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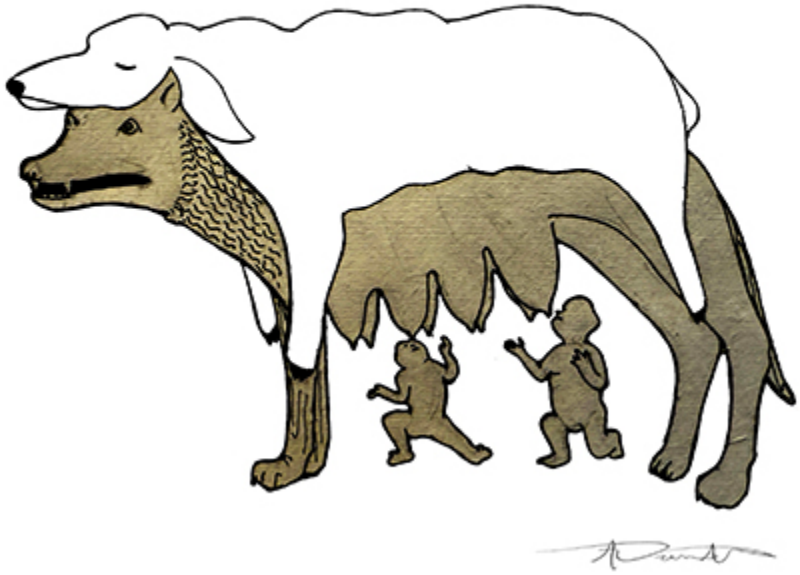

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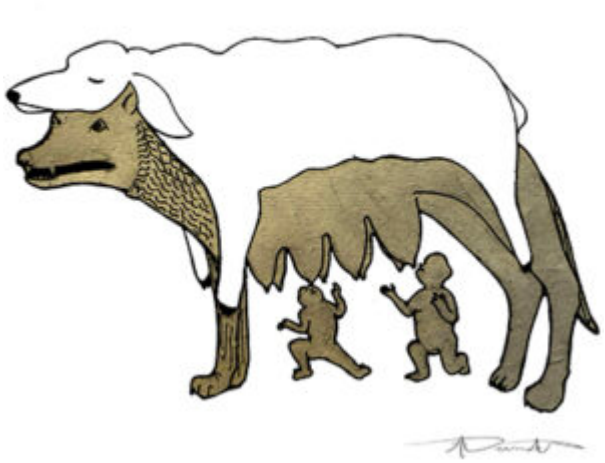
Fraud: The New Normal in Government

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

"One sees by experience in our times that the princes who have done great things are those who have taken little account of faith and have known how to get around men 's brains with their astuteness".[1] This observation may seem to come from a populist think tank but it is from 1532 (Machiavelli, *The Prince*).

Shrewdness and cunning were always part of the art of obtaining and maintaining power, and democracies are no exceptions. And indeed, notwithstanding the moral depravity of deceit, ruling by cheating is all too common in constitutional history. As Simon Bolivar has stated in his Angostura address: "We have been ruled more by deceit than by force, and we have been degraded more by vice than by superstition."[2]

Not only the demagogues used misleading rhetorics as a regular tool of emotional politics. Pericles, the great populist leader of Athenian democracy, lied about the state of affairs in Athens, "in name a democracy but, in fact, governed by its first citizen [Pericles]." Julius Ceasar, and Augustus lied when praised the Republican form of government and pretended to rule within the republican institutions – and the people and Senators (those who survived) rather enthusiastically participated in this game of deception.



Artist: Drew Martin

Of course, there are fundamental differences among political mimicries in the art of misrepresentation which includes, among others fraud and lies and cheating. Hitler's pretension to rule within the constitutional order of the Weimar Republic differs fundamentally from the claim by Chavez, Erdogan, or Orbán that they run a democracy, as they were elected originally lawfully and democratically. Hitler's lie in 1939 that Poland has attacked Germany differs from the self-deception of American leaders who made themselves to believe about the existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. The difference among political regimes is in the art of deception: why the rulers lie, and disregard facts known to them, how far they dare to mislead, and in the regularity of misrepresentation. Dictators and autocrats in the making cheat to end democracy, while in democracies politicians are lying within limits and even Machiavellian democrats among them do not intend, and in most of the cases do not annihilate democracy. Not that democracy would not be better without lies.

Illiberal democracies stand out in the history of political deception. Here the rulers not only lie, make false promises, manipulate, twist, distort and invent facts, withhold information, and doctor statistics. They go beyond these well-known practices of acquiring, maintaining and increasing power. Although the mountain of truthiness, 'facts' based on gut feeling reaches unusual height even by world history standards, there is nothing unusual here. The great innovation of contemporary populist leaders is that they govern with rules that systematically cheat. The leader of illiberal democracy pretends to rule according to the freely expressed wishes of *his* people, he claims that *his* regime respects the rule of law, human rights, and it is a democracy (only perhaps a better one than what you have in elite -ruled, inefficient democracies). This mimicry is necessary in those weaker states where the regime, its economy and even sovereignty depend on international relations as is the case of smaller European Union member states. This is also required in countries where the liberal, democratic expectations are still widespread in the electorate, and even those who dream of a strong

leader of their stump insist on elections as the form of people's government. Here the populist must (pretend to) play by these inherited rules. But powerful states, where the leaders and, increasingly, the general public believe that they do not depend of democratic traditions or expectations, these inhibitions are easily disregarded and the fig leaf of legality becomes very transparent, and deliberately so, because the not-anymore-hidden disrespect of decency, brutality, and violence is the welcome form of governing. Giving up the cat and mouse game of legalized cheating is a clear sign that the leader is becoming a full blown autocrat leaving behind the crumbling façade of democracy.

Systemic cheating (lying deceit, fraud, spin, tricks, workarounds and other forms of misleading) is at the heart of governing in illiberal democracies. Here institutionalized cheating by legal manipulation and manipulations of the law are constitutive elements of a potentially self-perpetuating political 'regime' (a potentially self-perpetuating political system and social order) that claims to satisfy the formal requirements of a constitutional democracy – until the ruler will feel this mimicry unnecessary. Even Putin had to go through a period of 'managed democracy' until he did throw it away (and could not afford it given the increasing need for oppression). But even today there are (formally multi-party) elections in Russia with pomp and fanfare.

Illiberal democracy manipulates what the people is and who they are; it manipulates the law too, to look like a system faithfully observing the constitution and the rule of law; it cheats to enable favoritism that it needs for domination in a patronage system and for the perpetuation of power. Regimes of cheat disregard that constitutional democracy cannot exist amidst constant misinformation that deprives it of facts and honest norms needed for rational discourse. A legal system that claims to empower people where it only caters to their bias and prejudice is a cheater: it will deprive people of their rational capacity necessary for democracy, and at the same time it will increase its legitimacy fraudulently by making the deceived people and many innocent bystanders believe that the system is democratic, constitutional etc. In this world of counterfeit, public procurement tenders are designed to guarantee successful cheat, as the tender sets conditions which can be satisfied only by a specific government crony. Or, if there are competitors with better offers than what 'our guy' has submitted, the evaluators will find legal grounds to disqualify the better offer, claiming national security interests or arguing that the offer is unrealistic. The above-mentioned grounds of exclusion are reasonable clauses of public procurement law, so how this can work? The evaluations are simply arbitrarily justified, if at all.

The law enables the cheating and the servants of the state know how to use the possibility of abuse. When a dealer sells his car that is overheating, he will answer upon inquiry that he had no problem with it on a very hot day in the desert. This is true in the sense that there was no overheating at the time when the vendor was in the desert four years ago and the car is overheating now. The statement is true but deceitful.[3] There is little difference between populist leaders of illiberal democracy on their way towards autocracy and the proverbial car salesmen.

Cheating means the observation of a rule only to depart from it , most often reaping undeserved benefits from the cheated persons or from the 'system' (the state budget). The cheater misrepresents himself as being in conformity with the norms, the rules of the game. Cheating does not require a false statement. I have an extra ace in my pocket that I use in the card game that enables me to show four aces in my hand. The four aces are there but I break the underlying assumptions which are based on a shared norm. These leaders of illiberal pseudo-democracies (mimicry-democracies) pretend to keep themselves within the game: "the game is valued, and so is its purpose and the objective, for example, of winning a football match (Maradona scores by handling the ball into the net)." [4] How you win the game does not matter. For many such leaders cheating with the law and on the law is not a moral problem and this is particularly true of populist rulers: they break those laws that they believe should not exist.

Ideally, the leader of the illiberal regime is in the position to set the rules that enable his cheating. The best aphoristic summary of the strategy comes from Latin-America: „hecha la ley, hecha la trampa" (make the law and then find your way around it).[5] In the more advance stage of ruling by cheating the law itself creates the workarounds. The rules are tailor-made to achieve the outcome favoring the rule-maker. You require presidential candidates to have a university degree and if you don't like the opposition candidate the degree-granting university will be able to determine that the degree was fraudulently obtained because twenty years ago the applicant transferred credits improperly. That may not be the case but this is a matter for the state-captured university being part of university. After all, such decisions pertain to autonomy required by academic freedom. We respect academic freedom in Turkey, don't we? This is how in 2025 the popular leader of the Turkish opposition was barred from running for presidency. The academic qualification requirement was introduced in 2017 by the current President. Of course, this innocent rule 'helps to have a well educated President' and the President could not foresee that his future challenger will have a dubious degree. But a well-educated President knows a lot about Chekhov's proverbial dramaturgy: a gun placed on the wall in act one is there for a purpose: to be used in act three.

This prescience works where there is total law-making power, for example when one has a subservient majority of dependent loyalists in Congress, or in the absence of a clear majority in a paralysed legislative body the Leader shall have enough constitutional authorization to rule by decree, where the divided legislation has no majority to overrule the decree. This is the typical case of *decretismo* in Latin America where at least in some countries the President has broad decree-making power to implement his policies in the absence of a working majority. After all, things have to arranged by someone.

In other instances, although the executive is limited in his decree-making powers in the absence of statutory authorizations, the executive will rely on decrees that are hardly consistent with the written statute or the spirit (values) of the constitution. But the Leader can afford such cavalier action as neither the captive loyalist parliamentary majority nor the captured judiciary will set aside the dubious decrees.

The easiest and most common form of creating legalized rule-bending is by grabbing emergency powers. This was already the way in the Roman Republic where dictators like Pompey, Julius Caesar or Augustus tried to obtain absolute power by being authorized to act as dictators. A Roman dictator had full powers of the state but for a limited time only, typically six months and for a specific task. The above military leaders asked for perpetual unlimited power in the name of some kind of emergency.

In contemporary emergencies which are used to extend executive power (a one man rule) the conditions of emergency are constituted by lies and misrepresentations; in other instances there are extraordinary threats but the powers are applied outside the scope of emergency, or the power is maintained even after the emergency ceased to exist (e. g. a pandemic is not there anymore). In Hungary, a country rightly admired as exemplary by despots in the making as an ingenuous, original inventor of techniques of abuse, the captured legislation authorized the government to amend all sorts of laws by decree in reference to situations that do not represent any emergency or much of actual threat as is the case of "emergency due to ongoing war in a neighboring country". A state of such emergency was declared under the pretext of the war in Ukraine that for many years did not pose any threat to Hungary. Given this fake emergency (and others like the threat of migration) the government was able to carve out for itself the power to regulate the economy.

The new Prince feels no shame to rely on fallacies, *non sequitur*, and (knowingly) false factual assumptions (including denial of obvious facts). The authorities disregard the dictates of ordinary reason to serve the leader's wishes, hiding behind a withered fig leave of legality. There is preference, even joy for the absurd in judicial interpretation of the law. Among the dozens of original and creative examples of this theatre of the absurd the non-imposition of environmental fines in Hungary offers an innocent school-book example. An emergency decree was issued as a measure of "Coordination of Defense and Security Activities" "due to hostilities in a neighbouring country" under the above emergency powers. The decree abolished environmental fines with retroactive effect, as well as fines which were to be imposed in the future. Who knows what kind of relationship could there possibly be between this environmental amnesty and the war in Ukraine or the improvement of national defense capabilities? Are pollution fines hampering Hungarian peace or defense efforts? (Hungary is the only NATO member that refused to provide arms to Ukraine). There is neither official nor political justification, not even an unofficial explanation for this decree – a derogation of an Act of Parliament. The lack of reasonableness or justification the absence of any link between the decree's stated purpose and its subject matter necessitates an examination of the real intentions behind the environmental amnesty decree. What remains in front of this irrational arbitrariness is the fact that a little bit earlier a major foreign investor was found (repeatedly) in violation of emission standards and therefore facing minimal fines. The company allegedly threatened the government that it will stop investing. There is evidence that other major investors were also polluting big and may have had similar concerns. The irrationality disappears but that hardly makes the trick more palatable.

"To my friends everything, and the law to my enemies." This leading maxim of illiberal cheating

is attributed, in different versions to late early 20th century Italian Prime Minister Giolitti and Brazilian populist semi-dictator President Getulio Vargas. Softer illiberal democracies apply only exceptionally the second part of this favorite of Putin and are satisfied with making the law for the friends (see public procurement criteria). For the soft illiberal democracy, it is enough not to prosecute those loyalists who transgress the law, or pardon them as it happened in the Czech Republic with outgoing President Klaus, but prosecution of opponents is seldom applied, at least in the early stage of autocracy building. (The personal desire of revenge may disregard this rule of illiberal regime building.)

The successful illiberal leaders are outstanding in cheating and duplicity, but their success cannot be attributed to their personal excellence only. For Machiavelli, "A great pretender and dissembler …who deceives will always find someone who will let himself be deceived,"[6] but dupe citizens are not numerous enough for the large scale social acceptance and endorsement of the acts of misrepresentation. Not everybody is dupe or self-blinding. Cheating as successful governance is rooted in existing cultural patterns and traditions. Among these traditions the instrumental, disrespectful, and shameless use of the law is crucial, On the recipients' side the skeptical public attitude to truth and facts contributes to the public acceptance and even endorsement of cheating. This fits into the mood in a post-truth world. If truth is not possible there can be no lie, and cheat and corruption become part of ordinary morals. This cavalier attitude was already quite common by the seventies of the last century. The novelist Joseph Heller provides a masterful example in his novel Good as Gold: "Perfect truth was not of determining importance in the exposition of Gold's theory: he felt mutinously that he had as much right to falsehood, bias and distortion in *his* memoirs of Kissinger, as Kissinger did in his memoirs of Kissinger."[7] Today one does not need a mutinous attitude to have the right to one's truth and falsehood. It goes without saying that this "right" is part of individual freedom. What matters for the new populist Prince is to have enough people to accept his truth and falsehood and he is successful in the endeavor, as his truthiness, and falsehoods are to a great extent the truthiness of his believers, even before he has articulated these nonsenses. For example, the Prince has no difficulty when he offers fraudulent remedies and protection against threatening aliens. The enemies (the aliens, migrants, sexual perverts, the elite that conspired against the good people) were already lingering in the mind of great parts of the population, he just dared to extract it from the public paranoia, to give form to these phantoms.

Sometimes the half-baked, instinctive dictator does not even see that he is cheating, or invents facts and grievances, as he is convinced of the delusional reality of his grievance that serves as the basis of the regulations ("rising violence in the capital … disrupts the proper functioning of the Federal Government").

The spreading of ' truthiness' by domesticated media is crucial in the manipulation of the public. The media are recruited into the service of the illiberal regime because the ruler controls the carrot of state assets (subsidies, advertisement) and the sticks of regulatory tools, and investigative authorities. In addition, in many non-established democracies without an existentially self-supporting citizenry the ruler can rely on the artificially increased personal dependence from the state and also on the inherited serf mentality that survived centuries of

servitude.

According to the Hungarian proverb, “the mendacious will be caught sooner than a limping dog.” (“The path of a liar is short” — would be its Swahili equivalent.) But that is not so obvious when it comes to illiberal democracies, and their legal systems. Sometimes it is difficult to prove that the law itself is fraudulent, as law is based on the assumption that it is law itself to decide what is legal and illiberal legislation is keen to print as law what serves fraud. Ambiguity too helps the cheater.

Consider Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) (2015-23). The PiS government is regularly accused by third parties including judgments of international courts of violation of the Constitution. In some instances, the PiS parliamentary majority used the shortcomings, loopholes, and open texture of the Constitution. These actions, for example a new system of judicial appointments enabling the government to appoint people who were considered loyalists were formally legal, though they were acts of cheating as the intent and result was to appoint judges who are not independent. In other instances the misrepresentation (lie) was more obvious. In 2016 a high ranking bureaucrat in the office of the Prime Minister decided – without specific legal authorization – not to send to the printer of the Official Gazette the decisions of the not yet captured Tribunal which he considered unconstitutional. According to the law the Tribunal’s decisions enter into force only by promulgation in the Gazette.

Even obvious violations of the Constitution can be declared lawful by a fraudulent court. Luis Parra was elected President of the Venezuelan National Assembly without the proper quorum, when the sitting Assembly President, Juan Guaido was not able to attend the vote being forcibly restrained by the armed forces. This parliamentary coup was found constitutional by the well selected Constitutional Chamber. For the judges all the procedural steps were appropriate and the quorum issue and Guaido’s absence were simply not considered.[8]

When the Supreme Court of India was supposed to determine the constitutionality of the emergency that Indira Gandhi, the incumbent Prime Minister has enacted in her attempt to turn India into a rump parliament-endorsed dictatorship, the Court’s judgement disregarded that the new electoral law that enabled her to run at elections was passed after Gandhi has jailed many opposition MPs on grounds of the emergency power that she has proclaimed. Moreover, the Indian Supreme Court ruled that the fact that Gandhi bribed her constituency did not disqualify her in the eyes of the Court, as she used her own assets to distribute gifts to members of her constituency. (It is true that until today candidates in India are expected to offer gifts – like in so many cases the fraudster can rely on the soft spots of public sentiment.)

