an accident but a structural feature essential to capitalism.

The historical evolution of capitalism can be understood according to what Picketty calls two fundamental laws. The first law describes capital’s share of the national income.(p. 52) Mathematically, it is expressed as:

$$\alpha = r \times \beta$$

where α = the share of capital in the national income (i.e., the share derived from rent on real estate, stock market or bond market investments, and so on, as opposed to wages or salaries);

r = the rate of return on capital (for example $r=5\%$ means that on a 1 million dollar investment one would earn 50 000\$/year);

and β = the capital/income ratio, which is the value of capital expressed as a percentage of the national income (on average in the wealthiest countries capital is worth around six years of national income. If the national income were 1 trillion dollars, the accumulated capital would be worth 6 trillion, or 600%.

Capital’s share of national income will grow the higher the rate of return on capital. The higher the rate of return on capital the more it accumulates and the and the higher the capital income ratio becomes. Growth of the value of α is an important factor in explaining the reasons why inequality is a structural feature of capitalism, but a complete understanding requires the second fundamental law. The second fundamental law explains how the capital/income ratio is determined. It is expressed mathematically as

$$\beta = s/g$$

where s = the savings rate and g = the rate of growth (corrected for inflation and demographic growth). In other words, if the money value of output grew by 10 %, with 5% inflation and 3% population growth, there would be, in real terms, 2% economic growth. Even after factoring in the fact that there are more people claiming a share and each share is worth less, there would still be 2% more available for consumption, investment, and so on. One does not need to be a mathematician to see that the lower the rate of growth, the higher the capital-income ratio will be. Let us start with Picketty's example. Assume that in aggregate terms society saves 12% of the national income each year and the growth rate is 2%, then β will equal 600%. If we hold the savings rate constant and decrease the rate of growth to 1%, then the value of β would double over the long term, to 1200%. As Picketty explains, "This formula, which can be regarded as the second fundamental law of capitalism, reflects an obvious but important point. A country that saves a lot and grows slowly will over the long run accumulate an enormous stock of capital." (p.166). Were capital divided equally between all citizens, or collectively owned, this accumulation in itself would not pose a problem for social cohesion and justice. But capital is not equally held. And in low growth environments (which capitalism has been in for most of the twentieth and all of the twenty-first century, according to Picketty's statistics), with high rates of savings, β grows. If most of the capital is held by a small minority, and the capital income ratio is going up, that means that society is becoming more unequal.

While these formulae are not really predictive laws (they do not tell us whether β will grow or not in the future, or even what factors drive growth), they do help explain the structural tendency towards inequality that defines the history of capitalism. Holdings started out unequal, the more holdings you have the more you can save (where 'save' means 'not spend on consumables' but invest or otherwise store up). In low growth environments, the more you can save the more you can earn and the more you earn the more you can reinvest the earnings in more savings. This dynamic drives inequality.

Picketty's results contradict what had become the orthodox position on inequality, the work of Stanley Kuznets. Working in the 1950's with a more limited data set, but also in the midst of the Cold War (whose politics were more than accidentally connected with his conclusions) Kuznets argued that the pattern of inequality was an inverted u-shaped curve. In other words, capital accumulation initially heightened inequalities, but these were gradually reversed as education and higher labour productivity created more wealth. (pp.13-15). Picketty's data definitively prove that Kuznets' inverted U-shaped curve was an anomaly, the effect of the massive destruction of capital in two world wars and redistributive economic policies and investment in public institutions following the war. In other words, political struggle and public policy can make capitalism more equal, but "it is an illusion to think that something about the nature of modern growth or the laws of the market economy ensures the inequality of wealth will decrease and harmonious stability will be achieved." (p.376). Distributions of wealth are eminently political.

In capitalism, no one gets what they deserve but only what they fight for. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the unprecedented destruction of wealth and resources during World War Two, strong unions in the West, sometimes in alliance with radical students (as in France, 1968) were able to win political parties to a politics of wealth redistribution and public investment. The oil shocks and 'stagflation' crisis of the 1970's discredited these policies and the institutions that made them possible—unions, social movements, public corporations and state-funded social services. A new politics of privatization, globalization of capital flows, tax-rate competition, and union-busting was launched. The results are clear. Taking the United States as my example (Picketty's statistics cover all the largest European and North American economies) the share of total income taken by the top ten percent of was about 50% in 1930, dropped to about 35% between 1950 and 1970, and then began a steady and still continuing increase to stand at 50% again in 2010. This U-shaped curve is found in every major European and North American economy.

The structural cause of this long term trend is, to repeat, a low growth and high savings rate combined with organized political attacks on labour and social services. The higher the rate of return on capital, the more large fortunes will continue to grow regardless of whether they are invested in enterprises which create employment for those who have only their labour to rely upon. “When growth is slow, it is almost inevitable that this return on capital is higher than the growth rate, which automatically bestows outsized importance on inequalities of wealth accumulated in the past.”(p. 423). This structural cause (which explains the long term pattern) is combined with deliberate policies of privatization and lowering the taxes on income derived from capital explains the upswing in inequality since the 1970’s: “the proportion of public capital in national capital has dropped sharply in recent decades ... in all eight leading developed economies... In other words, the revival of private wealth is partly due to the privatization of national wealth.” (p.184) Of course, this privatization of public wealth was not evenly distributed. Those who could afford to buy public assets put up for sale added them to their existing, already massively unequal holdings. The overall result is the accumulation of more and more capital in fewer hands.

The wealthiest are thus freed from the need to work or contribute anything of any life value to anyone else. With a large and diverse enough portfolio, the wealthiest one percent can live without doing anything productive at all, and continue to increase their fortunes without building anything, creating anything of use for anyone else, or in any way aiding the the sort of growth of need-satisfying economies require. They can use their financial power to ensure that political parties continue to adopt policies that allow them to accumulate even more capital, and then pass this wealth on to their children, who become spectacularly wealthy without having to do anything more than be born. Picketty warns that we are returning to the age of the robber baron and the rentier, the age of “patrimonial capitalism,” in which workers scramble to find lower and lower paying work while the richest one percent control an ever increasing share of national income, not because they do anything to deserve it, but just because they can expect a predictable rate of return on their capital. “As global growth slows and international competition for capital heats up, there is every reason to believe that r will be much greater than g in the decades ahead. If we add to this the fact that the return on capital increases with the size of the initial endowment, a phenomenon that may well be reinforced by the growing complexity of global financial markets, then clearly all the ingredients are in place for the top centile and thousandth of the global wealth distribution to pull farther and farther ahead of the rest.” (p.463) If this trend continues (and Picketty is clear it will, unless counteracted by oppositional movements) democracy will become impossible. “The people” cannot rule themselves if their “countries are owned by their own billionaires” who use their money to create nothing but more money for themselves in a cancerous spiral to the bottom.(p.463). (For an explanation of the cancerous nature of this devouring of whole societies by the moneyed elite, see John McMurtry, *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, 2nd edition, 2013).

This is not the news most economists are paid to deliver. Picketty knows it, and embraces the role of idol smasher enthusiastically, providing the evidence needed to put paid to five key myths of contemporary capitalism.

Five Myths Exposed

1) Perhaps the most commonly heard argument in favour of inequality (and it is not new, but goes back at least to Adam Smith), is that it promotes economic growth from which all classes benefit. If the more industrious are rewarded with higher incomes, they will be motivated to reinvest that income in productive enterprises, thus creating jobs and public benefits. While Picketty does not reject this argument out of hand, his statistical analysis reveals that the lower the growth rate, the higher the inequality, proving that there is no positive correlation between inequality and economic efficiency or growth. “Historical experience shows,” he concludes, “that such immense inequalities have little to do

with the entrepreneurial spirit and are of no use in promoting growth.”(p. 572) Instead, they represent, as Marx also concluded, the domination of living labour by dead labour.