Outright falsification may require shameless denial of existing legal and moral norms or a claim that an event occurred, which did not, or a norm exists or exists with a specific meaning while nothing is more far away from facts and truth. At the end of the day cheat is replaced with shameless arbitrariness and words mean what the power choses them to mean. Humpty Dumpty becomes the Queen of Hearts. Norms are not only denied: they can be invented in the

service of the political power. The often quoted trick of the Supreme Court of Nicaragua regarding the unconstitutionality of the constitutional rule on presidential term limit illustrates it. In order to allow Noriega to run as many times as he wishes his Court invented an absolute human right for sitting Presidents to remain eligible as part of their inelianable individual passive voting right.[9]

With institutionalized cheating rationality and economic efficiency are devastated, and the regime of cheating is perpetuating an increasingly despotic corrupt regime. But public morals is what suffers the most serious damage. The problem with fraudulent government was already noted by Cicero: "There are two ways in which injustice may be done, either through force or through deceit; and deceit seems to belong to a little fox, force to a lion. Both of them seem alien to a human being; but deceit deserves a greater hatred."[10]

During Communist days Vaclav Havel hoped that citizens will step out of "living with the lie" and that will end communism.[11] We are "living in lies" again, and only in former communist countries. The arbitrary regime that rules by cheat is disrespectful of its citizens and makes them complicit in its cheating.[12] Complicit or not, they are treated as dupes to be manipulated. And sometimes they are so dupe that they consider these lies as liberating, just because these are their own misunderstandings or paranoid representations (as is the case with the pandemy virus denial).

There is nothing surprising in the acceptance of regimes that rule by cheating. On the road to despotism, Hannah Arendt warns, "totalitarian movements conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations."[13]

Notes

[1] N. Machiavelli, The Prince, 2nd ed., transl. Harvey C. Mansfield. University of Chicago Press 1998. p. 69.

[2] Message to the Congress of Angostura. Dec. 18. 1819. Selected writings of Bolivar. compiled by Vicente Lecuna ; edited by Harold A. Bierck, Jr.; translation by Lewis Bertrand. New York : Colonial Press, c1951. Vol 1. 211.

[3] Thomas L. Carson Lying and Deception: Theory and Practice. Oxford UP. 2010 15-16

[4] G. Palombella, 'The Abuse of the Rule of Law', Hague Journal on the Rule of Law (2020) 12:387–397 Palombella refers to Green, ibid 389 ff

[5] . Ratliff, William, and Edgardo Buscaglia. 'Judicial Reform: The Neglected Priority in Latin America'. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 550 (1997): pp. 59–61.

[6] Machiavelli, op. cit. p. 70.

[7] J, Heller, Good as Gold (Corgi Books, 1980) p. 365.

[8] http://www.tsj.gob.ve/-/sala-constitucional-del-tsj-ratifica-a-luis-parra-como-presidente-de-la-asamblea-nacional

[9] Case No. 602-09, in the Amparo Writ Ortega et al. v. the Supreme Electoral Council of the Republic of Nicaragua. https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/nicaragua-supreme-court-decision-permitting-president-others-to-seek-reelection/

[10] Cicero, On Duties (De Officiis) 1.41

[11] "Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal…everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety …" Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless. In Vaclav Have, Living in Truth, ed. Jan Vladislav (London Faber & Faber, 1986) 55-6.

[12] The politically unconnected businessman will participate in a public procurement tender, deliberately presenting a losing offer only to become one of the subcontractors of the winner.

[13] Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism N Y Houghton Mifflin 1994 352-3.

Democratic Resilience in the United States: Containing Trump's Threat to Democracy

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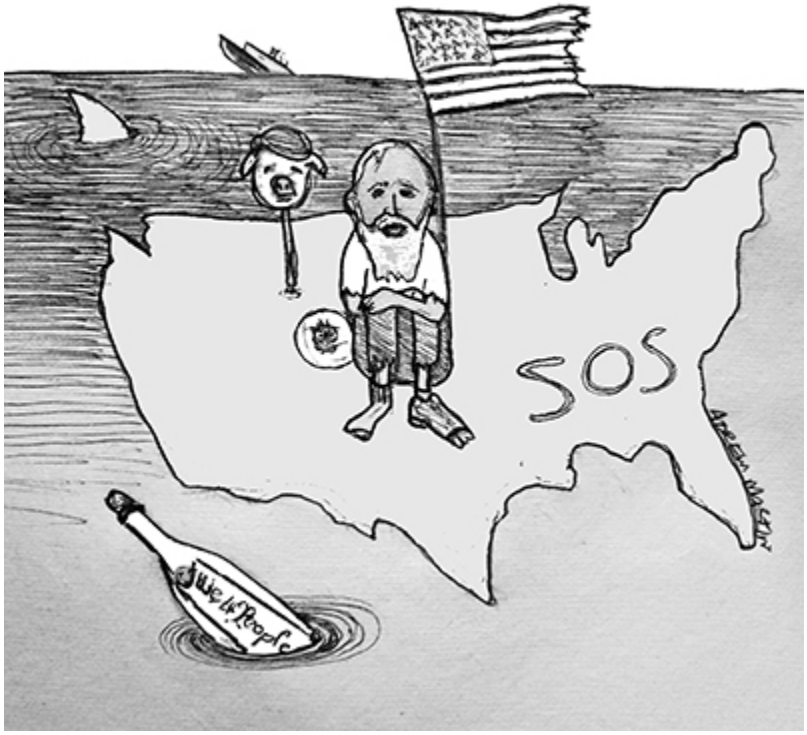
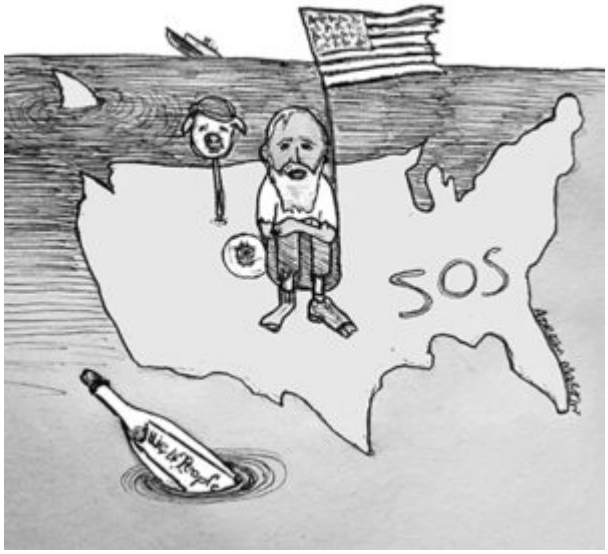


Since regaining the presidency in 2025, Donald Trump and his allies have launched a devastating attack on American democracy. The targets of this attack are the checks and balances, and the civil and political rights that have provided the foundations of our constitutional system for over two centuries. In the few short months of Trump's second term, it is still too soon to say how Trump's onslaught will end. But it is already clear that the threat he currently poses to democracy in the United States is far more severe than they were in his first term.

During his first term (2017-2021), Trump succeeded in eroding deeply held *norms* of political discourse and practice, but U.S. political and constitutional *institutions* remained more or less intact. Challenges to the democratic system – including on January 6 – were contained by congressional opposition, by the courts, by the press, and by civil society – as well as by opponents within the Republican party itself. During the second term, constitutional institutions have come under a much more devastating attack by a far more unified presidential elite. With the acquiescence of Republican congressional majorities, the Trump administration

has unilaterally undertaken massive purges of the federal bureaucracy, sought to weaken or eliminate independent agencies, violated the civil rights of immigrants, and deployed regulatory and fiscal powers in an attempt to bring both universities and corporations under his control. Lower courts have moved to block some of these initiatives, but it remains to be seen whether their rulings will be backed by the highly conservative Supreme Court, or even whether Trump will abide by them if they are.



Artist: Drew Martin

In this paper, I provide a comparative perspective on two crucial questions raised by these developments. First, what are the possibilities that the United States might devolve into what political scientists have called a "competitive authoritarian regime" – one in which the façade of democratic institutions obscures the reality of political power that cannot be held to account by either constitutional checks-and-balances or by the electorate itself? There are, as I will argue below, important impediments to this development, but given the severe backsliding that we have already witnessed under Trump 2.0, it is a possibility that should be taken very seriously (Levitsky and Way 2025).

The second issue – assuming that American democracy *does* survive in some form – is the extent to which its institutions can recover from the damage incurred under Trump 2.0. The prospects in this scenario are very far from encouraging. From a comparative perspective, we find few, if any, "recovering" backsliders have regained the level of democratic quality they had achieved prior to the backsliding episode. And in the United States itself, democratic institutions did not return to a prior equilibrium following the defeat of Trump 1.0. Although I speculate on the possibility of a political realignment that places American democratic institutions on a more secure footing, the more likely scenario is one in which a post-Trump democracy would emerge significantly weaker than it was before.

I address these questions in two steps. The first section examines the current challenges to

democracy in the United States in the context of socioeconomic and institutional sources of resilience widely discussed in the comparative literature. In the second, I review the experience of "recovering" backsliders to speculate on possible post-Trump scenarios.

PART 1: SOCIOECONOMIC AND INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES OF RESILIENCE.

Socioeconomic sources of resiliency

We begin with a consideration of the effects of extensively studied socioeconomic sources of democratic resilience. As we have already indicated above, it is important to emphasize the distinction between backsliding (the incremental erosion of democratic institutions) and reversion to a competitive authoritarian regime in which minimum standards of democracy are no longer maintained. Following Przeworski and Limongi (1997), Rustow (1970), (Linz 1978), and others, those minimum standards would include broad suffrage and relatively free elections in which oppositions will have a reasonable chance of replacing the incumbent government. It is also a standard that appears to motivate the widely-used V-Dem classification of electoral democracy.[1]

Experience in the United States itself leaves no room for doubt that wealthy democracies are far from invulnerable to *backsliding*; see, for example, Reidel et al (2025). On the other hand, the robust empirical relation between economic development and the *survival* of democracy has been a bedrock feature of the political science literature since Lipset's (1959) seminal article on that issue was published over sixty years ago. Przeworksi et al (1997) went farther, famously showing that no democracy had failed in societies with a per capita GDP above $6055 in 1975 dollars, the level that Argentina had reached prior to the 1976 coup d'etat. And these claims have received more recent affirmations in studies by Brownlee and Maio (2022) and Danield Treisman (2023), who conclude that the rate of breakdown is extremely low for countries (like the U.S.) with high levels of GDP and long histories of democracy.[2]

The United States is by far the wealthiest country to face a serious threat of democratic breakdown, with a per capita GDP of $89,678 – well above the inflation-adjusted Przeworski threshold ($35,966 in 2025) – and the eighth highest in the world. South Korea – which has so-far successfully fended off major threats – is the only other backsliding country to exceed this threshold, with a per capita GDP of $37,675. Hungary – the wealthiest backsliding country to succumb to authoritarianism – had a GDP of only $25,703 in 2024. Although there is abundant reason to be concerned about the health of American democracy, therefore, its high level of economic development provides a reason to be hopeful about its survival.

It should be emphasized that the *causal* (as distinguished from the *empirical*) links between development and democracy remain unclear, and they cannot necessarily be expected to remain robust going forward. The United States is a wealthy society, but it is also a very unequal one, and that is the source of considerable political conflict.[3] Reidel et al (2025), moreover, observe that the combination of capitalism and generous social protections that provided the foundations for post-World War II democracies has been severely eroded by the

dislocations of globalization, growing inequality, and identity conflicts. The erosion of this democratic "class compromise" is especially pronounced in the United States, where the provision of social welfare protections was already more limited than those in other developed democracies.

Notwithstanding these caveats, however, it remains likely that the high level of economic development will remain a major – if far from a fool-proof – source of resilience in the United States. Important works by Carles Boix (2003) and by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2006) have posited a connection between high inequality and democratic breakdown, but the empirical evidence for their claims is mixed, at best; redistributive conflicts between elites and masses accounted for only a relatively limited number of breakdowns among "third wave" democracies (Haggard and Kaufman 2012, 2016).

Wealthy societies, moreover, have other attributes that provide some protection from the threat of breakdown, even at relatively high levels of inequality. These include higher levels of literacy, larger middle classes, more diverse private sectors, bigger cities, and more secular and tolerant cultures.[4] All are strongly associated with democratic survival (see Ingelhart and Welzel (2010), Inglehart 2016, Levitsky and Way 2023). More generally, Przeworski and Limongi (1997) and Boix and Stokes (2003) theorize that, in rich societies, it is more rational for power contenders to struggle to expand their *share* of the wealth within a democratic system than to incur the high costs of trying to gain it all through an authoritarian seizure of power. If a high level of wealth does not *guarantee* the survival of democracy in the United States, it does vastly increase the odds that the system will continue to be characterized by at least the minimum standards of accountability to a broad electorate.

Civil Society, Institutional, and Electoral Sources of Resilience

In general, despite severe polarization that has roiled the US. political system, the prospects for the survival of democracy in the United States are also bolstered by the characteristics of civil society and its political institutions – a major focus of attention in recent studies of resilience (Merkel 2023; Croissant and Lott 2024). We turn first to the strengths and weaknesses of American civil society and then to an assessment of the institutional and electoral checks that can help to impede the centralization of power.

Civil Society

Potentially, opposition from civil society and the mass public remains a major impediment to a long-term consolidation of power. United States scores .98 in the civil society index based on V-Dem data **https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/civil-society-participation-index?tab=table**, These scores are based on estimates of the extent to which major civil society organizations are "routinely consulted by policymakers, how many people are involved in them, women can participate, and candidate nomination for the legislature within parties is decentralized or made through primaries." The U.S. score was far higher than those of other backsliders, such

as Hungary 0.44; India 0.59; Poland 0.71; and Korea 0.81.

Civil society, to be sure, was caught off-guard by the "flood the zone" approach adopted during Trump's first months (see Kaufman 2025). During the early months of Trump's second term, civil society organizations, the press, and big business – all important checks during the first Trump term – have appeared dazed, confused, and intimidated. Many corporate leaders and major universities have sought to cut separate bargains with the administration in order to gain favorable treatment and/or minimize losses.

As societies become more polarized, moreover, civil society organizations can be mobilized in support of, as well as opposition to, autocratizing governments. In the United States, the movements supporting Trump's rise to power have been increasingly populated by a powerful network of think tanks, internet activists, business organizations, and religious groups. As Reidel et al (2025) note, civil society [as well as horizontal institutions] can be a crucial site of democratic contestation, but it can also be "repurposed to serve autocratic ends."

But our vision should not be restricted to the onslaught of early 2025. Over time, opponents in civil society are also likely to regain their voices. To some extent, this is already happening. Thousands of civil society organizations, networks and coalitions working at the state and local level are already engaging in efforts to promote free speech, fight disinformation, deescalate community conflicts, improve civic education, and promote electoral reform.[5] Trump's extremist tariff and immigration policies have provoked strong protests from trade associations and civil rights organizations. Law schools and legal professional associations have bolstered judicial efforts to push back against abuses of authority. And Harvard's decision to oppose threats to academic freedom has provided a focal point for collective resistance from many other universities. As Trump's initial "honeymoon" fades, we can expect more active opposition from human rights organizations, business associations, and others.

Political Institutions: Congress, Courts, Federalism

To succeed in his attempt to concentrate personal power, Trump must also find ways to overcome the many "horizontal" constraints built into the United States constitution. As already suggested, this is not necessarily an impossible task, given the extensive political and social polarization that now afflicts American society. The profoundly polarized two-party system is the weakest link in the democratic system, and the current Republican control of Congress constitutes a significant change from the first Trump administration.[6] In the first two years of that term (2017-2018), Trump confronted significant divisions within the Republican majority itself, including support from influential Republican leaders for the authorization of the Mueller investigation. Between 2019 and 2021, the Democrats' recaptured the House of Representatives and imposed even greater constraints on Trump's presidency — including, of course, impeachments and widely-viewed public hearings. But Trump 2.0 has been far less constrained by the need to manage disparate governing coalitions in the legislature.[7] Since 2025, small, but now far more disciplined Republican majorities have regained control of both houses of Congress and have acquiesced to a radical extension of

presidential power – deep into the federal civil service, into law enforcement and the courts, and even into some state and local governments.

Even taking these threats into account, however, the U.S. constitutional system contains multiple veto points that can impede the complete dismantling of democratic institutions. We focus specifically on the role of the courts, the US federal system, — and, potentially, a revived Congress — as impediments to the full collapse of democracy.

The courts. Turning first to the role of the judiciary, it is important to note that comparative evidence on the role of judicial systems is rather mixed: Boese et al (2020) find that independent courts do impose a significant constraint on backsliding governments. Croissant and Lott (2024), on the other hand, find that, although judicial independence deters the onset of backsliding, that effect disappears once backsliding is underway. Haggard and Tiede, (2024) like Boese et al (2020), view the judiciary as a potential check on executive aggrandizement, but they warn that the weakening of legislative oversight is associated with greater backsliding risk.

This warning, of course, is especially relevant to the United States. Historically, U.S. courts have long been cautious about challenging decisions made by the political branches. And with the consolidation of a conservative Supreme Court majority during Trump's first term, the Court has tilted sharply to the right – favoring an expansion of presidential authority over independent regulatory agencies and granting the president broad immunity from criminal prosecution.[8]

At least until very recently, however, the judiciary has also imposed important constraints on presidential authority. District and appellate courts have ruled against the administration on issues related to immigration, academic freedom, and civil rights. Their authority to do so, it should be noted, was weakened substantially by a Supreme Court ruling in June 2025 that barred federal district courts from issuing nation-wide injunctions to protect individual plaintiffs; this had been a powerful tool previously used to check the executive branch. But the full scope of this ruling remains to be litigated, and in the meantime, there are other avenues (such as class-action suits) through which citizens can seek redress through the lower courts. Moreover, even with a supportive 6-3 majority on the Supreme Court, the Trump administration is unlikely to escape completely from constraints on attempts to evade constitutional limits.

Institutionally, the right of judicial review provides courts with considerable constitutional leverage (Haggard and Tiede 2024). Conflicts with the judiciary, as noted, are still ongoing, and as with the case of Kilmar Obrego Garcia, some adverse rulings might simply be ignored. But strengths of the judiciary are deeply rooted. These rest not only on legal precedents of judicial authority going back to the founding of the Republic, but also on the fact that the court system has long-standing roots in civil society. Although right-wing organizations such as the Federalist Society and the Heritage Foundation have come to exercise considerable power over the selection of judges, the path to appointment continues to go through established schools of

law, clerkships, and influential bar associations. The norms of behavior acquired during that process are sometimes violated, but they continue to serve as checks on politically-motivated decisions. The result has been that even "Republican" judges – including those appointed by Trump himself – have pushed back against Trump's attempts at executive aggrandizement.[9]

The federal system. The highly decentralized federal system in the United States also serves as an important constraint on the centralization of political power. Compared to many other federal systems around the world, states and local governments maintain substantial control over law enforcement, budgets, social policy, and the electoral system itself (see Kaufman, Kelemen, and Kolcak 2024). This independence, to be sure, does not always prove beneficial to American democracy. Historically, state-level enclaves of authoritarianism have been deployed to violate the civil and political rights of Black minorities and Native Americans (Gibson 2012). In the contemporary era of political polarization, moreover, the expansion of Republican control in "red states" has contributed to the erosion of federal constraints on Trump's power (Grumbach 2022).

But robust state and local powers have always been a double-edged sword (Bednar 2009). As my co-authors and I have argued elsewhere (Kaufman Kelemen Kolcak 2024), the same state strength that can diminish democracy can also protect it from autocratic assaults at the national level. Critically, the decentralized administration of elections helped to prevent Trump's attempt to subvert the 2020 presidential election. Democratic and even some Republican office-holders blocked schemes to rig elections in key battleground states. Their efforts to protect election results were upheld, moreover, by state courts as well as by federal judges, including those with known Republican affiliations.

Struggles over state and local control, of course, have continued and even intensified since the 2024 election. Conflicts over federal authority escalated substantially in June 2025, when Trump sent Marines and National Guard to Los Angeles to put down protests over immigration round-ups – over the objections of Governor Gavin Newsom and Mayor Karen Bass. Notwithstanding this disturbing turn of events, however, state governments, legislatures, and courts remain major platforms for the mobilization of political opposition and for the projection of its influence at the national level.

Congress and the political parties? Both the continuing independence of the courts and the leverage available to the opposition within the federal system provide important opportunities for the revival of Congress as a bulwark against authoritarianism. As long as these doors remain open to pressures from civil society and the electorate, both incentives and political alignments can be expected to change in a favorable direction. Historically, the opposition party typically gains House seats in midterm elections; and with the Republicans currently holding only a narrow majority, the Democrats stand a good chance of regaining control of that chamber. In fact, given the current erosion of Trump's popular support, they might do so by a large margin. And although the Senate and the President himself might block their legislative initiatives, House Democrats can hold hearings, dominate the news cycle, obstruct Trump's agenda and advance popular proposals of their own.

Moreover, some Republicans, who are now acting in lock step with the Trump administration, are likely to display greater independence as a result of presidential decisions that affect their electoral chances. As I have argued elsewhere, serious cleavages – already evident to some extent — can be expected to widen between internationalists and isolationists, and between MAGA hardliners and more traditional "free-market" leaders (Kaufman 2025). Of course, many things can go wrong, and democracy may well emerge seriously diminished; but it is reasonable to expect that the momentum behind Trump's bid for autocratic control will encounter substantial congressional headwinds.

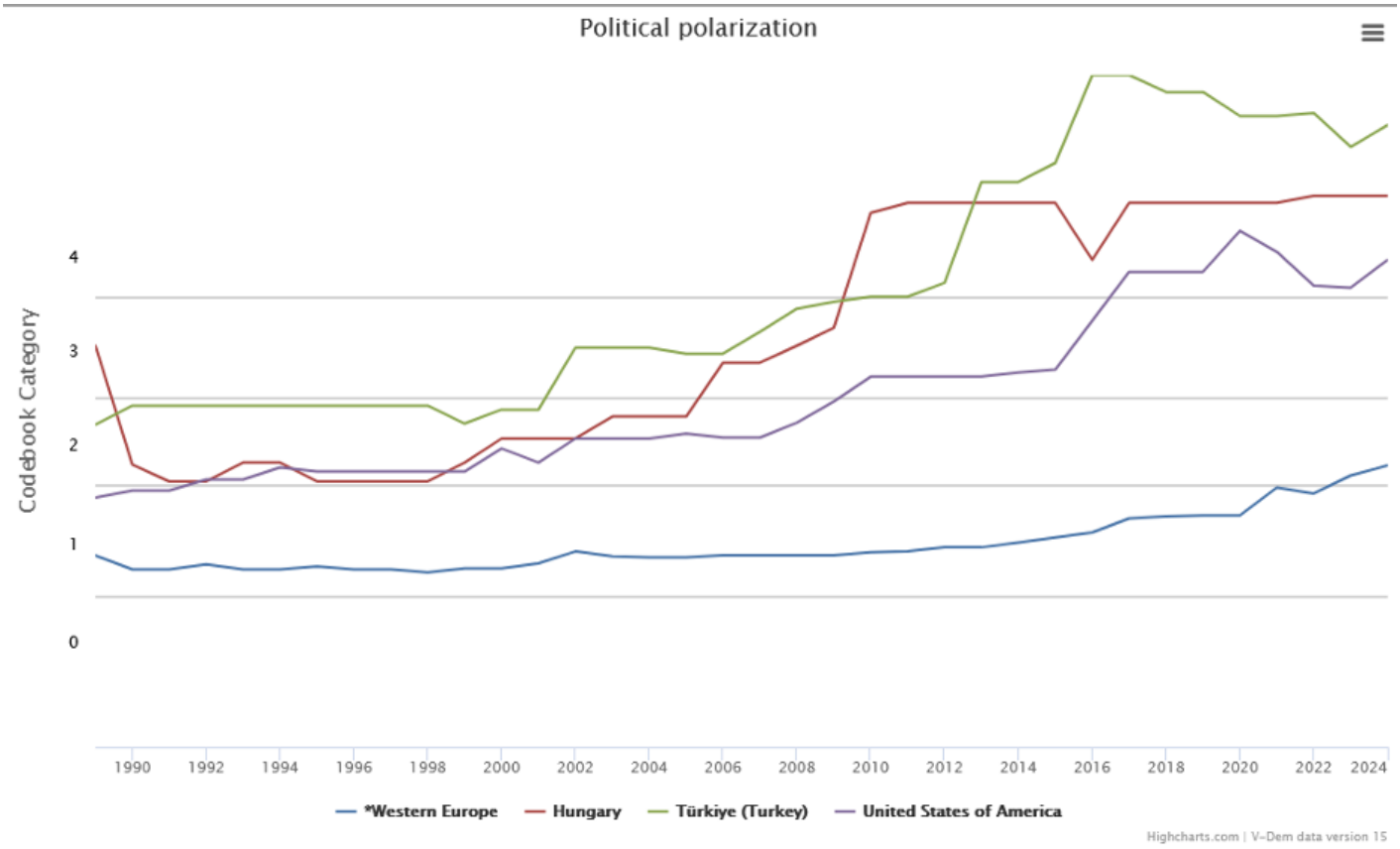
Vertical Accountability: The Electorate

Perhaps the most serious danger to American democracy is posed by the deep division within the mass public – a division that so far has provided Trump and the far right with a bedrock minimum of electoral support. The levels of polarization in the United States far exceeds that of Western Europe and is comparable to those of other backsliders that have lapsed into authoritarian rule (see Figure 1). Even if American democracy survives, continuing polarization will be a major source of instability.

However, polarization also implies significant mass opposition to – as well as support for — the Trump movement. Trump has never won over 50 percent of the voters: he won only 46 percent in 2016 and 49.8 percent in 2024. Moreover, as briefly noted above, public support has dropped steadily since he returned to the presidency, with approval ratings currently in the low 40s. Presidential approval ratings were hit especially hard since the unveiling of Trump's radical tariff initiatives, and they are likely to decrease even more as the consequences of these measures unfold.

To be sure, we cannot expect Trump's electoral support to collapse entirely. The MAGA base (about 30 percent of the electorate) is very likely to remain loyal; and in the current media environment, many other Trump voters might be confused about who is accountable for the difficulties they are experiencing. Even so, we can expect further defections as conditions worsen. This is highly likely to provide some wind at the back of the Democratic opposition and to weaken the loyalty of some Republican political leaders.

Figure 1: Political Polarization: Hungary, Turkey, United States, Western Europe



Conclusion

The second Trump presidency is far more dangerous than the first. Society is even more polarized than before, horizontal checks are weaker, and purges of the civil service, together with the appointment of loyalists, have eliminated or weakened internal checks within the federal bureaucracy. Yet the impediments to the consolidation of autocratic power are also significant. Far more than in backsliding democracies elsewhere, an authoritarian project in the United States is constrained by a wealthy, diversified, and complex economy, as well as by a robust civil society and a broad swath of public opposition. Institutional constraints also remain a continuing source of resilience. These include the checks provided by the United States judiciary, its federal system, and increasingly likely, its Congress.

As we will discuss below, these sources of resilience are unlikely to prevent further deterioration of American democracy. At the end of the next four years, it is realistic to expect the political system to be characterized by far weaker legal restrictions on the arbitrary exercise of power, weakened constitutional checks, and continuing abuses of civil liberties. Indeed, several leading theorists have argued that the "costs of opposition" have risen so high under the second Trump presidency that the United States has *already* become a competitive authoritarian regime (Levitsky, Way, and Ziblatt (2024).

But in their seminal work on competitive authoritarianism (2012), Levitsky and Way also argued that the conceptual boundary between flawed democracies and competitive

authoritarian regimes, though faint, is nevertheless significant: it marks the difference between a "playing field" in which oppositions have a reasonable chance to constrain incumbent governments and win elections, and ones in which such chances are vanishingly small. This bare-bones distinction strips away or deemphasizes many of the "horizontal" accountability mechanisms associated with liberal democracy. But it is one that is far from trivial, and it is consistent with a broader theoretical tradition that insists that democracy should be conceived in dichotomous terms – either a regime is democratic or it is not (Linz (1978); Przeworski et al (1997); Rostow (1970).[10]

In the United States, opponents to Trump's attacks on democracy have faced harassment, intimidation, and – in some cases – violence or imprisonment. Even so, I have tried to show that the American "playing field" remains open to meaningful political contestation in civil society, the courts, and at the state and local level. The 2026 congressional elections will pose the next big test of the democratic system, and we can expect increasing challenges to voter rights and ballot counts. But the opposition can also wield institutional and political resources to defend legitimate electoral outcomes, and a Democratic victory in 2026 would significantly alter the political equation. From this perspective, it is reasonable to conclude that American democracy is still alive, if only barely, and that it has a significant chance of remaining so. In the next section, we take up the question of what a post-Trump democracy might look like.

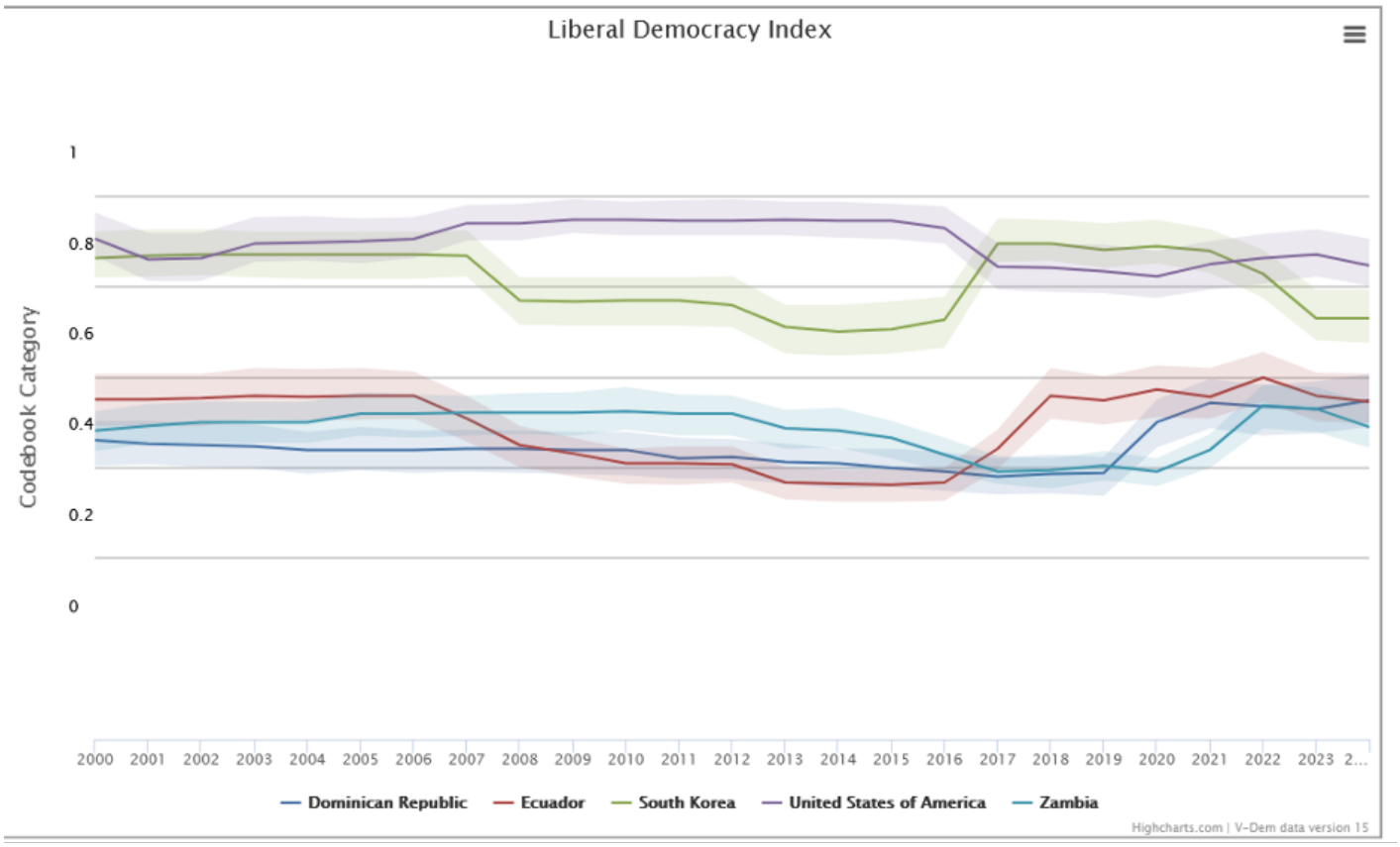
PART TWO: HOW MUCH DAMAGE? WHAT ABOUT RECOVERY?

Speculation about the course of American democracy over the next four years must be tempered by the fact that the system is sure to be impacted by exogenous shocks that cannot be anticipated in advance. In this connection, it is important to recall that Covid played this role during the first Trump term, and is likely to have contributed materially to his defeat in the 2020 election. This time around, such shocks might well come from the reckless behavior of Trump himself on both the domestic front and the world stage. He might well be vulnerable to his own policy mistakes with respect to trade, tax and spending policies, or international conflicts. One way or another, we can be fairly certain that shocks will come, even though their timing and effects are impossible to predict. Despite this uncertainty, however, it might be useful to attempt to peer through the fog and speculate on alternative scenarios that might lie ahead. In this section, I elaborate on my previous concerns about the prospects for a full recovery, but also briefly posit the possibility of a more hopeful future.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, the comparative evidence that democracy can fully recover from backsliding episodes is far from encouraging. In eleven of the sixteen backsliding cases examined by Haggard and Kaufman (2021) democratic oppositions succeeded in ousting autocratic rulers and in restoring constitutional governments. But eight of these – including Joseph Biden's administration – failed to rebound to the level of Liberal Democracy scores achieved prior to the backsliding episodes (see Figure 2). [11] Post-backsliding democracies in Ecuador, Zambia, and the Dominican Republic did return to pre-backsliding levels (Figure 2); but the previous democratic regimes had been characterized by weak states, corruption and political fragmentation; and in the aftermath the episodes, their

democracies returned mainly to this status quo ante, remaining vulnerable to corruption and political stalemate. (on Ecuador, for example, see Polga-Hecimovich and Sanchez (2021).

Figure 2: Liberal Democracy: Dominican Republic, Ecuador, South Korea, US, Zambia.



The challenges to full recovery are also evident in South Korea, a country not included in the Haggard and Kaufman study (but also shown in Figure 2).[12] In 2017, a backsliding episode was halted when President Park Geun-hye — the daughter and political heir of a former military ruler, Park Chung-hee — was impeached and convicted on charges of corruption and abuse of power (Laebens and Lurhmann 2021). Unlike the "recovering democracies" discussed above, South Korea had previously been classified as a "liberal" democracy, and like the United States, its economy exceeded the "Przeworski threshold" of rich countries immune to democratic collapse. Predictably, Park's ouster was driven by strong civil society protest, followed by robust responses from the country's parliament and judiciary (Laebens and Luhrmann 2021).

But Korea's society remained highly polarized, and the return to democratic "normalcy" remained relatively short-lived.(see Figure 2) In 2022, Park's conservative party, the People's Power Party (PPP), regained the presidency under the leadership of Yoon Suk-yeol. In 2024, Yoon declared martial law and summoned troops to close parliament in a brief, but shocking, attempt to seize autocratic power. Once again, democracy held. Civil society and

parliamentary resistance led to the defeat of the coup in a matter of hours, and Yoon was forced from power. But the crisis had a profoundly unsettling effect on the political system – as reflected in a decline in the country's Liberal Democracy index from a high of 0.80 after the ouster of Yoon to only 0.61 in 2024.

Can American democratic institutions be strengthened in the aftermath of the second Trump administration, or will they replicate the weaknesses that led to his return in 2025? Any discussion about a democratic recovery must begin by taking into account the enormous damage that has already been done to American society and to its position in the world. Trump's attack on long-standing geopolitical alliances has severely damaged American credibility as an anchor of international law and provider of "soft power" promotion of international security and well-being. In just the first few months of 2025, he has undermined Biden's effort to bring the country back from the international damage of his first term. The challenge will be even greater for any government seeking to resume leadership in the aftermath of the second term.

On the economic front, the reckless tariff and trade policies pursued in the quixotic attempt to "bring back manufacturing," have drastically – and quite possibly, irreversibly — altered supply chains and investment options. Uncertainty with regard to regulatory and fiscal policy is also likely to place a significant drag on investment and prices, and there has already been a significant shift away from American equities and debt. In the longer term, such factors are likely to lead to a severe weakening of the United States' role in the global economy – almost certainly to the advantage of China.

Finally – and perhaps most importantly — the attacks on the federal bureaucracy through mass firings and job uncertainty have severely weakened the state's capacity to deliver critical services, health and education, and public safety. The lost institutional memory and expertise that go into the provision of such public goods will be difficult, if not impossible, to replace in the coming years. These crippling deficits in state capacity will leave Trump's successors with only a limited ability to respond effectively to popular expectations and demands.