2) The second myth is that the rich have earned their higher incomes through superior talent and effort. This is the “meritocratic” argument. In fact, Picketty accepts the idea of meritocracy, he just demonstrates that the richest people in no way deserve the spectacular fortunes they possess, because the sheer amounts cannot be plausibly explained by proportional superiority of talent. Picketty (and Marx, for that matter) do not believe in some mathematical ideal of equality that abstracts from concrete differences of talent and contribution. What he objects to is the unargued assertion that any degree of inequality is explained by superior merit. In many cases, the person who currently controls the fortune has contributed nothing to its existence. As he says of, Liliane Bettencourt, the richest woman in France, “she has never worked a day in her life,” and yet has seen her fortune grow just because other people have invested it for her. She lives off the labour of others. Where is the superior talent?

3) The third myth is that education is the royal road to social mobility and greater income inequality. This myth is the darling especially of the Richard Florida-creative capital crowd, but it is nonsense. First, the same inequality that characterizes income distributions characterizes the quality of educational institutions. The richest people go to the richest schools where they learn to organize and govern society so that it is reproduced in ways that preserve their private interests. “Inequalities of training have largely been translated upward, and there is no evidence that education has really increased intergenerational mobility.” As for the “creative capital” thesis there is again no evidence to support it. In localized contexts, some de-industrialized cities have been able to reinvent themselves (Pittsburgh, for example, or Waterloo, in Ontario), and capital will concentrate in areas where it is already highly concentrated (in the San Francisco bay area in the case of the information technology sector). These are local phenomena, however, and do not establish the central claim that we are on the cusp of a new era of spectacular, ‘creativity’ driven growth. While “skill levels have increased markedly over the past two hundred years” it is nothing more than “mindless optimism” to believe that “capital has lost its importance and we have magically gone from a civilization based on capital, inheritance, and kinship to one based on human capital and talent.” (p.224)

4)The fourth myth is that the wave of privatization that has occurred across the globe has contributed to higher economic growth rates. As I noted above, Picketty demonstrates that it has had negligible effect on the growth rate and is really a case of redistributing formerly public assets to the ruling class, further enriching them at the expense of the majority of people.(p.184)

5) The final myth that Picketty puts paid to is that the real problem today is not class inequality but intergenerational inequality. The claim simply abstracts from the observable realities of income inequality, which fall along class lines regardless of the generation. There are rich young people and rich old people, and their wealth has nothing to do with which “generation” they belong to. The wealth of the world is not being consumed by the post-World War Two generation; it is, all available evidence suggests, being re-distributed upward to the top centile of the population of the eight wealthiest countries, who will pass it on to their children. “The concentration of wealth is actually nearly as great within each cohort as it is for the population as a whole. In other words, and contrary to a widespread belief, intergenerational warfare has not replaced class warfare.”(p. 246)

Cold and unfeeling numbers, clearly presented, are often the most powerful political rhetoric.

The arguments and the evidence are more sophisticated and detailed than I can hope to reproduce in this reading. They are persuasive, knock-down, as they sometimes say in philosophy. They destroy the myths of the market and prove beyond any reasonable doubt what the overall goal of neo-liberal policy has been, and what the effects of (more or less) untrammelled market forces are— the concentration of

capital and wealth in fewer, richer hands. Now that we understand the causes of the problem, let us turn in conclusion to Picketty's solution.

A Tax on Capital?

The boldness of Picketty's critique of the dynamics of wealth distribution is not matched, unfortunately, by his proposed solution. After demonstrating in the most convincing fashion that inequality is growing, threatening the social foundations of liberal-democratic society, the only solution Picketty suggests is (by his own admission) a modest progressive global tax on capital. His suggested upper rate is 10% on the largest fortunes of one billion or more Euros. The main purpose of the tax, he argues, "is not to finance the social state, but to regulate capitalism." (p.518) It is not clear, however, how such a modest tax could achieve that much grander purpose. It would not even reduce inequality. If the largest fortunes increase by 10% per year through wise investment strategies the tax would fix inequality at existing levels. True, it would stop the growth of inequality, but it would not alter the class structure of capitalism in the least.

But it also does not address the real problems of capitalism, of which inequality of wealth is a symptom. Capitalism generates inequality of income because it is rooted in inequality of power over life-conditions. Those who live off of their capital do not need to work; those with no capital do. This is the fundamental problem of capitalism that underlies all the rest. Those who live off their capital do so because they own the natural and productive wealth that everyone needs in order to live, develop, and enjoy their lives. Because they are in a position to determine the life conditions of everyone else, the ruling class can also exercise preponderant control over the institutions of the state. Since state institutions have the exclusive authority to make law and set public policy, control over the state, rooted in control over life conditions, confers control over law, policy, and the institutions of social life governed by them. A tax on capital that merely fixes inequalities at existing levels does nothing to address this undemocratic and life destructive structure of power.

Nor does it expose the material irrationality of the ends of a capitalist economy. Like a shark, capital must move or die. As we have seen, Picketty agrees with Marx on this point. However, despite some superficial and unsystematic references to human needs, and a teasing comment about "real democracy and social justice" requiring specific institutions of their own, "not just those of the market" (p.424) he does not anywhere contest the ruling norm of capitalist society— growth of money value as the supreme end to which life and social institutions must be bent. What he fails to note is that money-capital growth ultimately depends upon the exploitation of natural and social life-support systems. When it becomes the sole end of society it threatens and destroys what McMurtry calls the collective life-capital upon which our existence depends. Collective life capital is "what enables life to reproduce and grow rather than degrade and stagnate through time. We defend it and our health by buying life goods and nothing else. The turning point is as old as physical and cultural evolution. *Every human advance is by knowing what enables life from what does not.*" ("Winning the War of the World," p. 10). Picketty concerns himself with a real problem— extreme inequality and the undermining of democracy—, but he does not see the deeper material irrationality of capitalism.

Capital in the Twenty-First Century is thus an important, but ultimately unsatisfying book. Like the "equality of what debate" that consumed Anglo-American political philosophy in the 1990's and 2000's, the book exposes the unjustifiable extent of inequality today, but does not work down to expose the depth normative and social problems of capitalism as a whole. Picketty mentions "real democracy," but does not tell us whether the institutions of "real democracy" are the existing institutions freed from the distorting effects of extreme inequality, or new institutions. Of economic democracy of the sort envisaged by, for example, Pat Devine, in *Democracy and Economic Planning*, he

has nothing to say. The impression one gets is that Picketty thinks that existing institutions are sufficient for real democracy, provided that the market forces that threaten them are constrained and regulated. If so, then he needs to pose the question to himself: if capitalism can be regulated by existing institutions, why are they currently being used to de-regulate it? He knows the answer— they have been captured by ruling class interests. Thus we return to the real issue, not inequality of wealth in the abstract, but class power dominating all of society for the sake of life-destructive increase of its money-value holdings. Taxes cannot fix that problem, but only an alternative democratic life-economy based on the principle that resources are to be sustainably employed to comprehensively and universally satisfy the fundamental life-requirements of all people.

READINGS: HARVEY, MOUFAWAD-PAUL, AND SEARS ON THE FUTURE OF ANTI-CAPITALIST STRUGGLE

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David Harvey: *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford, 2014).

Joshua Moufawad-Paul: *The Communist Necessity* (Kersplebdeb, 2014).

Alan Sears: *The Next New Left* (Fernwood, 2014).