It should already be clear that I find little reason for optimism that these challenges can be decisively overcome. Given the profound uncertainties we face, however, it is useful to speculate on a more positive outcome. It is conceivable, if far less likely, that the radical and destructive initiatives of Trump 2.0 could generate an equally radical realignment – one that would produce a large, new majority coalition, marginalize Trumpian extremists, and establish a new foundation for competitive democratic politics and a reconstruction of the American state.

I cannot point to contemporary cross-national examples of such an outcome (but see Bateman's (2025) discussion of "democracy reinforcing" hardball). However, US history itself does provide examples of major partisan realignments (1896 and 1932) that upended the prior balance of political power and produced profound changes in the country's political economy. One – launched under McKinley in the 1896 election – led to long-term dominance of the

Republicans in the Northeast and Western states. The New Deal launched by Roosevelt after 1932 rested on a new coalition of Northeast labor, Mid-West progressives, and southern Democrats. Both the McKinley and Roosevelt realignments, it should be emphasized, were engineered at the cost of unpardonable deals with Southern white elites that denied the civil and political rights of African Americans. However, under the Republican dominance of the early 20th century, the United States emerged as an industrial economy and as a major world power. And the New Deal coalition laid the foundations for the establishment of America's modern welfare state — and, eventually, for responses to demands for social justice for Blacks and other excluded minorities.

A major realignment in the 21st century would look very different from either of these historical examples. Most assuredly, an attempt to resurrect the industrial and union-based foundations of the past would founder in the face of revolutionary changes in production and communications technology, global integration, and artificial intelligence. A new coalition would require a project that combined the social and political interests that have emerged out of these changes with effective strategies to respond to the massive insecurities and inequalities that these changes have produced.[13]

If such a coalition is possible at all, however, it would most likely emerge – as was the case under Roosevelt – through trial-and-error responses to unexpected events, rather than through a clearly planned-out, "top-down" strategy, which would surely have negative side-effects that would be difficult to reverse. More important, attempts to construct such a coalition, whether from the "top-down" or "bottom-up" would carry very high – and quite possibly unacceptable – political and constitutional risks. Ironically, the institutional checks and balances that might work to impede the centralization of power under Trump would also be likely to frustrate radical reforms pursued by a new governing coalition. Overcoming such obstacles, in turn, might well require the "democracy-reinforcing" hardball strategies discussed by David Bateman (2025) that test the outer-limits of the norms and institutions of democratic politics.[14] And this, in turn, is unlikely to succeed in the absence of devastating crises that reduce Trump's support to its hardcore minority.

For those concerned with finding enduring ways to confront the current threat to US democracy, these observations pose a major dilemma. Bold – "hardball" opposition — might well optimize the long-run chances of re-founding the American political system. But in the short-run, it risks a radical reaction and a disastrous defeat. In the immediate future, on the other hand, the best way to slow or block Trump's autocratic agenda might be through more moderate appeals that reaffirm – and respect — the importance of constitutional limits. This is clearly a far more prudent course of action. But it might well come at the cost of accepting a far more fragile democracy, one that is doomed to contend with the enduring polarization of American society.

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Notes

[1] V-Dem definition is that: electoral competition for the electorate’s approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. In between elections, there is freedom of expression and an independent media capable of presenting alternative views on matters of political relevance.

[2] Levitsky and Way (2023) suggest in a recent *Journal of Democracy* article that democratic collapse is relatively unlikely even in countries that have reached middle levels of development.

[3] Stokes (2025) claims that there is a very high correlation between inequality and backsliding.

[4] As is customary, this generalization does not apply to societies in which high wealth derives predominantly from petroleum.

[5] For a very useful summary of these activities, see Burgess and Burgess (2024)

[6] Croissant and Lott (2024) argue that party systems provide the weakest components of democratic resilience across democracies in Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia.

[7] But see alternative view by Kurt Weyland (2024).

[8] The Court's controversial decision in 2024 on presidential immunity for "official" acts has also opened the way to blatant and extensive acts of corruption on the part of the president and members of his family – most recently, the acceptance of Qatar's $400 million gift of a presidential airplane.

[9] See, for example, Linda Greenhouse (2025) "Should Reporters Identify Judges by the President Who Nominated Them?" Guest Essay. *New York Times*, May 12, 2025.

[10] Regimes of the World (ROW) – a widely used categorical ranking of regime types – provides a comparative perspective. In 2024, before Trump's second term, RoW continued to classify the United States as a "liberal democracy," despite the damage done in the first Trump term. We can expect the ranking to be considerably lower in the 2025 edition, which will take the second term into account. But to fall entirely out of the RoW "democracy" category altogether, the United States would need to be placed below Zambia, North Macedonia, and Nigeria, each of which were rated as ED- ["Electoral Democracies minus] despite far more fragile social and political institutions. Even a higher ED standard would place it on a level of countries such as Slovakia, Solomon Island, Sri Lanka, Suriname, and Timor-Leste. (p. 14 V-Dem Institute, "Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?" It remains unlikely that, despite the deterioration, the United States would fall below this threshold.

[11] The others did not. These included (Brazil, Poland, North Macedonia, Greece, Ukraine, Bolivia, Serbia, and the United States following Trump's loss of the presidency in 2020).

[12] Melis G. Laebens and Anna Luhrmann (2021), "What Halts Democratic Erosion? The Changing Role of Accountability," Democratization 28, 5: 908-928.

[13] For example? Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson (2025).

[14] David A. Bateman, "Democracy-Reinforcing Hardball: Can Breaking Democratic Norms Preserve Democratic Values?" *Comparative Political Studies* 2025, Vol. xx: 1-35. Special issue edited by Giovanni Capoccia and Isabela Mares. As historical examples, Bateman points to the Reconstruction period in the United States, the formation of the French Fifth Republic under Charles DeGaulle, and the passage of the British Parliament Act in 1911, which eliminated the veto power of the House of Lords.

India’s Conservative Revolution: The Postcolonial Left meets the Hindu Right

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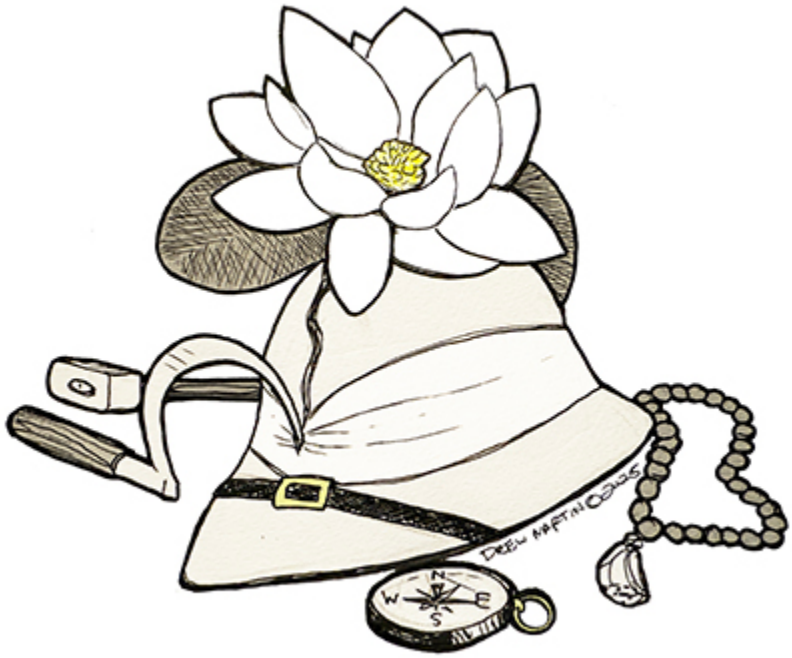
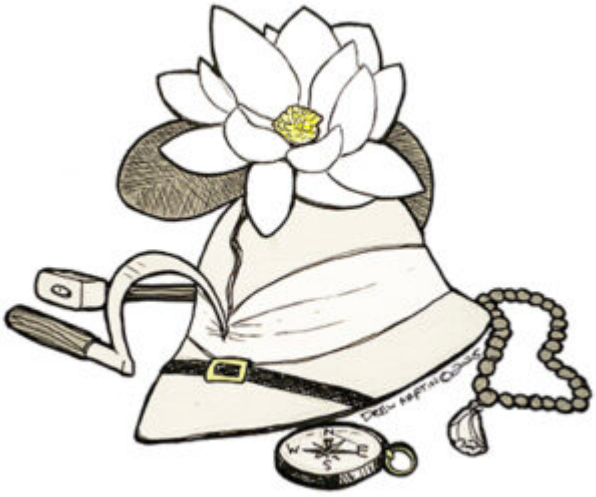


A strange thing happened at a conference on “Decolonization of the Indian Mind” organized by a Hindu nationalist outfit and attended by the bigwigs of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), the politburo of the Hindu Right. [1] One of the speakers, Rakesh Sinha, a member of the upper house of the Indian parliament and a member of the RSS, gave a presentation that would fit right into a seminar on postcolonial and decolonial theory in any Indian or American university.[2]

Speaking in chaste Hindi, Sinha took his rapt audience through the depravity of colonialism, its lingering after-effects, and the need to replace the stories the West tells about history, reason, and progress with Indian metanarratives. The purpose of decolonization, he said (roughly translated), was “the colonization of the West by a Hindu metanarrative – not to enslave it, but to save it from itself.” This “long journey” to the conquest of the West has to begin at home because only after we get rid of the Western mindset in our own colleges and universities can we aim at installing “Vedas and Upanishads as core courses in Harvard University.” Sinha’s missionary ambition is an echo of Modi’s oft-repeated promise to make India the *Vishwaguru*, the guru to the world.



Artist: Drew Martin

What would bring about this decolonization at home and abroad? The first step is to put Europe in its place and reject the pretension of universality of its ideas. At this point, Sinha dips into Edward Said's critique of Orientalism and the postcolonial "breakthrough" he has inspired. He gives three cheers to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*, an acclaimed classic of postcolonial theory. He heaps praise on Chakrabarty for his courage to declare Europe a "mere province," and not the whole universe. Chakrabarty is a true nationalist, says Sinha, because "what was the task of *rashtrawadis* (nationalists), that task has been carried out by Dipesh Chakrabarty." He then exhorts his audience to learn from postcolonialists and subalternists despite their supposedly Marxist sympathies, "just like Lord Rama sought wisdom from the demon-king Ravana."

Strange Bedfellows

Such enthusiasm for left-leaning luminaries of the postcolonial pantheon – everyone from Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Franz Fanon to Edward Said, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gayatri Spivak, and Ashis Nandy – at a gathering of hard-core Hindu Right may appear out of place at first sight. But, as I argue in my recent book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: The Wages of Unreason*, the warm public embrace of the Postcolonial Left by the Hindu Right was far from unexpected. Indeed, this public lecture – "liked" over 2,000 times on YouTube – is only the visible tip of the iceberg that I bring to light in my book.

The Postcolonial Left and the Hindu Right, my book demonstrates, have become strange bedfellows. Postcolonial theory, along with its younger cousin, decolonial theory, is providing fresh ammunition and scholarly respectability to the Hindu Right. The shared ground between the two "enemies" is not limited to name-dropping or superficial appropriation of post-ist jargon. Rather, there is a deeper ideological convergence in their evaluations of modernity and traditions, science and religion, and universalism and cultural particularities. The Postcolonial

Left and the Hindu Right are on the same page when it comes to defending traditions against modernity, popular religiosity against secularization of the mind, and the discursive construction of reality (or rather, "reality") and the cultural embeddedness of ways of knowing and living. Above all, both sides rage against the "colonization of the Indian mind" by Eurocentric ideas that are robbing us of authenticity. Both are singing the same song, with the same refrain: Down with Eurocentrism! Decolonize Now! *Swaraj* in ideas![3]

The contemporary Hindu Right, I argue, is only the latest chapter of the conservative revolution against Enlightenment rationalism and secular humanism that began with the Indian Renaissance in the late 19th century. Like the conservative revolutionaries in the Weimar Republic who declared war against the French Enlightenment and British liberalism because they were alien to the *kultur* of the German *volk,* India's conservative revolutionaries, too, sought to defend and revive India's *Volksgeist,* which they claimed lay in Hindu "spirituality," against the "materialist" and "atheist" West. To that end, they sought to purge the alien ideas they encountered under the British in the uniquely Hindu style of hierarchical inclusivism.[4] They did not reject the Enlightenment ideals of scientific rationality and liberalism outright – for an open confrontation of contradictions has never been the Hindu way. Rather, they turned the ideas they found threatening into *inferior*adjuncts of the spiritual holism and integralism of Hindu *dharma*. They accepted the letter but denied the spirit of liberal ideas.

The contemporary Hindu Right has inherited this conservative drive to rejuvenate the Hindu soul and purge it of impurities. To that end, the Modi administration has launched a campaign to "decolonize the Indian mind," which has injected a heavy dose of ancient Hindu sciences and philosophy into all levels of education, from primary schools to "centers of excellence" in universities.[5] The "decolonizers" are mining the scholarly work of postcolonial and decolonial theorists because they find their critique of the "epistemic violence" of Eurocentric conceptual categories congenial to their agenda of "Making India Great Again," by making it Hindu again.[6] They see the Postcolonial Left as the enemy of their enemy, and therefore, their friend.

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For nearly five decades, starting with the Emergency (1975-1977), India's first brush with authoritarianism, prominent Indian intellectuals who claim to speak for social justice and cultural rights of the marginalized have been waging a war against the ideal of secular modernity that India set upon at the time of Independence. They believe that India's experience of modernity is not organic because the elites running the show have accepted the colonial legacy of scientific reason and secularization as universally valid and universally desirable. Instead of universality, the critics find a deep difference, even incommensurability, between India and Europe.

These anti-secularist intellectuals see the critique of colonial legacy as a precondition for creating a modernity that is authentically "our own." Our critics insist that Kant's directive of escaping the tutelage of all external authorities by daring to think for oneself — the famous *Sapere Aude!* "Dare to use your own reason" — will not work in India in the manner it worked

for Europe in the Age of Enlightenment. For the once-colonized, the Kantian spirit of *Sapere Aude!* demands that we *first* escape the apprenticeship of our erstwhile colonial lords and masters before we can dare to think for ourselves, on our own terms and in our own cultural idiom. Thus, to live more authentically and chart our independent course in the modern world, they argue, we must rediscover the indigenous modes of living and thinking that are still alive among the non-modern masses who are marginalized and condescended to by the elites with colonized minds.[7]

To that end, this segment of the Indian Left has produced withering critiques of the "Western" values enshrined in the Constitution, especially the commitment to secularism and the cultivation of a skeptical and secular worldview. They see these values as cast-off clothes of Europe that don't fit Indians and turn them into pathetic mimic men. What unites these critics is a suspicion of the Enlightenment ideal of rational progress – the belief that there are universally valid ways of knowing (that of modern science) that are objectively superior to others, and that with better knowledge, we can make genuine progress toward making a better society. Theirs is a *total* critique of modernity that conflates validity claims with power, leaving reason incapable of doing its work of ideology critique. They see scientific reason itself as a metanarrative tainted by Western metaphysics, colonial domination, Orientalism, and racism. We will refer to these critics of Indian modernity collectively as the Postcolonial Left.

The rise to academic prominence of the Postcolonial Left through the last quarter of the 20th century coincided with the meteoric rise of the Hindu Right in India. The same shock to the Indian polity — the imposition of the Emergency that lasted from 1975 to 1977 — that led many on the Left to rethink the trajectory of Indian modernity, also brought the RSS into the public sphere from which it had been banished after the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. The same turn away from state-led development to a neoliberal market economy that enabled "Third World" intellectuals to move to centers of learning in the "First World" where they would take a poststructuralist turn, *also* brought the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a political front of the RSS, to the commanding heights of Indian politics. [8] By the late 1990s, the BJP had abandoned its earlier view of the state as a protector of society against the markets and embraced the market (or rather, crony capitalism)[9] as the main driver of societal transformation. The BJP has adroitly welded neoliberal economic policies with a toxic civilizational populism that pits an "us," the bearers of traditional Hindu values, against "them," the non-Hindu minorities and the godless, Westernized "elite." We will refer to the 21st-century manifestation of Hindu nationalism as the Hindu Right.

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My book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism*, recounts the intellectual history of the past 50 years and looks at the disaster that follows when cultural despair leads the Left to renounce the promise of the Enlightenment. I offer a two-part argument. First, I establish that Hindu nationalism belongs to the family of conservative revolutions against the Enlightenment and liberalism, of the kind that brought down the Weimar Republic and prepared the cultural grounds for Nazism. India's conservative revolution began in the late

19th- early 20th century with Swami Vivekananda, Bipin Chandra Pal, Sri Aurobindo, and other leaders of the *Swadeshi* movement, and continued through Gandhi's leadership of the Indian National Congress. These pioneers of Indian nationalism sought to domesticate the liberalism they encountered under colonialism by subsuming modern science into Hindu mysticism, [10] while defending the institution of caste as a superior, more harmonious, and communitarian alternative to the liberal ideal of rights-bearing individuals thrown into the vagaries of the marketplace. Their objective was to revive the eternal "soul" of their ancient nation, which was to direct India's tryst with the modern world. India was to seek its own "alternative modernity" that was compatible with the "eternal" values of its Hindu civilization. The Indian Constitution, written at a time when India had gone through the trauma of Partition and when secular liberals like Nehru and Ambedkar had the upper hand, was a departure from the Hindu revivalism that was a prominent feature of Indian nationalism. The conservative revolution did not just turn over and die once the Constitution came into force: It continued to live a subterranean life in the "Sangh Parivar," the family of Hindu supremacist outfits directed by the RSS, which now controls the levers of power.

The second part of my argument is that postcolonial theory's romance of the virtuous, non-modern "subaltern"[11] victimized by Western rationalism and secularism shares the spirit of Weimar conservatives who sought to defend the *kultur* of the German *volk* against the soulless and materialistic *Zivilisation*. Like the Weimar conservatives, Indian postcolonial thinkers were driven by a cultural despair over the "nonsynchronous contradiction," or *Ungleichzeitigkei*t (literally, unequalness of time) caused by the rapid but uneven spread of capitalist modernization that had led to radically different lifeworlds existing together at the same time, in the same space, and often in the consciousness of the same person. Their cultural despair drove a sizeable segment of the Indian Left, like their Weimar counterparts, to seek an exit from modernity (or, rather, "colonial modernity") itself. They sought an "alternative modernity" that would be guided by the traditional values of the non-modern masses who were being left behind by modernization. Unlike the Hindu conservatives, they were motivated not by the dream of reviving the Great Vedic Tradition, but by a sympathy for the marginalized masses whose lifeworld they feared was being trampled by the modernizing zeal of the technocrats and elites running the show. The problem, however, is that the "little traditions" of the subaltern derive their sense of the sacred from the same Great Tradition that the Hindu nationalists want to revitalize.