The period from 2008 to the present is characterised by wide-spread dissatisfaction with growing inequality, the accelerating decay of liberal democracy, the unaccountable rule of financial industry oligarchs, on-going ecological degradation, and the unending sacrifice of human life—mostly young—in wars that signify the global system-crisis. Unfortunately, while opposition to the collapsing liberal-capitalist world-order is widespread, life-coherent political responses—responses that address the causes and propose plausible and realizable alternatives to systemic ecological and social threats to life—have not yet emerged. There have been some hopeful monsters—unexpected forms that looked like they might survive long enough to reproduce and grow—The Arab Spring, Wisconsin, Occupy, the Quebec Student Strike, the election of Syriza— but at this point only Syriza is still active, and is confronting (through no fault of its own) the severe limitations an international economic system places on the ability of national governments to respond to the democratic demands of its people that their fundamental needs be met before creditors are paid. The crisis is so severe that even orthodox economists like Thomas Picketty are warning that revolution might be the only way to address inequalities of wealth grown far beyond anything that could be justified in terms of “incentives” and meritocratic reward for effort. The problem that Picketty does not examine, but which it is the purpose of this review to discuss, is what political form a new revolutionary movement might take in the aftermath of the failures of early and mid-twentieth models of vanguardism and armed struggle. Without an answer to that question, the world will certainly be in for a period of prolonged instability, punctuated no doubt by unpredictable spontaneous rebellion, but not a period of revolutionary transition to a more democratic, life-affirming, sustainable, just, mutualistic, and enjoyable world.

The three texts I will examine were not written in response to each other, but are linked together by a shared belief that capitalism is in systemic crisis, that this crisis is damaging to human and planetary life, and that this current period—like the period around 1917—is demanding an answer to the question: what is to be done? David Harvey’s *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*, Joshua Moufawad Paul’s *The Communist Necessity*, and Alan Sears’ *The Next New Left* broadly share a historical materialist approach to understanding the crisis, but only Moufawad Paul draws what might be called orthodox Marxist political conclusions. Of the three, Harvey’s is the most theoretically ambitious. It is a comprehensive re-interpretation of the social contradictions of capital as well as a political intervention into the current crisis. Moufawad-Paul and Sears, though less comprehensive, are not of less political importance. Harvey and Sears are more honest about the need for radical rethinking of the traditions and prescriptions of revolutionary vanguardism. Moufawad Paul, while offering some instructive criticisms of rhetorically overblown academic communism, tries to resurrect that vanguardism, which leaves his argument strangely, and sadly, disconnected from the concrete demands of the present

conjuncture. I will treat each in turn, and conclude with some general observations (but not, alas, solutions) to the political, economic, social, and ethical challenges that continue to confront our world.

Harvey makes it clear at the outset that his book is not about the contradictions of *capitalism*, but of *capital*. Capitalism is a complex social form which is structured by political, economic, social, and cultural institutions, riven by complex differences of group experience, in which innumerable individual perspectives and goals collide in daily life. The contradictions of capitalist society, therefore, are more complex than the contradictions of capital, because they involve problems of sex and gender, race, ethnicity, religion, morality, military conflict and the machinations of national and international *real politik*. The contradictions of *capital*, on the other hand, while always mediated by the contradictions of capitalist society, are analytically separable. Those contradictions are the barriers that the accumulation of capital (in its dynamic form, money-value that creates more money-value) generates for its further accumulation. “I make ... a clear distinction between *capitalism* and *capital*. This investigation focusses on capital and not capitalism ... By capitalism I mean any social formation in which processes of capital circulation and accumulation are hegemonic ... Capitalism is rife with innumerable contradictions, many of which, though, have nothing in particular to do directly with capital accumulation. ... Why do I not include the contradictions of race and gender (along with many others, such as nationalism...)? ... because although they are omnipresent within capitalism, they are not specific to the form of circulation and accumulation that constitutes [its] economic engine.”(p.7) While this use of abstraction is legitimate as a means of isolating the economic driver of capitalism, Harvey aim is not theoretical clarity for its own sake, but to make clear the real life implications of this driver for real people. Understanding the book is demanding, but its ultimate focus on practical implications for social change makes it accessible to the attentive reader.

Harvey divides the contradictions of capital into three sets: the foundational, the moving, and the dangerous. The foundational contradictions are endemic to capitalism and take a more or less constant form across history. While they are essential to the economic dynamics of capital, they have important political and indeed ethical implications. The contradiction between use-value and exchange value, for example, does not only mean that goods and services are produced if and only if there is an expectation of profit to be made, but also that people can be systematically deprived of that which their lives require if they cannot afford to pay for commodified life-necessities. Likewise, the contradiction between production and the realization of profit (as producer, capital has an interest in low wages whereas the realization of profit requires workers with enough money to spend) not only poses a challenge for capital, it also encourages working class demands and struggles to focus on wages—to the exclusion not only of system-transforming demands, but other areas of work life (such as working time). By understanding these contradictions and how they interlock to form a dynamic system that is continually prone to economic crisis, Harvey believes we can see the basic outlines of an alternative society: “These contradictions define a political terrain on which an alternative to the world that capital creates can be define. The political orientation must be towards use values rather than exchange values, towards a money-form that inhibits private accumulation of wealth and power ... into multiple overlapping regimes of collectively managed common property Instead of production for production’s sake leading the way to a forced world of manic and alienated consumerism, production should be rationally organised to provide the use-values necessary to achieve an adequate material standard of living for all. Realization should be converted into a wants and needs based demand to which production responds.”(pp.88-9). Although he does not often use the term, these principles of his alternative correspond to the core economic principles of the Marxist socialist tradition.

The strong point of this aspect of his argument is that his analysis of the contradictions enables him to frame an alternative in terms of what capital itself points towards but cannot realize: a world in which its extraordinary productivity satisfies the fundamental requirements of a meaningful and good life for all. The program cannot thus be easily dismissed as utopian, since all that it requires for its realization already exists, but under the exclusive and undemocratic control of the ruling class. On the other hand, Harvey fails to explain what the difference between want and need is, and how his alternative is going to restrain “manic consumerism” if it leaves wants and needs on an equal footing. What is missing, in short, is a coherent account of just what goods and relationships a meaningful and valuable life requires. This lacuna is filled, to some extent, in his analysis of the second and third sets of contradictions.

The second set of contradictions Harvey calls “moving,” to indicate that although they are found in all periods of capitalist history, the form they take can vary widely, both historically and geographically. These contradictions are not only challenges to the ability of capital to reproduce itself, they continually pose what one might call ethical-existential problems for the meaning and value of people’s lives. Capitalist productivity and the technologies it generates continually make some forms of human labour obsolete, calling into question not only the ability of (some) workers to find work, but the very meaning of human work as a source of relevance and meaning in life. The contradiction of freedom and domination, likewise, is not only an economic problem caused by the system-need to ensure compliant workers; it touches on the deepest problem for mortal beings—who will control their finite life time and what options will be available for different modes of realizing the capacities for experience and activity through which life is made worth living. Workers, he argues, “do ask, just as much as anyone else, what the meaning of the kind of life to which they are condemned might be and who it is that is in charge of the evolutionary process that either casts them into the ranks of the unemployed as disposable beings or offers them a job ... When meaningful jobs disappear, then the clear sense of being exploited is dangerously supplemented by a growing sense of total alienation as to their meaningless position in a make-work world.” (pp.128-9). Although Harvey’s explicit aim was to focus narrowly on the barriers capital imposes on its own ability to grow, he is continually pushed outside the narrow economic realm, which is a great merit of the book.

Harvey’s analysis underscores the point that economics is not so much a science but a structuring frame that determines whether and the extent to which human life-activity is intrinsically valuable or reduced to a mere means of system-reproduction. Given the fact that these moving contradictions cut to the core of what it is to be human, they are, potentially, a more explosive source of system-transforming demands. One can struggle for higher wages without necessarily calling into question the legitimacy of capitalism; one cannot struggle against alienated labour or class domination without demanding a different system. Occupy, for example, was not just about the unfairness of wealth and income inequality; it was about a different form of living- mutualistic, slower, deeply democratic, tolerant, and dignified. While there are many criticisms that could be made in retrospect, what Occupy demonstrated was that the sources of opposition and the demand for an alternative are not narrowly economic- jobs and money at any cost- but political, ethical, and existential— governing say over the institutions that shape our collective life and real chances to do work that is socially valuable and individually valued.