In their critique of modernity, however, the postcolonial thinkers have ended up meeting India's *real*conservative revolutionaries who have been "provincializing Europe" long before it became a fashionable leftist slogan. Postcolonial and subaltern studies scholars have stigmatized the *same* Enlightenment values of scientific rationalism, secularism, and individualism as "Eurocentric" and culturally alien to the folkways of the subaltern, which the nationalist thinkers from Vivekananda to Gandhi had deemed too materialistic and individualistic for a nation as "spiritual" and as integrally "communitarian" as India. While the nationalists had treated the "spiritual" as the unchanging essence of India, postcolonial thinkers treated the "subaltern" as the bearer of an unchanging and non-secular consciousness that valued community, religion, and honor instead of material interests and utilitarian

calculations. [12] Just as the nationalists had sought an "alternative modernity" that would deliver the material goods made possible by modern technology without the Western "vices" of individualism, materialism, and atheism, postcolonialists have sought a modernity that values the values of the non-modern subaltern. Meanwhile, the old idea of modernity as *disenchantment* and a progressive decline of ignorance, blind faith, and the chokehold of traditions has died a slow death.

But the anti-modernist Left has met the Hindu Right only *halfway*, for they have no sympathy whatsoever for the civilizational populism that the latter has ignited. No votary of postcolonial/decolonial position has ever condoned the vicious Islamophobia of the Hindu Right or approved of the authoritarian turn that India has taken under Modi. For all their critique of Eurocentrism, postcolonialists remain committed to the political values of egalitarianism and liberal democracy. The anti-Enlightenment Left has met the Hindu Right on the metapolitics, but not on politics.

But – and here is the rub – their relentless attacks on the foundations of secular modernity have disabled a rational critique of Hindu metaphysics and the deadly traditions it sanctions and have thereby allowed the fire of Hindu chauvinism to spread. By recklessly propagating the cult of the non-modern subaltern, the high priests of postcolonial/decolonial theory have succeeded in tilting the intellectual center of gravity toward a politics of nostalgia and revival, which is the natural terrain of the Right. Consequently, there is now a void where there should have been a strong, principled, secular democratic front against Hindutva's onslaught on all that was once decent and promising in the idea of India.

Before we examine the intellectual debt that the Hindu Right owes to the Postcolonial Left, it would be useful to examine the axioms of postcolonial thought that have dominated the intellectual scene in India.

The Axioms of Indian Postcolonialism

Indian intellectuals have played an outsized role in the creation and elaboration of postcolonial theory. Two out of the three founding figures of postcolonial theory, the so-called "Holy Trinity" – Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha – are of Indian origin, now living in the United States. The scholars whose names have become virtually synonymous with postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies – notably, Ashis Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash, Vinay Lal, Aditya Nigam, and Nivedita Menon – all have roots in India, and some of them live there permanently or part-time.

I have suggested that there is not one, but two origin stories of the sensibility that calls itself postcolonial – one American and the other Indian. The first began in 1978 in the literature department of Columbia University in New York City with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. The second began around the same time in post-Emergency New Delhi in the writings of Ashis Nandy, the self-described "anti-secularist," and among a group of historians belonging to what came to be known as the Subaltern Studies Collective, who were beginning

to explore Indian history from the perspective of the non-elite masses. As many of these scholars moved to American and other European universities, their concerns with the direction of Indian modernity merged with the Saidian-Spivakian stream, which itself was a part of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist stream of social theory that declared an end to all universally shared norms and ideals. As the Indian stream made contact with poststructuralism, it imbibed the latter's anti-realist, constructivist, and relativist epistemology, and its focus shifted from the lives of the subaltern to a textual and metatheoretical critique of colonial modernity.

There is no founding document or manifesto of postcolonial theory. In my reading of the postcolonial literature as it evolved from Nandy's initial intervention, I have identified the following four themes that have dominated the Indian debates:

First, beyond economic and political injustice, colonialism committed another kind of injustice, namely, "epistemic injustice" that results in mutilating and silencing the worldview of the colonized people.

Second, epistemic injustice did not end with the formal end of colonialism. Colonialism has an afterlife in India because Indian elites – be they Marxists, secular-minded liberals, or Hindu nationalists – continue to do what the colonial powers used to do, namely, judge the folkways of the common people against Western norms. Liberals and Marxists try to reform the subaltern consciousness through inculcation of scientific rationality, while Hindu nationalists try to reform Hinduism by fitting it into a monotheistic and scientistic mold. Secularists and Hindu nationalists, according to postcolonial critics, are equally colonized because they measure the lifeworld of the non-modern masses against European standards, which they deem to be universally valid and universally desirable.

Third, the non-elite masses (the subaltern) have a mental and moral landscape that is independent of the Westernized secularists and the self-Orientalized Hindu elites. In the subaltern mind, the gods are real, Puranic myths are more meaningful than the history as told by historians, and the natural world has fuzzy edges that are not clearly demarcated from the spiritual (the Absolute Spirit, Brahman, that manifests itself as matter), or the supernatural (the *shakti* of gods and goddesses). In the subaltern world, community counts more than utilitarian calculations of money-making and competition, living with nature counts more than productivity and efficiency, and tolerance of difference is the norm. To think that the subaltern view of the world is merely a leftover from the past, or a premodern survival, and to expect Indians to become more secular and utilitarian as the country modernizes, is to remain imprisoned in a Eurocentric mindset that sees the West as the end of all history and the goal of all development.

Fourth, the recovery of subaltern consciousness is necessary for epistemic decolonization that would end the "violence" of the post-Enlightenment episteme. The subaltern lifeworld must become a living option for the elite if we want to feel at home in "our modernity," rather than forever exist as consumers of imported ideas. It is necessary, therefore, to "provincialize"

Europe so that the shoots of an alternative, indigenous modernity can have a chance to grow.

Along with these founding assumptions, two other tropes have been influential in India, namely, "strategic essentialism" as theorized by Gayatri Spivak and "hybridity" as theorized by Homi Bhabha.

Strategic essentialism has served as a permission slip to use ideas opportunistically to "fight the other side."[13] As Spivak herself put it:

It is absolutely on target to take a stand against the discourses of essentialism [and] universalism… But strategically we cannot…*You pick up the universal that will give you the power to fight against the other side,* and what you are throwing away by doing that is your theoretical purity (1990, 11–12, emphasis added).

As we will see below, strategic essentialism has been put to work by the Hindu Right to appropriate Orientalist essentialisms when they bolster their pride and condemn them in a Saidian sense of being constructs of colonial power when it comes to problematic issues like caste and patriarchy.

Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" and its cognates – Nandy's "critical traditionalism," Nigam's "borderless philosophy" — are like the holy water of Ganga that can remove the sin of essentialism and confer "agency" and even "resistance" to the colonized. The problem with the hybridity talk is that, as I elaborate in my book, hybridizing, or combining any idea with any other, *regardless of the contradictions,* is how Hindu hierarchical inclusivism has always worked. Hinduism thrives on encapsulating contradictory ideas into its own all-encompassing spiritual monism. A classic example of such "hybridity" is how Vivekananda managed to read Darwin's purely naturalistic idea of natural selection, which has no room for divine agency, into the spirit-centered cosmology of Vedanta and Yoga. Hybridity is no "resistance" to colonialism; it is rather how Hinduism "modernizes" and rejuvenates itself by assimilating and disarming foreign ideas.

Hindu Postcolonial Studies

As we saw with the conference on decolonization this essay opened with, the intellectual harvest of postcolonial theory did not stay confined to academia. It did not take long before what I call "Hindu Postcolonial Studies" began to take shape. This "school" is made up of Hindu nationalist intellectuals who embrace the Saidian critiques of the colonial construction of India from a distinctly dharmic perspective. Whereas the Postcolonial Left challenged Eurocentric metanarratives to let the subaltern speak, the Hindu Postcolonial Studies combats "colonial consciousness" to empower the Hindu majority and to make India the guru to the world.

In the last two decades or so, a new breed of Hindu Right intellectuals have emerged who call themselves "baudhik Kshatriyas" or intellectual warriors (Kshatriya being the traditional warrior caste). If you read the recent writings of some of their superstars whose books sell like

hot-cakes in India – Koenraad Elst, the Belgian Islamophobe and a pagan with dubious connections with European New Right, Balagangadhara, another Belgium-trained critic of "colonial consciousness," Rajiv Malhotra, the well-known muckraker who runs the US-based Infinity Foundation that propagates Hindu exceptionalism, and J. Sai Deepak who wants to decolonize the Indian Constitution – three things become clear. One, they share the postcolonialist impulse to "reverse the gaze" and judge the West from a Hindu perspective; two, Edward Said and Walter Mignolo (the guru of decolonization) are their guiding stars whom they appropriate "strategically," and finally, they share the anti-realist, social-constructivist epistemology of postcolonial theorists while "strategically" rejecting their anti-essentialism.

The indigenists among the anti-modernists (Ashis Nandy, Aditya Nigam, for example) have long criticized Hindu nationalists for being mentally colonized because they don't respect the tolerant folk religiosity of the subaltern, and cast Hinduism into a Semitic mold (by adopting features common to Abrahamic religions such as a single canon of sacred texts, a preference for monotheism which they find in Advaita Vedanta, a Vatican and Mecca-like center which they are building in Ayodhya). This exact criticism shows up in Koenraad Elst's 2001 book, *Decolonizing the Hindu Mind,* where he accuses the RSS of being too secular and not defending the pagan practices of ordinary Hindus because of their bias toward monotheism. Elst demands that RSS stop seeking the approbation of secular elites, give up the Indian version of secularism as equal respect of all religions, and openly declare Islam and Christianity to be not religions, but monstrous and murderous ideologies which have no place in India.

Balagangadhara places himself squarely in the tradition of Edward Said and promises to unleash the*real* radicalness of Said's writings that his other followers have, presumably, failed to grasp. Said is put to work by Balagangadhara to claim that there is no such thing as a "caste system" or even a religion called "Hinduism" in India; they are constructs of the "paranoid consciousness," or hallucinations, of British Orientalists and administrators who mistook their subjective experiences shaped by Christianity for the reality of India. Here, the Saidian/Foucaultian anti-realist chickens truly come home to roost: All social scientific knowledge of non-West is Orientalist because its background assumptions are European/Christian. Balagangadhara goes on to cite the postcolonial literature to repeat the familiar refrain of the continuing colonization of consciousness and experience in postcolonial societies. In his telling, we in India live in the matrix of "colonial consciousness" spun out of paranoid fantasies of our erstwhile rulers.

Rajiv Malhotra is better known for his harassment of scholars than for his scholarship. With his best-selling books, especially his 2011 *Being Different: Indian Challenge to Western Universalism*, he has established himself as a voice for Hindu (or rather "Indic") supremacy. He places himself in the Saidian/postcolonial tradition, which he praises for "reversing the gaze" on Western universalism. But he takes postcolonial studies to task for not going far enough *and* for going too far. Followers of Said have been too defensive because they only try to "rescue the depiction of India from Eurocentrism" without challenging Eurocentrism with

Dharma-centrism. He blames this timidness on their remaining wedded to the secularist assumptions of conventional social sciences. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, has gone too far in its skepticism of *all* metanarratives because it threatens the Indian metanarrative and leaves Indians defenseless in the face of the West. For Malhotra, postmodern skepticism is fine when unleashed on the West, but illegitimate when directed at the "eternal" truths of dharma.

Finally, J. Sai Deepak's 2021 book, *India that is Bharat*, derives absolutely reactionary conclusions from postcolonial and decolonial theories.

The Postcolonial Left decried secularism for being unfit for India because it was a "gift" of Christianity, berated scientific rationality as silencing local knowledge, condemned human universals as Eurocentric, and dreamed of indigenizing our sciences and decolonizing our minds. The Decolonial Left went further and insisted on complete "de-linking" from European universals in favor of creating a "pluriverse" where different cultures would be free to cultivate their gardens as they pleased.

These chickens come home to roost in Sai Deepak's work, which demands a total rewrite of the idea of India, including its constitution. India has to stop thinking of itself as a territorial nation and proudly reclaim its status as a civilizational state. This would require, as a first step, that it give up its current name, India, and begin to proudly call itself Bharat, the name that honors the "Emperor Bharata" of the *Mahabharata*.

The second step would be to cleanse the Constitution of its Western–Christian "onto epistemological and theological" assumptions. This would require reengineering the state whose "civilizational duty" would be to protect the country as the "homeland for Indic consciousness" and where those with non-Hindu worldviews (the Muslims, Christians, and non-believers) would become second-class citizens.

Sai Deepak's book is a paean to decolonial theory (especially Walter Mignolo, who wrote a glowing blurb for it, which he later withdrew), and a homage to Balagangadhara's theory of colonial consciousness. If anyone needs proof of the reactionary implications of postcolonial and decolonial theory, they ought to take a good look at this book.

If this sad saga has any message for the Ivory-Tower Left, it is this: Be careful of what you wish for.

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[1] The conference was organized in 2017 by Bharatiya Vichar Manch, based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. BVM calls itself an “intellectual movement” and organizes discussion forums on current affairs. It runs a very active YouTube channel, preferring videos over the printed word. Rakesh Sinha’s lecture can be watched at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9xJl-RmvEY

[2] Sinha’s lecture drew upon his 2016 publication *Swaraj in Ideas: Quest for Decolonization of the Indian Mind*, published under the auspices of the Indian Policy Foundation, which he was the founding director of. This book is available at

https://www.ipf.org.in/encyc/2020/10/23/2_07_40_08_Books_1.pdf

[3] *Swaraj* is a Hindi word for "one's own rule" or "self-rule."

[4] Hierarchical inclusivism is a dominant trait of modern as well as medieval Hinduism which treats various philosophical schools and religious traditions as not erroneous or false, but as falling short of the fullness of the ultimate truth known only to Advaitic (non-dualist or monistic) tradition of Hinduism. Thus, neo-Hinduism propagated by such figures as Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and S. Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) affirms the truth of all religions – and *mutatis mutandis,* all worldviews and knowledge systems – as valid at a lower level which is ultimately contained in, and transcended by, the knowledge of the transpersonal Absolute indicated by Advaita, the apex of Hindu theological and philosophical wisdom.

[5] For a critical look at Modi's National Education Policy, 2020, see my 2024 book, *Field Guide to Post-truth India.*

[6] Modi adopted the MAGA mantra for India at his last meeting with Trump before the two had a falling out. See "MAGA plus MIGA becomes mega partnership for prosperity: PM Modi," *The Hindu*, Feb 14, 2025.

https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/maga-plus-miga-becomes-mega-partnership-for-prosperity-pm-modi/article69218015.ece

[7] That the use of reason for the once colonized must lead to a renewed appreciation of the pre-colonial past is most forcefully argued by Partha Chatterjee, a leading light of Subaltern Studies. In an essay titled "Our Modernity," Chatterjee argues that whereas a European Enlightenment thinker like Kant can rhapsodize about the modern as an escape from the past, we, the victims of colonialism, have no choice but to see "our modernity" as an escape from our colonized present and to "transpose our desire to be independent and creative ..to our past" because until we undo the regime of colonial knowledge, "we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would we be taken seriously as its producers" (2010, 151, 146).

[8] Arif Dirlik (1994, 329) famously answered the question "When exactly … does the 'post-colonial' begin?" with a simple one-line statement: "When Third World intellectuals arrived in the First World academe." As Vasant Kaiwar (2009, 206) elaborates, "Postcolonial studies were, at least at their inception, a metropolitan phenomenon, taking place in a context of deep restructuring in the former colonies of political-economic, intellectual, and academic life that coincided with the more or less thorough abandonment of state-originated projects of development…" The Postcolonial Left, ensconced in the First World academe, abandoned any engagement with the restructuring of political economy under neo-liberal globalization and took a culturalist turn that fitted well with the accent on postmodernism and multiculturalism that dominated the metropolitan universities in the last quarter of the 20th century.

[9] Christophe Jaffrelot's 2024 book, *Gujarat Under Modi: Laboratory of Today's Indi*a, offers a good account of the beginnings of crony capitalism in India.

[10] See my “Science Sanskritized: How Modern Science Became a Handmaiden of Hindu Nationalism” (Nanda, 2020), reprinted in Nanda 2024.