The final set of contradictions, what Harvey calls the “dangerous contradictions, are threats not only to the accumulation of capital, but capitalist (and, potentially), any human society. The dangerous contradictions are between the need for capital to continue to grow and the ecological conditions of organic life and the foundational ethical-existential conditions of human social life. The constant need to grow could, if left unchecked, consume every natural space and substance and subordinate every

human experience, activity, and relationship to a commodified object for sale. That which is not commodifiable would be eliminated. As ecological destruction and “universal alienation” spread, even the pretence of democratic society could not be maintained. The end of social reproduction amidst rising inequality and billions of disposable beings could only be ensured by the most ruthless surveillance-police state means. “Oligarchic capitalist class privilege and power are taking the world in a similar direction almost everywhere. Political power backed by intensifying surveillance, policing and militarised violence is being used to attack the well-being of whole populations deemed expendable and disposable. ... Ruthless oligarchic power is now being exercised through a totalitarian democracy directed to immediately disrupt, fragment, and suppress any coherent anti-wealth political movement (such as Occupy). (p.292) Harvey does not indulge in irresponsible catastrophism, but here as throughout the text, draws out worse-case scenarios from existing, observable, trends.

His solution draws heavily on Andre Gorz’s *Critique of Economic Reason*. Harvey, like Gorz, defends a set of demands that centre around severing the link between meaningful activity and work. If technology is going to continue to advance then human labour will become less and less important to production. The technological replacement of human labour will pose a problem for capital (since it valorizes itself through the exploitation of labour), but also for those who depend for their living on being exploited. A stark choice is emerging: either the majority of people figure out how to gain control over the productive apparatus of society and put technology to work satisfying human needs, or they will find themselves the objects of totalitarian surveillance and military control in support of the tiny fragment of the population appropriating most of the world’s wealth. The question is: on what basis can this movement be constructed?

Harvey tries to break his political ideas free from the orthodox Marxist idea of working class revolution. First, he notes all the various sites outside of the workplace where the circulation and reproduction of capital can be disrupted. People can fight over affordable housing and nutritious food, for example, which calls into question the private control over space and sustenance, which then raises deeper questions about the legitimacy of the capitalist system as a whole, grounded as it is in private control over universally needed resources. Thus, on a practical level, he suggests that a broad-based anti-austerity/de-commodification of life-goods movement be built. What the left has failed to adequately theorise, he claims, is the way in which capital takes back with one hand what it gives (in the form of wages) with the other: “What labour wins in the domain of production is stolen back by landlords, the merchants, ... the bankers, ... the lawyers and commission agents, while a large chunk of what is left over goes to the taxman.” (p.67). Rather than see these struggles as peripheral to the main struggle between workers and bosses at the point of production, Harvey argues that they ought to be made central to anti-capitalism.

Uniting the seventeen point program with which he concludes the book (the elements of the program consisting of theoretical resolutions of the seventeen contradictions he analyses) is a set of philosophical principles he calls “revolutionary humanism.” Revolutionary humanism and not class consciousness must be the foundation for a successful anti-capitalist politics, he believes, because the challenges posed by the dangerous contradictions go beyond what the nineteenth century idea of class consciousness can solve. It is not only the commodification of labour that causes universal alienation today; it is the growing obsolescence of human labour even in fields requiring intellectual labour. The environmental crisis cannot be resolved simply through workers’ control of production; its solution requires a revolution in human motivation and desire, its re-grounding in and limitation by fundamental needs. In short, anti-capitalist movements need to think about what it means to be human and articulate arguments

that will convince people, not only that another world is possible, but also that another humanity is possible.

I believe that Harvey is correct to insist that a coherent anti-capitalist politics that can avoid the failures of the early twentieth century revolutionary left needs universal ethical-existential foundations. The problem, however, is that Harvey does not work down to the most universal ethical-existential foundations of all: the shared life-needs of living organisms within the global field of which human beings are situated as integrally natural-social beings with the richest set of life-possibilities. This truly universal material foundation for an alternative life-economy is implied throughout his argument, but is never made explicit. Nevertheless, Harvey's arguments speak to the heart of the global challenges the world faces, and his concrete proposals form as good a starting point as any for a set of objectives that can guide the political practice of whatever new organizational forms arise to challenge the bleak future that awaits us unless the dominance of capital over life is broken.

At the same time as Harvey's theoretical critique is deeply insightful, it is possible to object—if object is the right word— that as far as organizational form goes, Harvey is silent. A list of principled ways of solving the contradictions is fine as a point of orientation, but it does not tell us what kind of organization is needed to successfully institutionalise those principles, or how to build it. The same argument cannot be made against Joshua Moufawad-Paul's *The Communist Necessity*. Moufawad-Paul's explicit goal is to deflate the pretensions of a recently formed academic cottage industry (Badiou, Žizek, etc.,) devoted to the production of verbose, abstract invocations of communism as an ideal alternative to capitalism but divorced from any attempt to specify a political practice capable of realising it. "Intellectuals at the centre of capitalism who are attempting to reclaim the name [of communism] might give lip-service to Luxembourg's maxim "socialism or barbarism," but what application of this maxim would eman in practice—that is, the question of how to make the necessity of communism a reality—is generally avoided." (p.31). In its place, Moufawad-Paul argues, is an uncritical hope that somehow the spontaneous movements that have arisen against certain manifestations of capitalism and neo-colonialism recently will coalesce into a mass movement capable of overthrowing ruling class power.(p.32)

Moufawad-Paul is dismissive of this hope on the grounds that because they do not specify a mechanism of coalescence, supporters of disparate social movements are not serious about revolutionary transformation. (p.32). Moufawad-Paul *is* serious, he assures us, and the proof of this seriousness is found in his return to an unabashed, unreconstructed vanguardism grounded in what he calls "revolutionary science:" "Science is that which speaks to material conditions without mystification, science provides a natural explanation of natural phenomena. Physics is a physical explanation of physical phenomena, biology is a biological explanation of biological phenomena, ... and historical materialism is an historical/social explanation of historical/social phenomena. Why, then, is historical materialism a revolutionary science? Because the historical/social explanation of historical/social phenomena is the very mechanism of the class struggle, of revolution. And this scientific hypothesis is that which capable of demystifying the whole of history and myriad societies, a way to gauge any and every social struggle capable of producing historical change." (p.43) One can admire Moufawad-Paul's commitment to reconnecting theory and practice and yet be astounded at the completely ahistorical way in which he conceives of the "revolutionary-scientific" nature of historical materialism. Three critical points must be raised in this regard.

First, there is and can be no identity of method between the natural sciences and critical social theories like historical materialism. The natural sciences work by analysing complex phenomena into isolatable elements and testing hypotheses concerning their behaviour in controlled conditions. The goal is precise mathematical modelling and prediction. Critical social theories cannot replicate these procedures, because they focus on complex wholes the scientific analysis of which would destroy the object under examination. The complex whole which is society also includes elements like value systems and beliefs which cannot be quantified and yet are causes of the behaviours (in this case, revolution) the theory hopes to explain. While long historical research reveals patterns and permits generalization, nothing like predictability is possible, because people react differently to different situations, whereas basic material forces do not. The law of the inverse square allows a physicist to work out the gravitational force between two bodies anywhere in the universe; economic crisis does not automatically produce revolution. So Moufawad-Paul's "revolutionary science" lacks that which science must achieve to be science— knowledge of laws that enable the prediction of behaviour.

This problem leads directly to a second: the reduction of the "material" of historical materialism to class struggle. Certainly class struggle is a fundamental factor in explaining historical change and political and economic progress (and, when the ruling class is victorious, regression). But class struggle, as feminists, anti-racist activists, indigenous rights movements, queer theorists, and movements for accessibility led by people with disabilities have been arguing for four decades, cannot adequately explain or address the broad set of problems differently situated and identified human beings must confront. Historical materialism, as a political theory of emancipatory action and not just a dispassionate understanding of social conflict has to develop as struggles change and diversify. I agree completely that a unified movement is necessary to solving structural problems, but that unity cannot be grounded in class position, notwithstanding the fact that class struggle (as thirty years of ruling class war on workers has proven) remains of central historical importance. I have argued elsewhere about how a life-grounded understanding of human being as concrete universal can provide a non-reductionist and non-exclusionary ethical-political foundation for a unified movement. I will not repeat those arguments here, but instead move on to discuss the third problem with Moufawad-Paul's position.

Ironically, the third problem is the unhistorical way in which Moufawad-Paul understands history. This problem follows directly from the second— because he reduces the material of history to class struggle, he misses the actual lessons that political history over the past forty years has taught. But unwilling to learn from history, he is left with no alternative but to insist on his own version of it in which—contrary to all available historical evidence—"the masses" are spurred into action by a vanguard party wielding scientific truths. As I have argued, such truths are not available to critical social theories, and, even if they were, "the masses" themselves have long since refused to respond to exhortations to fulfill their "historical mission." As the only evidence for the existence of an historical mission is a group explicitly acting on it, the absence of such a group is strong evidence that the mission is not real, but the product of theory. When the evidence does not support the theory then—by Moufawad-Paul's own argument— the theory must change. Unfortunately, Moufawad-Paul does not abide by his own conclusions in this regard.

So, it is true to say that "the most oppressed and exploited masses are reading neither Badiou nor Debord, neither Zizek nor the invisible committee," but it does not follow that their work is completely divorced from history, as he goes on to claim.(p.95) The abstract nature of their work is a consequence of the current impasse of the left—an impasse brought on by the failures of the "revolutionary science" Moufawad-Paul looks to as the source of clarity. However, if the Leninist and Maoist traditions could solve our problems, they would have—they had seventy years to work, and they did

not. Of course, for all of those seventy years they were locked in struggle with the capitalist world. The failures cannot be uniquely attributed to endogenous factors. Nevertheless, they failed, and this failure combined with the deepening of the crisis of life-conditions under capitalism has produced (although this situation may be changing over the last five years) a retreat to theory as an attempt to preserve the hope for a better world in conditions not propitious for the realization of such hopes. Whatever criticisms need to be made about philosophical communism, they need to be made in the historical context which helps explain its emergence.

Still, Moufawad-Paul is not wrong to argue that “communist hypotheses” will not feed people or free them from alienated labour and social relations. Since the Arab Spring uprisings we have seen widening social struggles and electoral breakthroughs for far left parties like Syriza. Moufawad-Paul is not particularly impressed by these struggles because they are not grounded in his revolutionary science. Nevertheless, millions of people across the Arab world rose up to contest the legacy of Western imperialism and colonialism (mass poverty and violent dictatorship) and hundreds of thousands, inspired by the Arab Spring, began the Occupy movement in North America and Europe. In last year’s Greek elections “The Union of the Radical Left” (Syriza) won the Greek elections. One can make all manner of abstract criticisms about the politics of these movements, but in these early days of a new shape of struggle, we should rather look upon them as experiments to find the organizational form(s) appropriate to what Alan Sears calls the “next new left.”

The excellence of Sears’ book is found in its deep historical understanding of the radical left in Canada and its honesty about the need for political experimentation if the left is to become once again what it was in the thirties and the sixties- a broad political force for change rooted in an actually existing alternative culture of anti-capitalist values. Sears calls this system of actually existing anti-capitalist values “the infrastructure of dissent.” He argues that “radical counter-currents are sustained by an infrastructure of dissent made up of a broad range of organizations and networks that support the development of activist capacities. Anti-capitalist organizations made up a part of this infrastructure of dissent, but there were also many other elements ranging from informal neighbourhood and workplace networks to shared culture and leisure activities, from rank and file union organizing within trade unions to alternative media.” (p.5) The significance of Sear’s novel concept of the infrastructure of dissent is that it reveals that activism cannot be sustained by force of commitment alone. On-going commitment requires a community that provides psychological strength (to compensate for feelings of alienation from the broader society against which one struggles) and material support to maintain serious struggles when access to income and the life-supportive goods it provides are cut off. If it is the case that social change requires sustained activism, and sustained activism requires an infrastructure of dissent, and the infrastructure of dissent of the old new left (which began in the 1960’s) has largely disappeared, then we should not expect the next new left to arise overnight, but its emergence will require a longer period of rebuilding a new infrastructure of dissent.

Sears traces both the building up of the infrastructure of dissent between the 1930s and the 1960s and its dismantling at the hands of the successful neo-liberal reaction: “The infrastructure of dissent that supported mass insurgency in the twentieth century largely tumbled down in the earthquake of neoliberalism and cannot be rebuilt. There have been major changes to in the organization of work, including geographic locations, size of workplaces, engineering of labour processes, weakening of unions, gender/racialized composition of workplaces, and erosion of job security.”(p.12). As we can see, the nature of the infrastructure of dissent is dialectically connected to the social structure in which it evolves. In the 1930,s for example, where a mass trade union movement was the leading political force, unions played a vital social and cultural role in the lives of their members. Women were often found

playing important supporting roles, reflecting, to some extent, the existing gendered division of labour,. As struggles proliferated in the 1960s to include the autonomous organization of oppressed groups, feminism allowed women to play a leadership role in their own struggles, but also to radically transform the cultural landscape, creating a new dimension to the infrastructure of dissent that allowed activist women to form the sustaining community bonds they needed to carry on their fight against a hostile traditional culture. The same could be said for queer activists, black activists, and the student movement. If the infrastructure of dissent that supported one period of struggles emerges in organic, dialectical interaction with those struggles and the specific problems a given social formation throws up, then they are historically intransitive—the infrastructure of dissent of one period cannot support the struggles of a different period. Hence, a new infrastructure of dissent must gradually be built.

One can see the broad outlines of a new infrastructure of dissent emerging— Occupy, on-line activism and alternative media, new informal international networks, and a general culture of horizontal connection, participation, and tolerance for concrete differences of all sorts is developing. The participatory nature of these movements, their stress on the importance of difference and individuality and the complete expression of all perspectives reflects the collapse of and spells doom for the sort of hierarchical vanguardism that Moufawd-Paul hopes to revive. That is not to say that there are not weaknesses to horizontalism and undisciplined participatory democracy. I have discussed these problems in detail elsewhere. Instead of repeating the critique, I want to stick with Sears' discussion of the challenges the current period poses to radical organizing.

The first challenge is the continued hegemony of an old social democratic and union-based left which has run out of ideas and energy. "A left that limits itself to defending existing conditions and tends to get confined to an uninspiring politics of protecting deeply compromised, under-funded, and heavily bureaucratised institutions and services (ranging from schools to social programs to union contracts) from ever deepening attacks. It can be difficult to find traction for demands and ways of organizing that point beyond the horizons of what already exists."(p.88) Sears' worries here are not without merit, but one should also keep in mind the other side— public institutions, compromised and bureaucratic as they might be, are also the fruit of past struggles, and represent, imperfectly, a democratic and needs-based counter-logic to the money-value of the capitalist market. Defensive (or, as I have called them, preservative) struggles should not be seen as ends in themselves, but openings for a political conversation about how public institutions were won in the first place and what the deep social drivers of the austerity now threatening them are. There is no guarantee that these conversations will produce the next new left, but that new left will have to grow out existing struggles, and people are willing to fight to protect what they are in danger of losing.