[11]The category of the “peasant,” the paradigmatic subaltern of Subaltern Studies, expanded to include non-modern elements of culture that even the elite share. Thus, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words:

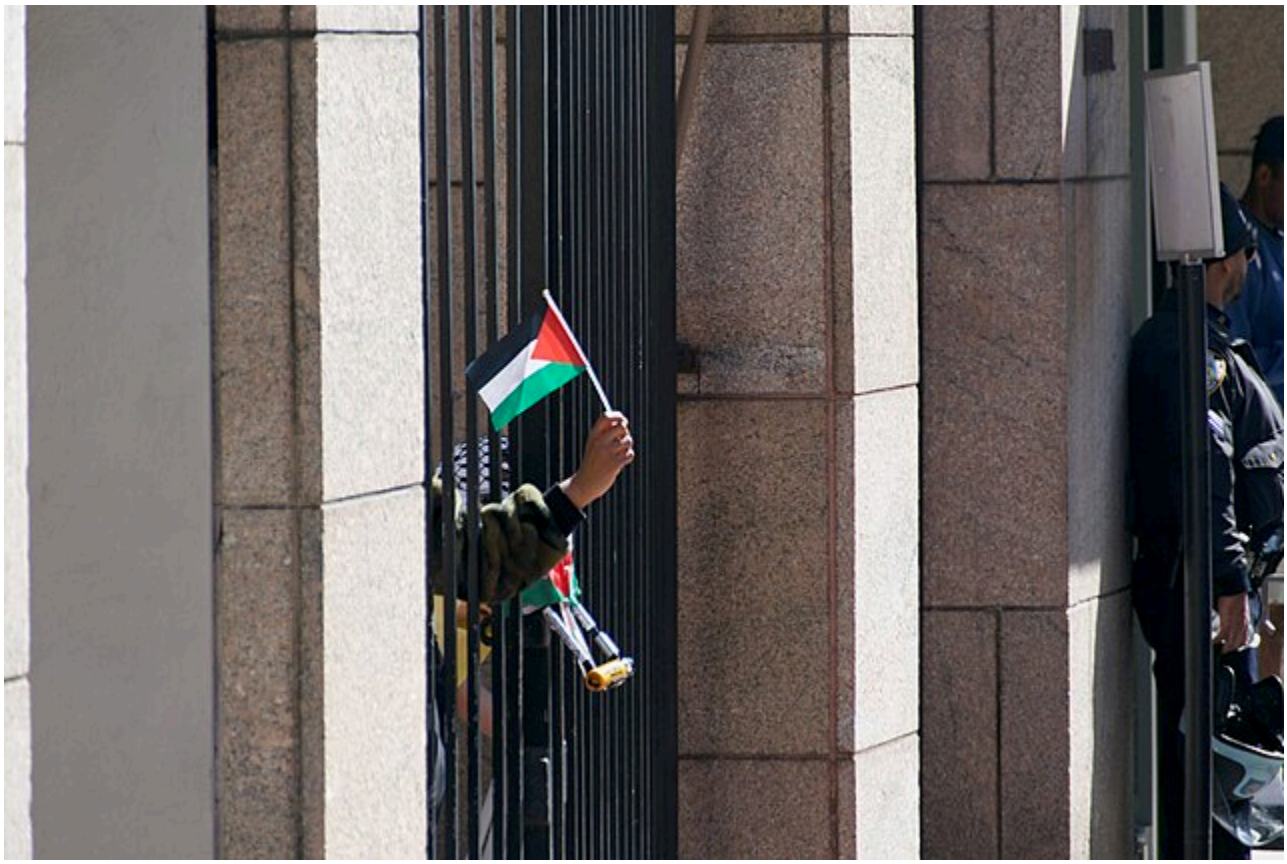
“The “peasant” acts here as a shorthand for all the seemingly nonmodern, rural, non-secular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their imprint on the lives of even the elites in India and their institutions of government. *The peasant stands for all that is not bourgeois in Indian capitalism and modernity* (2000, 11, emphasis added)

[12] As Vivek Chibber has correctly pointed out, the postcolonial insistence on finding indigenous theoretical categories stems from the belief that the Indian peasants and workers “are motivated by an entirely different kind of psychology, namely, a psychology specific to their pre-bourgeoise culture wherein choices were not made on rational grounds to serve material interests. Rather, workers’ choices reflected the premium they placed on community, religion and honor” (2013, 18).

[13] It is not just postcolonial thinkers, but scholars from many diverse disciplines who have embraced the logic of strategic essentialism. As Yascha Mounk remarks, it has become commonplace for activists in the United States to “preface their remarks by acknowledging that race (or gender, or ability status) is a social construct, before going on to make surprisingly essentializing claims about what ‘Black and brown people’ (or women, or the disabled) believe” (2023, 46).

Eventful Protests Against the Israeli Genocide: The Italian “Hot Summer” for a Free Palestine

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3



On September 22 2025 a 24 hour general strike was called by several grassroot unions in Italy to protests the complicity of the Italian government with the Israeli genocide in Gaza, support the effort of the Global Sumud Flottilla to bring humanitarian help to the starving population, and call for an end to the war economy. Up to 500,000 people mobilize in the street in 90 protest events all over the country under the slogan “Let’s block everything,” with several blockades and occupations of harbors, railway stations and high-ways in Rome, Milan, Turin, Genoa, Florence, Bologna. The main promoter of the initiative, the Unione Sindacati di Base (USB, Union of grassroots unions) called for “the immediate break-off of relations with the terrorist state of Israel, which is the concrete way in which Italy can, and must, react to the genocide that is taking place”. Since then, protests have multiplied taking various forms.

On October 3 2025, a new general strikes is called against the Israeli genocide, this times by grassroots unions but also the CGIL As two millions mobilized on the streets, marching, blocking harbours and railways stations, interrupting traffic and occupying schools and

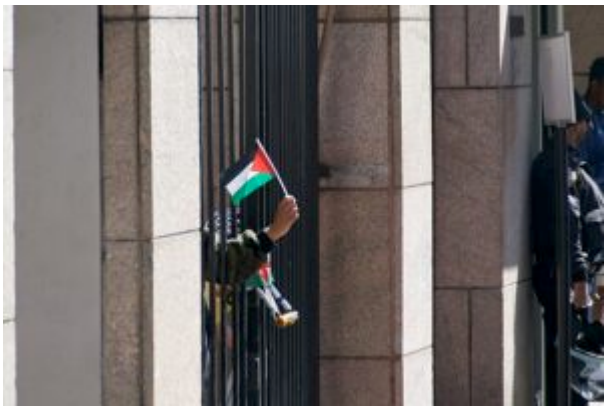
university, with a main slogan being "L'Italia lo sa da che parte stare, Palestina libera dal fiume al mare", I addressed the questions of several journalists from all over Europe who wanted to know, why now? And, Why in Italy? I think, there are several reasons. First of all, the protest in solidarity with Palestine has been growing for two years, relying on a mix of old and new organizations and activists. The Summer has been intense with thousands acts of resistance and disobedience that allowed masses to mobilize and feel empowered through flash mobs and hunger strikes. But then there was a trigger, as the Global Sumud Flotilla represented a way to do something against a genocide that intensified in the most dishuman forms. The moral shock was catalysed as the dockers in Genova launched their proud and daring motto, "If they block the flotilla, we block everything". The very form of the flotilla, bridging heroic commitment with a global participation, created a strong identification by workers and students, pacifists and feminists, the many diasporas and the racialised Italian citizens, firemen and progressive police persons but also prisoners, pupils and their teachers, the grassroots unions and the CGIL, the traditional Left and the new generations on the Left, religious and lay authorities. Especially, it was the Palestinians who encouraged with their example to resist and oppose one of the worst genocide in history. At the moment, it looks like an unstoppable tide.

In what follows, I will develop on the example of this intensification of protests in Italy to present some more general reflections on what came to be known as a global social movement for a free Palestine. In particular, I will propose the concept of eventful protests to single out how contentious politics is produced in action, through the interactions of different individuals and collectives.

Since October 7th, 2023, when Hamas and other Palestinian militias launched the "Operation Al-Aqsa Flood," Israel's retaliatory war on Gaza has led to devastating consequences, with attacks expanding to the West Bank and Jerusalem as well as other countries in the area, including Lebanon, Syria Tunisia, Qatar and Yemen. At the moment, the Israeli Army has killed over 70,000 civilians, displaced more than 2 million Palestinians displaced, destroyed 70% of Gaza including hospitals, schools and univeristies and pushed an entire people to the brink of survival without water, food, medicine or electricity. Despite the International Court of Justice (ICJ) warning Israel to prevent genocide, attacks have escalated for two years while most Western governments and mainstream media remained silent or even complicit.

Yet, global solidarity has surged against what was defined as the first televised genocide in history All over the world millions have taken to the streets with demands going from ceasefire to the end of Israeli-imposed famine and from a free Palestine to the end of settler colonial occupation. The coalitions mobilized all over the world on those claims have been broad and heterogeneous. In different countries, they have involved in various constellations diaspora associations and religious communities, students and workers, feminists and environmentalists, pacifists and anti-racists, older and new generations on the Left, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial groups, large civil society organizations and squatted centers, lay and religious solidarity organizations. Social movement organization in solidarity with Palestine, active long before October 7th, found themselves revitalised and reshaped, developing new repertoires of protest while continuing to draw on established practices. New organizations and citizen

platforms emerged rapidly across countries at local, national and transnational levels.



Pro-Palestine Protest at Columbia University, 2024

These mobilisations have been characterised by a multifarious repertoire of actions. Large numbers of activists have participated in marches; boycotting of Israeli entities have been campaigned for in academia, arts and sports as well as with reference to companies with high investment in Israel; hunger strikes have mobilized specific professions; knowledge has been built in university encampments and spread by artists and intellectuals. More recently, civil disobedience has emerged as a central form of protest which is able to directly achieve the aim through the blocking of ships carrying weapons to Israel and the Flottillas trying to force the Israeli blockades to bring food to Gaza.

These protests have been met by repression which, in many countries, targeted especially vulnerable groups, such as migrant, racialized Arab and Muslin communities, but in many cases it extended to prominent public figures—including Jewish—who expressed solidarity with the Palestine people. Especially in the countries which have been more involved in the arm trading with Israel (such as the US and Germany) as well as in those that bear more historical responsibilities for the Palestinian Nakba since 1948 (such as UK and France) the attempts to suppress solidarity with Palestine has been the most pronounced, with brutal police interventions against peaceful protestors as well as the harassment of activists through administrative disciplining (up to firing and deportation) and public defamation. Moral panic have in fact been launched by pro-Israel lobbies, politicians and mass media in a weaponization of the accusation of antisemitism which has been facilitated by the broad adoption of the working definition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, collapsing Judaism with Israel, and the criminalization of non-violent social movement organizations such as the Boycott, Divest and Sanction network. In this process, with the support of the far right, the accusation of antisemitism was used in racist campaigns against Arab and Muslim migrants, but also ethnic minorities and the Left tout court accused of “importing” antisemitism into the morally superior Western civilization.

The development of the massive global social movement for a Free Palestine can be explained by the convergence of several broad streams of opposition. In it, we can in fact single out

dynamics which are typical of movements of international solidarity, pacifist protest campaigns, mobilizations against colonialist legacies led by diaspora activists, but also, more broadly, a movement against capitalism, racism and patriarchy. Resisting a Far Right backlash (and a turn on the right by many center-left parties), the protests in solidarity with Palestine have opposed racism and repression at home, resisting an authoritarian turn which is more and more affecting even established democracies. In different moments and with different intensity, the global movement for Palestine also intersected with resistance to neoliberal development in the educational system as well as in the economy at large, mobilizing students and workers on their own conditions of precarity and exploitation but also on the moral content of their own activities. While call for keeping "all eyes on Gaza", the massive protests also addressed what Gaza represents in the world, opposing institutions that have consistently deviated from their proclaimed norms by aiding and abetting the Israeli genocide. In fact, the dominant demands have ranged from a call for an immediate ceasefire, the humanitarian relief of population besieged in Gaza, the Palestinians' right to self-defence and self-determination, to a call to dismantle the imperial Zionist project and its regime. Chants such as 'It didn't start on the 7th. Oct' or 'It's not a war, it's a genocide' pointed at the framing of the events in Gaza within a broader liberation struggle also indicating an international reckoning of the chain of complicities that in the West have brought about the current Western-supported Israeli genocide.

As has been noted in previous global waves of protests, while international events have been influencing the flow of the protest events for a Free Palestine, national variations persist, shaped by different political and social contexts, as well as different movement traditions. These variations affect the ways in which movements coordinate, cooperate, and frame their struggles within and across contexts. What is more, while certainly stemming from grievances, social movements do not automatically emerge when dissatisfaction is high. The framing of a problem as political and the mobilization of organizational resources are necessary steps towards transforming grievances into action. In this sense, it is important to observe how social movement organizations in solidarity with Palestine have successfully created and sustained coalitions over a long period of time. In particular, broad alliances between racialized minorities, diaspora communities and social movement organisations focused on different issues (from workers' rights, climate change to transfeminism, pro-migrant and anti-racism) have forged around an anti-colonial master frame, denouncing and opposing different forms of colonization and domination that intersect in the Palestinian cause bridging the issue of peace and war within broader discourses and other struggles of social justice and democracy.

What is more, these processes emerged from action itself, as it is often during the protests that ties between very different groups are built and shared narrative emerges bringing existing and new organizations in the streets but also mobilizing long-term activists together with new generations that are socialized to the protest for the first time. In order to study the mobilisations in solidarity with Palestine, it is therefore essential to analyze the mechanisms of the intensification of protests by looking at how a global social movement for a Free Palestine has emerged, expanded, and transformed across different settings.

Embedded in the Fordist moment, at the onset social movement studies assumed a stable (albeit conflictual) system. Opposing a vision of social movements as pathological, seminal studies have pointed to the 'normalization' of protests. Generally speaking, many reflections have focused on 'quiet times'; that is times in which structures heavily constrain agency, events and reactions to events seem predictable, routines prevail, changes happen at slow pace, objectivity is pursued, and the situation is considered 'normal'. This certainly helped our understanding of the development of social movements under certain circumstances. However, the post-Fordist period has challenged some of these conditions through the increasing neoliberal uncertainty linked to growing and multiple inequalities, the spread of feelings of exclusion, and multiple crises of political responsibility. Sociological reflections have thus addressed the acceleration of time and the increasing role of events in catalysing protest. Intense times emerge therefore as times in which agency challenges structural constraints, predictability shrinks, the influence of conjunctural events increases, decisions are made at high speed, and the need for subjective assessment increases under conditions that are considered as extra-ordinary.

In this context, the concept of *eventful protest* points to the effects of protest on the social movement itself. Some protest events constitute processes during which collective experiences develop through the interactions of different individual and collective actors that take part in them with different roles and aims. Protest, therefore, not only produces breaks but also builds new norms by forming prefigurative arenas, forging new networks and developing feelings of solidarity "in action". In this sense, some events help intensify time by breaking old institutions and allowing new ones to emerge. Eventful protests trigger a process of *time intensification*, which on the one hand implies a *fluidization of structures* and, on the other hand, a *densification of relation*s.

The recent intensification of protests for a Free Palestine in Italy provide pertinent illustration of how resources for protest increase during the actions themselves. In Italy, since October 2023, a broad network of social movement organisations active on feminist struggles, environmentalism and anti-racism as well as labour unions joined forces with pacifist actors. The leadership of the pro-Palestine mobilisations was quickly assumed by Giovani Palestinesi (the Young Palestinians) – a group formed in 2020 that includes Palestinians from the diaspora, young Arabic speakers (often second- generation) as well as young Italians, primarily students. Alongside them, a central role was played by the national Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Coordination and pro-Palestinian organisations which had been active even before 7 October 2023. While not always massive, the protests were persistent over time and very widespread across the Italian territory. It has been however in September 2025 that grassroots trade unions have been able to catalyse a huge and massive resistance against the Israeli genocide—this is what, also thanks to the territorial rootedness of the movement in solidarity with Palestine.

Greta Thunberg Speaking at Global Sumud Flotilla, Barcelona, 2025

A turning point that triggered the general strike for Gaza mentioned in the incipit was the march in Genoa which, on August 31, mobilized 50,000 citizens wishing good winds to the vessel that was to leave from the city harbor to join the Global Sumud Flotilla. Reminding the Freedom Summer of 1964, as activists from the Northern States of the US went to the South to help Black voters to register as their visibility was used to protect the Black activists, also the activists are sailing to Gaza in the more than 50 vessels from all over the world put their lives at risk, using their visibility to sensitive the public opinion and shame not only Israel but also the complicit governments in the West that are arming the Israeli genocide. In this process, they build upon, but also create global ties and prefigure another world, a world of justice and solidarity

On the occasion of the protest in Genoa, the commitment to solidarity with Palestinians was embedded in the history of resistance that characterized the city. So, taking part in the march, the mayor stated how proud she was to be the mayor of a city that was awarded a golden medal for its resistance to Nazi-fascism and was now triggering a new wave of resistance against a new genocide. The moral shock of the genocide resonates with a long tradition of solidarity from Genoa and its harbour. So, a CGIL unionist recalled the ship who left Genoa in 1973 with humanitarian help for the Vietnamese population, reaching Hanoi after months of navigation while an activist of the Calp mentions the historical commitment by the dockers to block arm traffic.

The preparation of the sailing of the Flotilla vessel saw the emergence of a coalition of organizations of very different types, from labour (overcoming competition among unions) to the educational system (putting together different student groups), catholic and lay pacifist associations. The trade unions have provided material and human infrastructures for the pro-Palestine action while the Catholic Church, including the archbishop, blessed the flotilla.

In support of the flotilla, hundreds of thousands of citizens brought more than ten times the expected amount of food. The mayor had gone several times to encourage the protestors, The harbour entire harbors mobilized to help the flotilla. The March in Genoa was covered in a sympathetic way even in most of the mainstream press.

At the protest, the mayor praises the courage of those who will sail to bring food to Gaza, but also the solidarity on the tens of thousands who donated food and the voluntary association that coordinated the event and especially the Collettivo Autonomo Lavoratori Portuali (Calp, Autonomous collective of the dock-workers), that has been at the core of the civil disobedience against arm trafficking, refusing to load weapon to be delivered to Israel. In five years, the Calp developed from a small collective, investigated by the police as 'terrorist', into an influential collective that has been invited in Vatican and blessed by the Pope, representing the image of the Genoa that resists. It was at the vigil for the flotilla that the slogan was put forward on which the general strike was called as one of the dockers from Calp stated "If Israel will not let this humanitarian help be delivered to the Palestinian population in Gaza, not a single nail will any longer go to Israel from this harbour". The spokesperson of the Calp so explained that: "If we lose contact with our boats, with our comrades, even for just 20 minutes, we will block all of Europe. Together with our Usb union, together with all dockworkers, together with the entire city of Genoa." During the torchlight vigil, the dockworkers stated: "Our girls and boys must return without a scratch, and all our goods, which belong to the people, down to the very last box, must reach their destination." And 'if anyone tries to stop the boats, "we will block all of Europe".

Diffusion of protest usually happens as successful repertoires are adopted and adapted. The Genoa protest highlighted the potential of the workers to disrupt the logistic support for the Israeli crimes. Interestingly, while the neoliberal management of the harbour has challenged labour power, the international solidarity and workers' combativeness that characterised dockers in the past are emerging anew. The Italian dockworkers are so doing, what the EU should have done: blocking arms direct to Israel. After the dock-workers of Genoa, also the dock-workers of Livorno (the Tuscan city that hosted the first congress of the Italian Communist Party in 1921) have been effective in stopping a US ship carrying arms from entering in the harbor after, for many days, 300 citizens have occupied the harbour to oppose the Israeli genocide. A main role has been played by grassroots unions and collectives that pushed the authorities and main unions to open a negotiation table.