Still, Sears is correct to argue that the next new left needs a more inspiring vision of the future. What that vision will look like in detail will have to be invented by the activists who create it. Observation of emerging trends suggest that the next new left will be young, will not look favorably upon institutional hierarchy, will insist on a diverse leadership representative of social and cultural difference out of which concrete identities are built, and will favour inclusive consensus decision making to top-down imposition of organizational discipline. Whether these emerging trends can generate the infrastructure of dissent they will need if they are to yield new movements capable of making fundamental social changes is an open question. Whether the horizontal and consensus based politics favoured by young activists can produce stable institutional forms and effective decision making in a crisis is also an open question. One of the main problems faced by Occupy was that any difference tended to give rise to separation from the main movement. Rather than develop forms of democratic *centralist* decision making, in which, after free and full debate, all members of the group accept the responsibility to defend

the decision made, activists in Occupy who disagreed with one direction simply went off to do their own thing, with the result that it was impossible to coordinate collective responses when the inevitable state repression came. The point here is not to dismiss the need for experimentation with new models, but only to warn that effective politics, politics that does more than resist but can also institutionalise and protect across the board changes, needs some element of centralism (discipline in the support for collective decisions) to complement its democratic life-blood. Failure to do so probably means a period of ephemeral spontaneous struggle that does not generate the social power necessary to reverse the neoliberal austerity agenda, let alone ideas for global alternatives on the agenda of the concretely possible.

Sears' concludes, correctly, that these problems cannot be solved by abstract theorizing: "The transformative model of self-activity is based on the idea that people who are faced with an unequal world learn as they start to take collective action. They share ideas and debate strategies," and in this way figure out as they go what works, what did not work, and the reasons why.(p.116) Out of such learning processes (for which there is no substitute) solutions to the pressing organizational challenges of the day are solved. Or not. One cannot exclude the possibility of failure where beliefs in strong conceptions of historical necessity are (as they ought to be) rejected. Freedom to change implies the possibility of failure. We can guarantee failure by persisting with old models of organizing where social conditions no longer support them. We can never guarantee success, which means that achieving it requires ever-renewed efforts, which means further that is political struggle requires discipline as well as hope and invention.

Evocations



MOON, JANUARY 2ND, 2015 (FOR HERB)

Originally Published, January 5th, 2015

Finally, tonight there is a chill in the air. Some coolness in January feels right. To the east, a nearly full moon rises, back-lighting the tree across the street. Though helpless in its winter inertia, its limbs, like worked old hands, stretch skyward, defiant, strong. In between its gnarled fingers the landing lights of a jet appear. It banks to begin its final approach to Detroit. The world is silent; the party is over. Behind the night, the unrelenting gloom of Southern Ontario winter hides. But the moon makes the grey beautiful.

Of all the things I imagine the dead will miss, it is these simple, unexpected, undeserved, unpriced moments. Yes: work, struggle, success, triumph, victory are good, but they exact a cost— failure, the vanquished, the losers. Through them, life is enabled, but not enjoyed. But the moon- crescent or full— is there every 28 days, and craggy old trees, and spring shoots, and the sparkle in the eye of your beloved, the wave of a friend, home— wherever and whatever that means— a favourite street, the smell of the dinner we cook for each other, the song that won't let you not dance, all these things just seize us and make us glad, just for being there, nothing else.

All these things say: "Life is good, and should last." But everyone knows, life is not (all) good, and does not last. With each birth, a unique perspective on the order of things is born, an intrinsically valuable centre of social self-consciousness comes into being, a thinking body that feels and acts in ways never to be repeated in the whole future of the universe. There is no balance sheet of being— each birth an absolute gain, each death an absolute loss of a unique world within the world. The coming to be of the new does not compensate for the ceasing to be of the old. Persons cannot be substituted for one another, despite what our stupid culture tries to make us believe. It fears mourning and grief because they put us in touch with the unreplaceable, when it requires that everything be replaced, endlessly.

It thus teaches people to say: "He lives on in memory." We know: That is not true. Memory is the past, the over and done with; life is the present and future; the-we-do-not-know-what-yet.

Past life, therefore, can only live on in what it continues to inspire in the present and the future. It is therefore right for the still living to live. One feels: "He is dead, the world should stop." But the world does not stop, and nor should it. Because if the lost life was good, it enabled and enriched other life still living. Its goodness, therefore, continues in the lives it nourished. If the world stopped, it would be a betrayal of those whose goodness keeps the world going. Life would really be in vain, if there were no future.

Neither art nor science can cure us of the sadness of death. But sadness over the loss of someone good is good. So why should we seek a cure for that which is good? Could there be a worse person than someone's whose death was mourned by nobody?

There is no consoling the loss of that which is not recoverable. But the moon will rise next month, and jets will land on runways and reunite lovers, and there will be people to see them, and be glad.

ON THE DARK

Originally Published, December 10th, 2014

Not that dark, not the dark into which our lives must pass, not the dark of ignorance, of the torture chamber, of the killer cop uniform, no, *the* dark, the dark from whence each of us came, the *nihilo* without which there is no *creatio*, yes, that dark, “the fecund dark in which we create” (Cocteau), the dark in which we imagine, disrobe, caress one another, fuck; the dark of the moonless sky that lets the paradoxical dark of the stars appear- magical lights that do not illuminate but still tell us where we are; not the dark of a black hole from which nothing escapes, but the dark of the unformed imagination from which all human things come, the primordial dark, the dark that was upon the waters before it was commanded that there be light; the space between the words, the rest between the notes, the silence that allows for speech; the dark of the vacuum into which particles pop into existence for no reason, the productive emptiness of mind into which thoughts come (from that same void? why not?); Master Niall of Preston and not Meister Eckhart is right (“Nature throws us into darkness”– the *scintilla animae* unites when what understanding requires is distance); the dark that comes first and abides as the future into which being is projected, the *conditio sine qua non* open to any possibility, prime matter, formlessness receptive to the forms we choose to give to the world, our world, rotating in the dark, the dark that allows gravity to act and our feet to stay planted to the earth, thus the dark of life, the dark which allows refreshing sleep, the dark of winter preparing spring renewal, that dark, yes, that dark, the dark of cool evenings that dry the sweat of our brows, the dark of the water that does not reflect our face, the dark that absorbs us so that we do not become self-absorbed, the dark of tarrying in an experience without classifying it, the dark that resists the light-speed exchange of information in the name of free thinking, the emptiness of not being full of oneself, that dark which people are afraid of because they cannot be alone with themselves. This dark.

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LIFE. GROUND.

Originally Published November 19th, 2014



A Philosophical Sky

does not quibble over mere adjectives.

Let me just remark, then, on the purity of its blue,

Without trying to get too fine, about which shade or hue.

In any case, it did not come to be described,

but to say: “Don’t call it sleep,

Call it what it is:

Death, and Resurrection.”

The sheltering soil is deep,

safe from the relentless wind,

that returns surface prettiness

to earth’s more essential purpose.

Kneeling in that shit-brown mud,

fetid and worm-worn,

I feel myself

a thousand years from now.

This “I,” this sore back,

this self-conscious flesh

digging into its origin and destination,

Can it say it is happy?

“I” and the thought of me will die,

the soil will endure.

That is no comfort, you say.

Perhaps it is not.

But it is true.

THERAPY

Originally Published September 10th, 2015

The basil grows fragrantly alive

as I pluck its leaves,

but all I can think is:

What needs to be done tomorrow?

Is there a law that says

I shall not enjoy the sun,

Gently caressing my skin now,

its angle falling towards autumn?

Why is it better to struggle

than to tarry on this pier,

watch the boys test their mettle

against the lapping river,

and listen to the silence of ships

as they glide past,

bound for Duluth or Montreal?

I want know:

Why can't I enjoy the cool humidity of my sweat

as I strain, pedaling hard against the slope,

stealing glances at the northern skyline,

still and silent as a painting,

too big for even Christo to imagine?

Who commanded:

Those who give a fuck must sacrifice these moments?

And for what?

Didn't *sans culottes* just become *lumpenproletariat*?

Always the same, no,

some smell shit,

others smell basil?

[A Logically Possible Prayer:

O Sun, glint on the water and dance with my eyes

and then burn my papers,

vaporise the solder that holds together

this machine architecture through which I do my duty].

But I do not believe in prayers,
even those only logically possible,
so I have learned to float.

It's easy, there are no incantations,
just swallow, drink, inhale.

Time expands, space contracts.

For a moment, there is just me,
Being.

But gravity is too powerful,
it drags even thoughts back to earth,
home of no lingering,
of endings and heavy beginnings,
that a gossamer instant of untension
is too frail to stop.

There is no reprieve.

SPANISH-MOROCCAN HOURS AND SEASONS

Originally Published June 25th, 2014

An Overheard Riff



This is the best thing— to be, unexpectedly, and only for a moment, in the presence of great but nameless talent sharing its art for the fun and joy of it, and thus being, ‘though uninvited, part of the fun and joy.

Arriving in Africa

...and bricks in piles; everything seemingly inside out, the finished looking unfinished and the unfinished finished, all openness to the air and sea and light; life in non-stop motion of donkey carts and trucks and motorized tricycles and on dangerous foot darting everywhere back and forth across the road smooth lean boys to and from the beach but no girls; road side shacks of tourist craft commerce but melons and tangerines and vegetables too; hugging the coast road feeling a little further off the beaten track than expected ...

At the Prado (How an Atheist Can Be Moved by Christian Art)

The universality is hardly in the narrative content, which is as particular (and ludicrous) as can be imagined, but in the faces- especially the anguished faces, Christ on the cross, his followers witnessing his suffering— and in the light (the mark of mastery is to make the paint seem illuminated from within). Even if you do not believe in its divinity, it speaks life.

Faded Paint



Fresh paint speaks of decoration, an invitation that says— this is for you, buy something. Faded paint on plaster speaks of home, not for your looking but someone else's living. An architecture of poverty, perhaps, but the weathering is beautiful, surface, yes, but real.

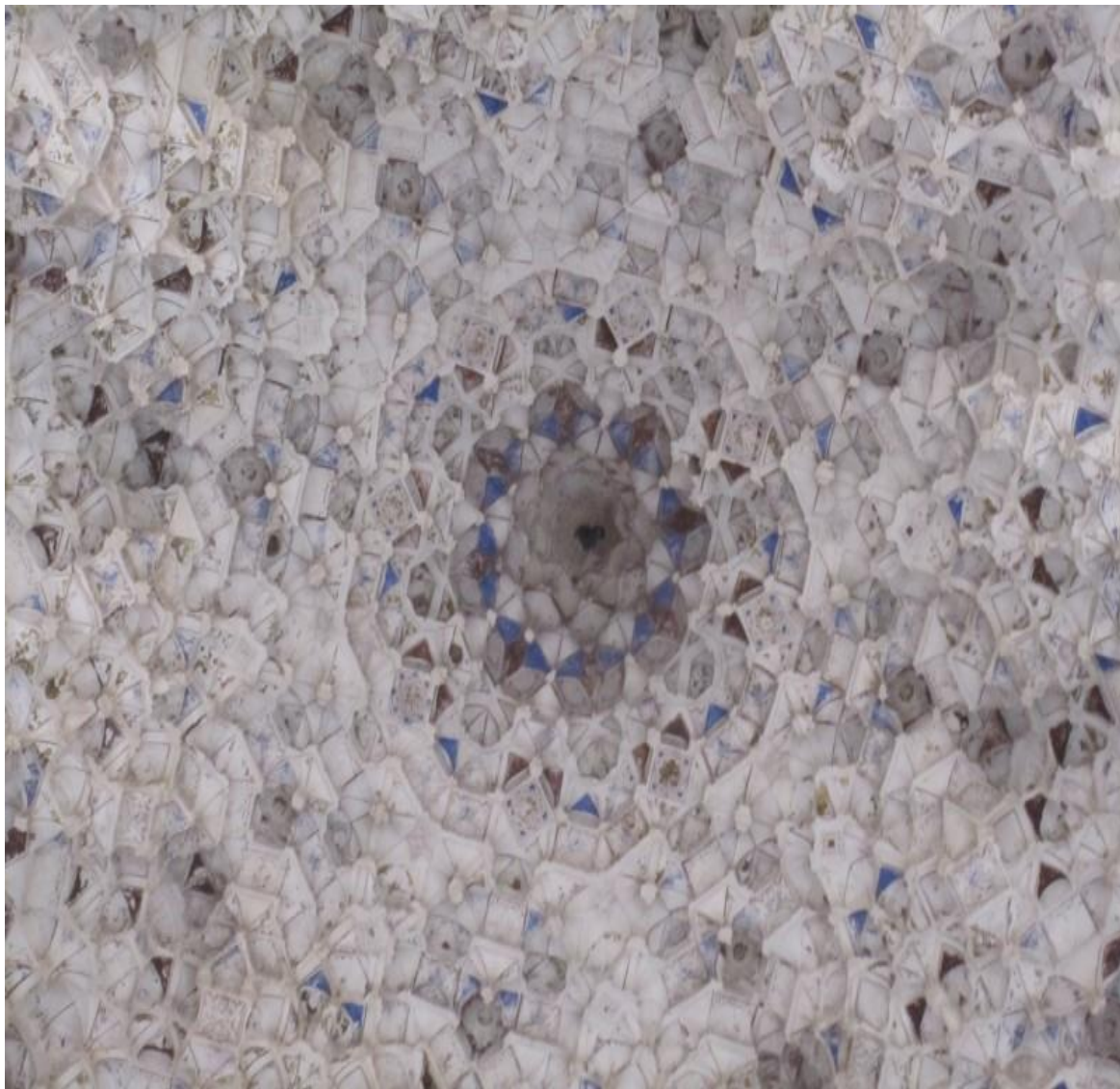
De Tanger a Fes par Grand Taxi (or, Possibilities of Violence Unrealized)

Barrel chested men on the crumbling sidewalk speak rapidly to each other in Arabic — Fes, 1500 dirhams— and we're off, hard on the gas all the way, around the corners and over every hill, honking at donkeys and bikes, scrapping by with an inch to spare, the old Mercedes with no seat belts and

cardboard for a rear window, the pleasing memory of how free it felt to ride unrestrained compromised by the image of both of us being launched through the front window into the main street of a rough Berber village, or dismembered amongst the pointillist field of plastic bags (the ubiquitous mark of 'civilization'). But no, we evade every on-rushing truck and old Massey-Ferguson tractor (built on King Street, maybe, in the factory I watched being knocked down so many years ago?). Around the bend the mountain road is now a highway, a nameless and mostly toothless man on a motorbike promising to lead us to the Riad.

It would have been too cliché to think of "A Distant Episode" all the way, but if money really were everything, why not just kill us, string us up like the goats hanging in front of the cafes or dump us on the hillside somewhere, rejecting the negotiated price in favour of the expediency of taking everything we have? A deeper bond must rule, at least sometimes.

Alhambra



Structure, replicating itself at ever decreasing scales, de-materializing into pure space.

Goya and Violence

Saturn must negate his divinity and become animal, devouring his own sons to hold the throne he will lose anyway; the May second rebels victorious lose on the 3rd. The condemned throws his arms up in protest, in despair, and in disbelief at the pointlessness of it all. But this truth must be forgotten (or must it?) for if there is no resistance, the worst win out (but do they not in any case?).

The Bandaged Whore of Tangier

The observer in me says- I would love to see you throw the fuckin rock that you are brandishing in your bandaged, bleeding hand, to watch it fly along the vector traced by those angry, angry eyes, to strike your tormenter, or, perhaps even better, the plate glass window of this sleazy port-side bar and hear the tremendous crash of glass and curses that would follow. But then the me in me says- perhaps it is a generalized anger that screams out from beneath the dusty skirt you have just hiked up to show the world your dimpled, wrinkled arse and braining one man (me) would be just as good as some specific abuser (From all appearances, you would seemed justified in that position). There is humanity in your capacity to stay defiant.

John The Baptist, Hustler



Whose gaze, cousin of God, your cloak so seductively draped, are you trying to attract?