The blockade of weapon trade with Israel continued then, thanks to the dockworkers as well as their rootedness in the territory and international solidarity. Also the dockers of the Ravenna harbour, in agreement with the city mayor, refused to be complicit in a genocide and so did those of Taranto by preventing the entrance in the harbour of a ship bringing military equipments to Israel. On September 27, it was again in Genoa that the workers forced a ship to leave the harbour without his load of arms. As many as 25000–including the archbishop and the mayor—marched again in the street from Gaza and the Flottilla. Blocchiamo tutto" is not an empty slogan as the dock-workers planning an international assembly and discussing the possibility to stop all trade to and from Israel. In Genoa and in the other harbor city, the eventful protest in support of the Global Sumud Flotilla and against the Israeli genocide. also catalyzed a collective solidaristic identity, rooted in the historical tradition, the harbour, the resistance to Nazis and fascists. The call "let's block everything" has empowering effects on all those who oppose the genocide as the workers built strong alliances with the citizens and the harbour became a positive symbol for all.

These protests, leading to and following the general strike of September 22 have been eventful in their capacity to inspire also other forms of protests by a variety or social and political groups. On the same day of the strike, in the most important Italian Theater, la Scala in Milan, all performers went on stage under a large ban against the genocide, while cinema theatres started a campaign in support of the Global Sumud Flotilla and for Palestine. Face to the complicity of Western governments, humanitarian action has also become political. So while Emergency sent its ship to support the Global Sumud Flotilla, UNICEF and Save the Children are denouncing the massacre of children in Gaza, and Oxfam, Doctors without borders, Medico international, Amnesty International, Human Right watch and many others appeal to the public opinion and the governments to stop the massacres of civilians. ARCI, the largest civil society network for cultural and recreational activities in Italy, is participating with a boat to the Global Sumud Flotilla, in order to break the siege and the silence, calling for a free Palestine and opposing the genocide. Born within the Communist tradition, the ARCI is still at the core of the mobilization for peace, social justice, global citizens‘ rights.

Over the Summer, hundred thousand citizens had been involved in the horizontal protests against the genocide launched under the slogan “Ultimo giorno di Gaza”, with the hanging of white sheets out of windows and balcony, to remind of the shrouds enveloping the bodies of killed Palestinians. Performances and flash mobs against the genocide had been organized everywhere in the country, from the big cities to the small villages. Protests also aimed at disrupting the use of land and touristic resorts as places of recovery from their military activities by Israeli soldiers. In Italy, as in Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Spain, this immoral use of the land ad land grabbing for speculative projects of gated Israeli communities have been contested in Sardinia, Marche and Campania. Request of boycott of representative of the murderous Israeli state have multiplied in sport competitions, artistic contests, commercial fairs. Most visible, at the Cinema Biennal in Venice, many actors and directors expressed horror about the Israeli imposed famine and support for the Global Sumud Flotilla. Receiving the Silver Lion for *The voice of Hind Rajab* (that had received a 24-minute standing ovation at its premiere), the director Ben Hanua stated “Her voice will continue to echo until accountability is real until justice is served. …. It is tragically the story of an entire people enduring genocide inflicted by a criminal Israeli regime that acts with impunity.”

Hunger strikes have also spread as a way for collective of people to express their moral outrage. As many as 15,000 health workers have participated today in a hunger strike against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. The protest, called by Health workers for Gaza, has spread all over the country being supported by several civil society organizations ì. Entire hospitals mobilized in some cities with the support of the professional association of the Italian doctors. The health workers honored their more than 1400 colleagues killed by Israel in Gaza, recalling the 125 medical structures, 186 ambulances, 34 hospitals bombed by Israel. Part of the protest campaigns of the Italian health workers for Gaza is the successful boycott of the Israeli pharmaceutical firm Teva. The recognition health workers got during the pandemic seems to have been relevant also in granting a broad, widespread and sympathetic media coverage for their actions.

Protests are eventful when they also succeed in affecting institutional actors. Reinvigorating the tradition of engaged municipalism, as a sign of solidarity, the Palestinian flag is flying on more and more public buildings in Italy—including the city council in Rome. Also, more and more public administrations voted for the recognition of Palestine and a boycott of Israeli goods.

To be successful social movements need to (also) affect party politics. With huge delay, this is happening with the protest against the Israeli genocide in Gaza. Among others, four Italian lawmakers from PD, 5 Stars movement and the Alliance of the Greens and the Italian Left will be on board of one of the vessels of the Global Sumud Flotilla. In the mist of the military attacks on the Flotilla, the members of the Italian parliament from the Democratic Party, the 5 Star Movement and the Green-Italian Left alliance occupied the Parliament Chamber calling the government to take position on the latest intensification of the Israeli genocide and take action against the criminal attacks on the Global Sumud Flotilla. Under this pressure, the Minister of Defense sent a ship to protect the about 50 Italian on board of the Flotilla, while the Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni even opened up to a possible recognition of Palestine.

In sum, a global movement for a Free Palestine has been growing against the Israeli genocide but also the Western complicity in it. As Israel threatened the 'unprecedented force' against a starved population while blocking the very possibility to run away and western powers are watching without intervening, it is the civil society that, in many countries, is mobilizing against the Israeli genocide and a free Palestine. With the recent intensification, but also their rooting in a two-years long campaign, the Italian social movement for a Free Palestine is showing what Charles Tilly defined as Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment (WUNC). In sum, with the hunger strikes of health workers; the block to the traffic of weapons to Israel by the dock workers; the calls for boycott of Israeli institutions by those working and studying in Italian schools and universities, the workers in the film industry stating they will not cooperate with Israeli firms, citizens and workers in the tourist sectors rejecting to provide a relaxing time to IDF soldiers—all these protest actions indicate that Gaza is forcing us not only to act in solidarity against the genocide but also to think about the ethical issues that are related with all human activities.

Investigating Putinism: History Over Ideology

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

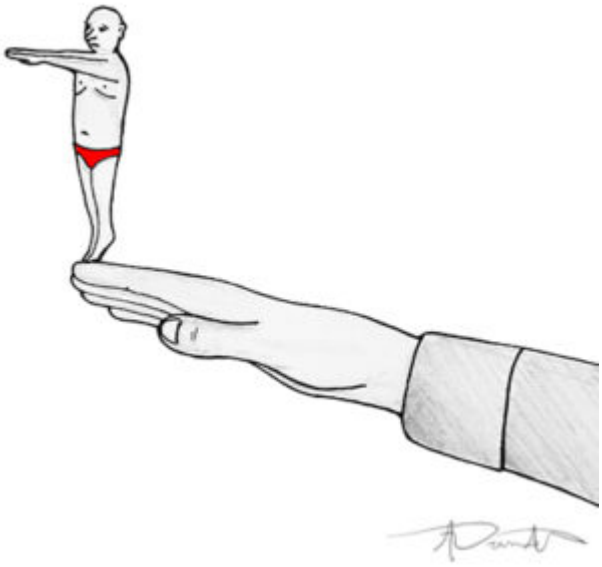
In today's Russia, memory politics has supplanted ideology as the primary instrument of political legitimation. This hinders efforts to explain the unique features of Putinism by approaching it as a political ideology.

Is Putinism a Form of Fascism?

Investigating Putinism means understanding why, for the past 25 years, Russians have accepted life in a notoriously corrupt society, which lacks basic protections for individual rights, and is ruled by the mafia-like secret services. Why do Russians continue fighting a brutal war against Ukraine, which has already resulted in almost a million casualties? What specific features underpin the resilience of the Putin regime?

Before the war, analysts claimed that Putinism offered "stability and order," supposedly much desired by Russians after the turbulent years following the fall of communism, and that the oil-driven economy delivered relative prosperity. None of this seems convincing today, especially since Ukrainians have finally been allowed to bring war into Russia's territory.

With an eye to the powerful ideologies of the twentieth century, such as fascism and communism, scholars try to explain Russians' support for Putin's regime by its successful ideology. What else could explain how the Kremlin achieves such political feats?



Artist: Drew Martin

The idea that Putinism is a form of fascism became popular among scholars during Putin's second term. Political scientist Alexander Motyl was one of the first to articulate this thesis.[1] There are undeniable similarities between Putinism and fascism, such as the worship of force, the cult of the leader, rule through terror, a longing for the medieval past, nationalism, militarism, and so on. Motyl emphasizes the "hypernationalist, imperialist, and supremacist ideology," typical of both regimes.[2] Historian Timothy Snyder accentuates the influence of pro-fascist philosopher Ivan Ilyin, whom Putin quotes in his speeches.[3] Additionally, many Russian public figures harbor an undisguised respect for fascism.

Debates about equating Putinism with fascism provided a pretext to normalize Putinism. During the annexation of Crimea, Stephen F. Cohen led this trend. Accusing his opponents of unfairly "demonizing Putin," he warned of the threat of a "new Cold War" and a nuclear apocalypse.[4]

Marlène Laruelle argues that Putinism should not be seen as a fascist regime or even as dominated by the far right.[5] By placing Putinism on the "broad spectrum of illiberalism," Laruelle invites us to view it as one of many conservative regimes, rather than as a sui generis monster. Alongside its negative traits, such classification underscores certain aspects of Putinism that are regarded favorably by the Western left, including the refusal to accept "geo-political alignment with the US," the notion that "the West is the normative hegemon of the world," and opposition to "economic neoliberalism."[6] Consequently, Putin's regime is defined as "post-liberal" and its ideology is described as being created to oppose liberalism, after Russia experienced it firsthand.[7] Laruelle compares Putin's ideology to a jazz band, where each member plays their own tune within the general theme.[8] Yet, a more accurate comparison for Putin and his clique might be the Wagner Group, nicknamed "musicians" in Russia.

Indeed, several key features distinguish Putinism from fascism. The latter included a socialist component and combined extreme nationalism with racism. Putinism rejects the socialist aspects present in fascism as well as the Soviet system, and despite its populism, it openly mocks egalitarian principles.

Most fascists were atheists and did not support religious messianism. And while Mussolini kept good relations with the Roman Catholic Church, the Nazi "Thousand-Year Reich" lacked any religious elements. In contrast, Orthodox messianism is crucial for the Kremlin, and the Russian Orthodox Church, along with its sects, plays a significant role in its politics.

The willingness to label Putinism as fascism is understandable: to recognize it as a criminal regime worldwide. But not all criminal regimes are necessarily fascist, and overstressing the similarities between Putinism and fascism might distract from the unique aspects of its criminality.

Does Putinism Have an Ideology?

The debates over the fascist nature of Putinism reinforce the belief that Putinism has an ideology. Twentieth-century ideologies had strong mobilizing power, and because Putin's regime also shows this power, the argument is that it must be driven by ideology. However, Putinism manifestly defies the underlying principles of modern ideologies.

Even those who see Putinism as an ideology acknowledge that it lacks the abstract concepts and universal ideas typical of modern ideologies. Those ideologies, whether liberalism, communism, or fascism, offered their followers a master key that purported to explain life in its entirety. Putin's regime lacks such a totalizing explanation and cannot be described as a theoretical system of any kind. Instead, the Kremlin manipulatively combines pieces of opposing ideological systems.[9]

No matter how many lies Soviet and fascist propaganda contained, there were certain fundamental ideological postulates they could not afford to violate. In contrast, chaotic inconsistency is an integral part of Putin's propaganda. The Kremlin's mouthpieces, like Vladimir Medinsky, openly claim that "there is no 'absolute objectivity' in history."[10] The Kremlin has weaponized postmodernism and deconstruction: if people cannot act as rational subjects, the more confusion and contradictions they face, the easier they are to manipulate.[11]

The futurist aspect was central to Soviet and fascist ideologies. Both of them had a strong revolutionary drive.[12]While Marxism developed a more sophisticated theoretical system, fascists also proposed formulas aimed at creating their "perfect society." They sought to test these formulas worldwide, which, from their subjects' perspectives, validated their goal of world conquest. Yet, Putin's regime is about the past, not the future.

Considering these differences, researchers have to use "generic" concepts such as imperialism, nationalism, conservatism, and anti-Westernism to describe Putinism as an ideology. Sometimes, even institutions and networks, such as the Russian World, are also considered aspects of Putin's ideology. However, these features, typical of many authoritarian and neo-totalitarian regimes, hide rather than expose the specifics of Putinism.

The central role of the Russian Orthodox Church and its messianism in Putin's propaganda is sometimes seen as a defining aspect of Russian ideology. However, the history of concepts demonstrates that the conditions under which a concept emerges and evolves set limits beyond which it loses its analytical capacity. Historically, the concept of ideology has been primarily applied to secular movements. If we expand the concept of ideology to include belief systems like religions and myths, we risk grouping too many and too diverse things under the same label. And we will almost certainly gain nothing by doing so.

Historical Memory and the Politics of Reversed Time

Remarkably, most of the evidence scholars use to support the view of Putinism as an ideology belongs to the realm of memory politics. The proponents of this view discuss the rapid growth of the budget for patriotic education, the creation of the Russian Historical Society, the development of pro-Kremlin history textbooks, including the textbook "Russian History" by Vladimir Medinsky (2023), and the opening of a multimedia historical parks "Russia – My History," which showcase a pro-Kremlin version of Russian history, from ancient times to the present. The cult of "The Great Patriotic War" (WWII) is considered the core of this ideology. [13]

All these facts are aspects of Putin's memory politics, which the Kremlin has been advancing since 2000. By 'memory politics,' I mean the strategies employed by various memory actors to justify and promote their interpretations of the past. Memory politics influences how the past is evaluated and remembered. The post-Soviet cult of the war is an extreme example of the political instrumentalization of a historical event. It is worth noting that the concept of memory

politics emerged in response to the memory boom of the 1970s and the decline of future-oriented ideologies.

Undeniably, the cult of "the Great Patriotic War" has been foundational for the regime since Putin took office in 2000. However, this does not mean that this cult and other historical myths constitute an ideology.

Historically, memory politics has overtaken and supplanted ideology in Russia under Putin. Several local and global factors contributed to this. An ideological void has haunted Putinism since its inception. Putin is no Lenin. He and his cronies came to power without any ideology. Embezzlement was their grand idea. Initially, Putin and his clique hoped that Orthodoxy would be enough to legitimize the regime in a multi-confessional country. However, the Church failed in its effort to fill the ideological vacuum left after the collapse of both Marxism and the pro-Western liberal ideology in the early 2000s. The acute need for legitimacy pushed Putin and his clique toward the instrumentalization of the Stalinist cult of the war.

Contrary to accusations that Russia started World War II by signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, the war cult claims that the Soviet Union was a peacekeeper (notwithstanding its war against Finland, the fourth partition of Poland, and the annexation of Western Ukraine, Belarus, parts of Romania, and the Baltic countries from 1939 to 1940).

One of the war cult's primary functions is to replace the memory of Soviet repressions with a sense of belonging in a heroic narrative, the patriotic struggle against Nazism. Another key function is to assert that the world owes Russia for saving it from fascism. Consequently, the argument goes, Russia has the exclusive right to reshape the global political order.

The war cult compensated for the absence of a clear ideology. It introduced a discourse to set Putinism apart from the failed democratic reforms of the 1990s. The war cult, which has consistently praised Stalin's leadership as commander-in-chief, has triggered the politics of re-Stalinization —a major trend in Putin's memory politics. Through several distorted historical episodes, this memory politics ushered in a positive reevaluation of Stalinism.

Putin's reelection in March 2004 sparked an unprecedented mobilization of the far right, whose leaders inundated the presidential administration with pamphlets and projects. They advocated a return to the Middle Ages as a social and political goal for Russia, suggesting the restoration of the social structures of medieval Rus. Establishing a "new oprichnina," a medieval state terror carried out by Ivan the Terrible in the mid-16th century, which they viewed as the best form of Russian governance, was central to their political vision. Stalinist repressions were seen as the re-emergence of this Russia's sacred "eternal archetype." They became foundational for the post-Soviet political neomedievalism. I use the term political neomedievalism to designate a growing global trend in far-right memory politics that alters representations of the medieval past to challenge the core principles of liberal democracy.

Around 2003-2004, political neomedievalism emerged as a new form of Kremlin memory politics. It had the same objectives as re-Stalinization. Glorifying Ivan the Terrible's oprichnina

and Stalin's repressions, they promote state terror as a key part of the Russian national tradition. This double-edged memory politics justifies existing social inequalities and supports the reconstruction of the empire as Russia's rightful goal. Nevertheless, there is no philosophy or theory, in other words, no ideology, that universalizes these social conditions or imperial politics.

Unlike memory politics, which has flourished in Russia, efforts to establish a consistent ideology have failed. Unsurprisingly, Vladislav Surkov's 2006 concept of "sovereign democracy," the most ambitious "theoretical" justification of Putinism, was soon officially discredited. [14] Medinsky's "Fundamental Principles of State Cultural Policy" (2014), which called for "the development of a spiritual and cultural matrix for the nation, based on a single cultural and civilizational code,'"[15] was abridged and adopted in a version of a bureaucratic scribble.

In contrast to scholars of Putinism, Putinists themselves acknowledge that they cannot develop a new ideology. The National Security Strategy, updated on July 2, 2022, called for the development of "attractive ideological foundations of the future world order." Alexander Dugin supported this by proposing the creation of "Putinism," a "new ideology," but he has yet to accomplish this task.[16] Additionally, the Russian Constitution, including its 2020 version, prohibits the establishment of a state ideology.

From a global standpoint, the Kremlin's search for an ideology occurred during a period marked by the decline of ideologies, which may have also contributed to its failure. The radical change in the perception of historical time since the end of the 1980s challenged the view of time as an objective, irreversible flow from the past toward a bright future. The crisis of the future – the loss of futuristic optimism and the fear of catastrophe – compromised the belief in a better future.

Putin's Russia presents an extreme case for observing how memory politics supplants ideology by trading the vision of the future for the vision of the past. Even proponents of the view that Putinism has an ideology agree that "The Kremlin's ideology promises that the future will be better because it will resemble the past, and Russia will restore its lost status […]."[17] Actually, Gleb Pavlovsky, one of the leading political technologists and an engineer of Putinism, believed that after the collapse of traditional ideologies, "the politics of history will become the standard of politics as such."[18]

Kremlin's neomedieval memory politics forms a patchwork of fabricated examples from an artificial past, a collage of discrete and decontextualized historical events that are misconstrued for political ends. Much more flexible than any imaginable ideology, this memory politics is imprecise, suggestive, and simple, inviting all to picture themselves in the promised past. Reversing historical time, it erases the ideas of democracy and encourages Russians to see themselves as slavedrivers rather than slaves in the neomedieval Russian Empire.

A Criminal Regime of a New Kind?