On Seeing Isabella and Ferdinand's Tomb

Only one thought— that you both might have discovered the humility that contented you with this pedestrian crypt *before* you had unleashed the rampages that loosed the blood that fed these golden monstrosities, the altars at which people still pray to a god who told his disciples to discard their worldly goods and follow him.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BARBERSHOPS

Originally Published, May 20th, 2015

For: Windsoria/Windstoria

A Night of Interactive Mapping and Story Telling

Part of Mayworks Windsor 2015

Friday, May 22nd, 2015

Artcite, 109 University Avenue West, Windsor



The men of my hometown seemed to do three things— work, drink, and go to the barber— and suffer their opposites— lay offs, hangovers, and hair loss. The town barbershop was in the same building as the hotel, where after shift everyone would go to drink and smoke. Kids could only determine what was going on in the hotel by inference from what they saw at home. Like Leibniz’s monads, there were no windows in or out, just stolid grey cinder block and two heavy aluminum doors, one for “Men” and the other for “Ladies and Escorts.”

Rick’s Barbershop, by contrast, with its large window and mesmerizing (to a child) barber’s pole, seemed a welcoming presence. Still, there was a tinge of the forbidden. Perhaps because it was in the same building as the hotel, perhaps because of the rumoured Playboy’s on the magazine rack, it had a slightly intimidating adult and masculine feel. But its unknowns just made it all the more alluring (almost as alluring as the hotel) and to finally go to the barber by myself felt like a rite of passage, an act of self-definition. Trivial, yes, but real.

Our aesthetic sensibilities are not so much learned, I think, as imprinted through banal experiences at crucial moments of our lives. From the time I first went to Rick’s I have always loved barbershops— the art deco look of the chair, the feel of its smooth swivel, the pneumatic sound the pumping of its pedals make, its generous proportions that accommodate ever expanding middle aged girths, the massage effect of the clippers on my scalp, the cobalt blue of the antiseptic bath for the combs and scissors, the gallery of haircuts past, the scraping sound the straight razor makes, the clean evaporation of rubbing alcohol from my neck.

Neither geography nor history have changed the look of barbershops. Rick’s on Birch Street in Garson, Aristotelis on Queen Street West and the Ossington Barber Shop in Toronto, Adolfo’s on Wyandote Street in Windsor, even the nameless Arab shop in the Petit Socco in Tangier looked the same. Products of an older urbanism of organic neighbourhoods, barbershops do not remodel, they just close; barbers don’t retire, they die.

The urbanism of an organic neighborhood— especially a working class neighborhood— is rooted in provision of the most basic human natural and social needs. The streetscapes are dominated by shops that satisfy our need to eat, to clean and care for ourselves, and to come together to laugh, argue, complain, organise, flirt, hook up, fall in love— corner stores, grocery stores, pharmacies, hardware stores, pool halls, community centres, bars. The barbershop mediates the natural and the social, but since one can live without cutting one’s hair, it is the social aspect that predominates. People go to the barber to talk as much as to get a shave and a haircut.

“Professore!” Adolfo would call out as soon as I came into his place, “What would we do without you!” Most of his clientele had left the neighbourhood long ago (although some dutifully drove back every two weeks for a haircut they did not really need anymore). The students who took their place in the neighbourhood, if they noticed his shop at all, looked upon it as they might a rotary phone. And they were right. The barbershop is a connection to a different era, a dying commitment to face to face sociality, the uncomplicated intimacy of allowing a man to touch your hair, and a trust which would seem mad in other contexts: There are few ways of giving yourself more completely to a person (who is always at first a stranger) than to let him draw a finely honed steel blade down your neck.

Somewhere, no doubt, risk analysts are calculating the probability of barbershop straight razor murders, a prelude to an argument in favour of barber-bots. One day— why not— the barber-bot *will* be upon us—

efficient, programmed, predictable- as will the the nurse-bot, the friend-bot, the fuck-bot. Perhaps to be joined soon thereafter by the philosopher-bot and the poet-bot. If we treat human activity as nothing more than an assemblage of subroutines, we can convince ourselves that anything can be outsourced to machines.

But is anything lost when another barber dies and another shop closes? Nothing great, of course. Barbershops are mundane things, prosaic, but then: so too is most of what is worth fighting for and good in life. If good lives had to be world historical, required a history changing invention, work of art, or political sacrifice- then most of life and the lives of most people would not be good. But this is absurdity- to define the good of life in terms that exclude most of the people who have ever lived, are alive now, and will ever live. People normally do not fight so that their oppressed artistic or scientific or philosophical genius can be expressed- genius finds a way, no matter what. People fight, rather, so they can live, and they live so they can tell the jokes they want to tell, love whomever they want to love, go where they want to go, and give as full play to their senses and intellect as they are able.

People's basic needs anchor them to neighborhoods and the deprivation of those needs brings them into the streets. Your neighborhood is where you go to get a haircut, have a solitary drink or three in the afternoon, and where you go to rebel. So far as I know, there have been no suburban revolutions. If suburbanites rebel, they come to town to do it.

This is how streets become storied: Not because some Hollywood buffoon shows up to shoot a movie, but because the quotidian sometimes gives rise to struggles from which history is made. Then the old people can say: "This is Clairmount Street, where the 1967 rebellion broke out," "This is Droulliard Road, where the 1945 blockade was organized," "This is where the Stonewall used to be." Eventually, people have enough, and they fight back. Ordinary people, just trying to get a shave and a drink have enough, and then they make history.

But not all history is political history and not all streets have their stories told. But the streets of organic neighborhoods all have stories to tell, because they all have a history- they have been around long enough to have changed. And because they have changed, some things have been lost which, while not great, were good. Working people, nameless to the wider world, die, and shops close, and the older people tell stories through which the imaginary city - the city in which the past is made present again - comes to be.

LAST TRAIN TO MALLAIG (FOR JIM)

Originally Published January 19th, 2015

I think you knew it was a one way ticket. They don't tell you when you get on, but we all figure it out sooner or later. At first, you think you will be there to admire the glen and the loch forever, that there will always be time for one more dram and another pint of heavy and to tell just one more story at the Horseshoe's long bar. But then...

Ah well. In the end, we leave small traces that are hard to decipher sometimes. Who we are, it comes down to those etchings we leave in the minds of others. But there is no translation guide, and everyone is allowed their own interpretation.

On me, you left the mark of your stories. Not this tale or that, but the unruly spirit of creation with which you spoke worlds into being. Serious people would get tangled in the web of words you spun and say: "Is that true? That cannot possibly be true."

But let serious people attend to business, which is a bore. Stories are for we who love life, for we who understand that the truth of the story is the telling, the free ride to somewhere else that feels a little better than where we are, the spark they light in our eyes. I never saw that spark extinguished in you, because I always listened.

I always listened and I always laughed. Was that irresponsible? Would a firmer hand have helped? Maybe friendship is too easy, forgives too much. I don't know. But I do know that I would rather be a friend than God. I am not good at judging.

Maybe you did not know how to be helped. You had a hard life, and were hard in turn. But you never turned to stone.

There is no app for becoming friends. Some people, they just vibrate at the same frequency. But it puts them out of phase with others. So be it. Love and friendship, they are not obligations, with some they last, with others they do not. Breeches, partings, failures— we know they are possible, but they are hard to predict. Human beings find innumerable ways to do wrong to one another. No one is innocent.

But if love and friendship end, there has to be a good reason, not just that life has become difficult. Life is always difficult. Where there is love it persists through the difficulties. It finds its way through.

So I persisted as your world contracted. You always made me laugh, and we always loved a drink, and we weren't very good comrades, we, who'd rather pay for another round before paying our dues. We never took matters seriously enough, but everyone ended up at our end of the table.

It is easy to stop feeling sad. You just have to put your mind to work at something else, or raise it up high (like a philosopher) and say: life and death, it's just a big swirl and we come in one side and go out

the other. The universe will put our elements to work again in something new. One must get on because it will be one's turn to exit soon enough.

So why be sad? We are all orbiting the same black hole that draws us closer every circuit, and I hear that even laughter cannot escape its gravity. So we should let our laughter ring through the heavens while we can, and not weep. And that is true.

But missing people is also true. And what we miss, we mourn. And you deserve someone to feel sad about you. And so I will.