Putinism employs unconventional methods to spread propaganda and rally the public. Comparing it to past models—such as fascism or Soviet communism—or relying on outdated concepts like ideology hampers our understanding of its true nature.

For the past 25 years, Putin's regime has corrupted—partly intentionally, partly accidentally—Russian society, making people believe that the president who evades accountability for his involvement with the mafia, crime, corruption, violence, and assassinations, represents the pinnacle of social success. The regime has committed crimes openly. State terror and violence have been celebrated, along with their perpetrators. Gangsters, SMERSH, and the officers of Cheka, NKVD, KGB, and FSB are much-admired heroes of post-Soviet popular culture. Encouraging the worst in the population, Putinism has perverted not only social relationships but also family bonds. Russians send their sons and husbands to die in Ukraine in exchange for stolen Ukrainian belongings and money from the Russian government. Exactly like Putin reassured the mothers of fallen soldiers that it was good for their sons to die from something other than vodka.[19] The war against Ukraine turned into a profitable business not only for the Kremlin but also for millions of people who found new well-paid jobs in the war industry, which, by different estimates, represents today around a third of the Russian economy. The cynicism reigning in Russian society drastically reduces the need for a serious ideological system.

Joining those who claim that the age of ideology is over,[20] I argue that Putin's regime clearly demonstrates how memory politics replace traditional, future-focused ideologies by substituting abstract theoretical discourses with decontextualized and distorted historical narratives. Political neomedievalism and re-Stalinization turn the repetition of the criminal past into the Russian regime's only possible horizon.

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Apocalypse Now? The Evolution of Trump's Policies Towards Iran

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

In a March 30, 2025, telephone interview with Kristen Welker of NBC News, U.S. President Donald Trump stated: "If they [the Iranians] don't make a deal, there will be bombing. It will be bombing the likes of which they have never seen." This vitriolic statement was reflective of Donald Trump's desire to remake the Persian Gulf region to his liking and force Iran to submit unconditionally to his policy demands. Prior to issuing this threat, Trump had warned Iran when he stated: "Every shot fired by the Houthis will be considered, from now on, as a shot fired by the weapons and leadership of Iran, and Iran will be held responsible and will suffer the consequences, and these consequences will be terrible." Trump concluded his threatening remarks by warning Iran: "I hope you will negotiate, because if we have to intervene, militarily, it will be terrible for them [the Iranians]." Shortly after issuing his salvo of threats, President Trump softened his tone by claiming that he is a man of peace and that his military threats against Iran had been overblown and misinterpreted.

Artist: Drew Martin

After the first round of U.S.-Iran talks in Oman concluded on 12 April 2025, Trump opined that the talks have the potential of remaking the Middle East in a way that has not been seen. However, just three days before U.S. and Iranian negotiators were to meet in Oman, Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu orchestrated a series of air strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities. On June 13, 2025, Israel attacked Natanz nuclear enrichment plant as well as the Isfahan and Arak nuclear facilities. On June 22, 2025, the U.S. targeted Iran's most heavily fortified nuclear sites by bombarding underground portions of the Natanz and Fordow uranium enrichment plants as well as the Isfahan uranium conversion facility. In its bombing campaign against Natanz and Fordow, the U.S. relied primarily on B-2 stealth bombers by using GBU-57 massive ordinance penetrator bombs, or the so-called "bunker busters." In addition, the U.S. used submarine-launched Tomahawk cruise missiles against the Isfahan site.

Shortly after the conclusion of the attacks on Iran's nuclear sites, Trump declared triumphantly that Iran's nuclear facilities were thoroughly and completely destroyed, a conclusion that has been challenged by many experts. What is certain is that the U.S.-Israeli military campaign inflicted heavy damage to Iran's internationally safeguarded nuclear facilities; the full extent of which remains to be determined. Moreover, notwithstanding the assassination of several Iranian nuclear scientists by Israel, Iran's extensive nuclear knowledge, its centrifuge manufacturing capacity, the ambiguity about the whereabouts of its stockpile of 400 kilograms of 60-percent enriched uranium, and the country's ostensible desire to keep the nuclear program going will remain one of the major driving force behind Trump's next moves towards Tehran. Although Trump's confusing, vacillating, and contradictory rhetoric about Iran may be reflective of the current state of political discourse in the United States, they should be understood in the framework of the broader Washington's post-2001 policies in the Persian Gulf region. The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of the evolution of Washington's foreign policy towards Iran in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent invasion of Iraq by the United States, a group of influential neoconservative hawks began to formulate a new American foreign policy in the Middle East that they hoped would guide Washington's policy in that region well into the twenty-first century. With their emphasis on regime change, the neoconservatives drafted grandiose plans to redraw the geostrategic map of the Middle East to Washington's liking.

The genesis of the neocons' formulation of a "new U.S. regional policy" dates back to the aftermath of the first Gulf War and the failed Shi'a uprising against Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Paul Wolfowitz, then Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and later the Deputy Secretary of Defense and a leading proponent of the Iraq war, took the lead in drafting a set of military guidelines called the "Defense Planning Guidance," which are normally prepared every few years by the Pentagon. Wolfowitz's draft argued for a revolutionary military and political strategy in the Post-Cold War era by rejecting the utility of containment as a relic of the Cold War. Most importantly, the report called for the adoption of a new strategy of preemption to replace containment and to be prepared to act alone when military action becomes necessary. Thus, Wolfowitz challenged the primacy of both containment and multilateralism in favor of compellence in advancing U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East.

By the same token, the neocon promoters of the compellence strategy denigrated the rule of law and international norms if they conflicted with the broader goals of compellence. In this vein John Bolton, a one-time influential neocon official who held numerous high-level positions in the U.S. government, including a stint as the national security advisor in the first Trump administration before he fell out of favor with Trump, stated that it is a big mistake for the U.S. to grant any validity to international law even when it may seem in Washington's short-term interest to do so because those who promote adherence to international law are the people who want to constrict the U.S.

After the September 11 attacks, the neocons found a U.S. president who was receptive to their poicy prescriptions, and they sought to use the "war on terrorism" as a pretext to expand their foreign policy agenda. On September 13, 2001, Paul Wolfowitz set the tone by linking 9/11 attackers to Iraq. In an eerily similar scenario, in his waning days in office, Mike Pompeo, Donald Trump's Secretary of State during his first presidential term, sought to link Iran to al-Qaeda, albeit without offering any verifiable evidence. Notwithstanding changes in nuances and approach to American foreign policy toward Iran over the past quarter of a century, the idea that Iran must be compelled to behave in certain manners or be forced to pay the piper has been incorporated into Trump's foreign policy toward Iran.

The developments on the ground in the post-invasion Iraq and elsewhere in the broader Persian Gulf region compelled the Bush administration to ultimately scale back its pretensions as an international sociopolitical engineer in favor of a more traditional realist approach to foreign policy decision-making. Realpolitik soon gave way to a new "grand strategy" whose foundations, as John Lewis Gaddis noted, lie in the nineteenth-century American tradition of

hegemony and unilateralism. In the Persian Gulf and Broader Middle East, this strategy called advocated preemption and compellence to replace containment and to be prepared to act alone when military action becomes necessary. Iran played a significant role in adoption of this evolving strategy. The idea that Iran must be compelled to behave in certain manners and cease its "malign policies" in the region has remained a constant principle of American foreign policy in the region.

The ideas of Bernard Lewis, the late Princeton historian of Islam and the Middle East, have played an influential role in framing America's post-2001 Middle East policies. Lewis's concept of a "new Middle East" was predicated on the region's potential fragmentation, which became appealing to the neocons in the United States and their Israeli supporters. While not explicitly advocating for the breaking up of the Middle East, Lewis's analyses have been interpreted by those favoring a muscular or militaristic American policy in the region as suggesting that the region's diverse ethnic and religious diversity and its internal socioeconomic struggles can and should be used to create a regional order that promotes America's hegemony in the region at the expense of potential adversaries.

The notion of fragmenting Iran has become an appealing concept for those elements in the Trump administration that may have come to the conclusion that Iran may be the last remaining obstacle to creating a new Middle East to further America's long-tern strategy in the region. As geostrategic economist Michael Hudson stated, the war on Iran did not start under Donald Trump. The war on Iran started in 1953, when the CIA and the British MI6 helped to overthrow the nationalist government of Mohammad Mossadegh which had recently nationalized Iran's oil.

As Hudson recalled from his early years working for the Hudson Institute in the 1970s, the Herman Kahn, the nuclear strategist and the model of the real life Dr. Strangelove, brought him to a meeting with some generals and military strategists to discuss what to do with Iran in case it once again tried to assert its autonomy and charted its own path away from that designed for it by Washington. This was during the reign of the shah when Iran was considered a staunch U.S. ally and a linchpin of America's Middle East policy in the Persian Gulf. In the meeting with American generals and strategists, Herman Kahn discussed the option of breaking up Iran into five or six ethnicities in case it chose to pursue a policy of independent from Washington.

In other words, America's concerns more than 50 years ago was how to handle the "Iran problem" if the shah decided to challenge the kind of international order that Washington was organizing. Kahn, who obviously was ignorant of Iran's long history, then argued that Iran is a composite of many ethnic groups, and why the U.S. strategy should focus on "playing" on these ethnicities in case a crisis with Iran erupts. Herman Kahn identified Balochis, at Iran's border with Pakistan, the Azeris, and the Kurds as ethnicities than should be organized, supported, and armed to facilitate the fragmentation of Iran if the need arises. This policy, which also dovetails with that of Israel's long-tern plans, has received a major boost among the ardent hawks in Trump's foreign policy team. When those in the Trump administration bring up the

notion of “regime change” in Iran, they do not simply imply a transition from the Islamic Republic to a different regime. Their goal is the break up of the country and turning Iran into a weak and dysfunctional rump sate.

There was a momentary shift in Washington’s Iran policy under Barack Obama’s presidency. Obama constructed a unique paradigm to implement the goals of the U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf, especially regarding Washington’s foreign policy toward Iran. Under the George W. Bush’s administration, confrontation and economic strangulation ultimately became the main pillars of Washington’s policy toward Tehran. In its early stages, Obama’s policy of “engagement” had all the features of an emerging ‘grand strategy” in the region, with the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) as its anchor. However, the JCPOA proved to be ephemeral as neither Obama nor the other Western signatories to the deal were unable or unwilling to fully implement it. It was already dying a slow death when President Trump during his first administration terminated American participation in the JCPOA. The inertia of the Biden administration created a near paralysis in U.S.-Iran relations and exacerbated tensions in the Persian Gulf region. In effect, the Biden administration continued Trump’s policy of “maximum pressure” and military threats to resurrect the Bush policy of compellence to cow Iran into submission.

Notwithstanding a torrent of confusing and contradictory foreign policy pronouncement that are pouring forth from the Trump White House, there is indeed a tricontinental geopolitical strategy that is beginning to shape President Trump’s foreign policy during his second term in office. As the historian of U.S. foreign policy and international relations Alfred McCoy has noted, instead of bolstering the Cold War-era mutual-security alliance like NATO” Trump seems to prefer a word divided into three major regional blocs, each empowered by a “strong” leader like himself, with “Russia dominating its European periphery, China paramount in Asia, and the United States controlling, in a version of fortress America, all of North America.” In the words of Alfred McCoy, President Trump is intent on pursuing his tricontinental strategy at the expense of the “traditional trans-Atlantic alliance, embodied by NATO, that has been the foundation for American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War.”

In his second term, Donald Trump has pursued his tricontinental strategy to demolish what under the neoliberal world order was referred to as “the rules-based international order” which the U.S. supported and advanced as the pillar of Washington’s global policy since the end of World War II. How does the Middle East fit into President Trump’s tricontinental strategy? The short answer is a cog in his transactional worldview. For this to work as envisioned by Trump, the Middle East, especially the Persian Gulf region, must remain “peaceful” and free of destabilizing forces that may challenge Trump’s transactional policies. Israel (and its regional allies) will be tasked with ensuring the success of America’s transactional dominance in the Persian Gulf and the broader Middle East while the U.S. would focus on implementing its global tricontinental goals. Only time will tell us how successful Trump’s new policy will be.

A Termite’s Guide to Undermining SNAP

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

Conservatives long have had it in for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps.[1] Ronald Reagan hated it so much that he refused to reverse severe program cuts even when faced with mounting hunger amidst a deep recession, choosing instead to send surplus “government cheese” to states to distribute to the poor. Newt Gingrich nearly derailed his assault on the social welfare safety net in his eagerness to replace federal nutrition programs with block grants to the states, a step too far even for fellow Republicans. The so-called Tea Party made SNAP a target in its budgetary brinksmanship with Barack Obama, and today’s Koch Brother-fueled Freedom Caucus would love nothing more than to shrink SNAP, and the federal government overall, to infant size – making it easier, as anti-tax advocate Grover Nordquist would say, to drown in the bathtub.

Some of this animus is fiscal. SNAP is the nation’s largest food assistance program and its second largest income supplement for the non-elderly, after the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). With annual spending hovering around $100 billion, providing food assistance to around 40 million Americans, SNAP is a target for Republicans looking to slash federal spending.

Artist: Drew Martin

But at its core the loathing is ideological, reflecting conservative insistence that any government aid should go only to a narrow tranche of the "deserving poor" – those too young, too old, or too sickly to fend for themselves. Even then, help should be given by local and state governments or, ideally, charity. The 19th Century beckons.

The language on SNAP in *Project 2025*, the Heritage Foundation's urtext for the Second Trump Regime, makes clear the sensibility: "Ostensibly, SNAP sends money through electronic-benefit-transfer (EBT) cards to help 'low income' individuals buy food."[2] Note the snarky adverb and the quote marks. The folks at Heritage apparently doubt that any deserving poor exist, so their zeal to go after the program is no surprise.

However, conservatives know that their hostility to SNAP, like much of their austerity agenda, is not widely shared by their fellow citizens. Sure, most Americans tell pollsters that they loathe "welfare" and that everyone who can work should. When asked, they also support ideals of small government and individual self-sufficiency. All things being equal, Americans are small-government conservatives, right?

Not quite. Social scientists long point out that Americans are ideologically conservative in an abstract way but programmatically liberal when asked about specific government supports. Social Security? Everyone's favorite entitlement, and you dare not touch it. Medicare? Ditto, not surprisingly. Food assistance to the poor? Yes, even to that: Two-thirds of respondents in a January 2023 YouGov poll supported SNAP, and 40 percent thought the program deserved *more* funding, not less. While support was highest among self-identified Democrats, two-thirds of *Republicans* surveyed held favorable views, underscoring that SNAP is seen by most Americans as the safety-net program of last resort.[3]

The budget slashers in Congress and at the Office of Management and Budget know this, and

this past summer avoided a direct assault on SNAP in the hilariously named One Big Beautiful Bill, in which they sought budget cuts to offset tax giveaways for billionaires. They made similar attacks on SNAP in the debt-ceiling hostage negotiations with Joe Biden in early 2024. In both instances, the attacks were during struggles over the federal budget, not "normal" legislative deliberation, which pretty much disappeared from the World's Greatest Legislative Body even before Trump regained the White House.

A bit of history helps. Conservatives have failed over the decades to cut SNAP eligibility and spending during once-regular reauthorizations of the Farm Bill, the omnibus legislation in which SNAP is housed despite being authorized under the Food Stamp Act of 1964.[4] Why is the nation's largest nutrition program tucked into the Farm Bill? Simple: To ensure urban and suburban Democratic support for welfare for Big Agriculture in return for Republican votes for food stamps.[5] *Quid quo pro.* Given their need to get votes, most Republicans were reluctant to sacrifice SNAP on the altar of austerity lest their rural constituents suffer reprisals. (*Nice corn subsidy you got there. A shame if something happened to it…)* They failed in 2014 after two years of budget brinksmanship with Obama, and even in 2018, when they controlled both chambers of Congress and had Trump in the Oval Office. The lesson for conservatives was clear: avoid the "regular" legislative process.

So they again took advantage of the rules on budget reconciliation, in particular its suspension of the Senate's usual need for supermajorities to overcome objections by the minority. Thus was the OBBB steamrolled through Congress. But even here the assault on SNAP was indirect. Nowhere in the Blobbb is there an outright cut in the program's budget, in contrast to what happened to foreign food aid and public broadcasting. Instead, conservatives inserted several administrative termites in the program's foundation. Left alone, the termites will nibble away, and over time SNAP's house will collapse. Here's how:

Step 1: Layer on administrative burdens

SNAP is an entitlement program authorized under the Food Stamp Act of 1964. If you qualify, you get a level of benefits based on household income and size as determined by Congress and the US Department of Agriculture, which oversees the program. Unless Congress restricts the SNAP budget, which it hasn't tried to do since the 1990s after repeatedly overturning its own caps, the only way to cut spending is to change program rules to make it harder for eligible households to apply, or to renew benefits. To do so conservatives like to layer on what public administration scholars Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan term "administrative burdens."[6] Such rules are designed to make life harder for those seeking government benefits, unless they are from favored groups like senior citizens, veterans, and farmers. The very nice people at the Social Security Administration are praised for their willingness to help their constituents get the benefits they rightly deserve. The folks at many state welfare offices, not so much.

Among SNAP's administrative burdens is every conservative's favorite stalking horse, work requirements for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents, which with the OBBB now apply to adults 18-64 (previously 18-52) and to once-exempted former foster youth age 18-24, veterans,

and homeless people. Work requirements on so-called ABAWDs have been a feature of SNAP since 1971, when southern conservatives insisted them in return for supporting expanded program eligibility and higher benefits. Rules on work requirements were intermittently tightened and loosened in ensuring decades depending on the political winds, and attained current form in 1996, when Gingrich and Company imposed new SNAP work rules as part of so-called welfare reform. Those rules mandate that to get benefits ABAWDs had to work at least 20 hours per week or be enrolled in a state-sponsored employment and training program, and they could only get benefits three months over any three-year span.

Independent scholars who study work requirements identify three problems with them. First, and despite the popular image promoted by conservatives, most adults in SNAP households who can work *already work*. They just don't make enough money to feed the household through an entire month. Indeed, economists point out that SNAP has become a support for the working poor, not the destitute.[7] Those who do not work usually have something else going on in their lives, from physical and mental health problems to caring for children or elderly relatives. Often a bit of both.

Second, there is little evidence that work requirements incentivize work. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which funds considerable scholarly analysis on work requirements, put it bluntly: "Decades of research show that these policies do not move people off assistance and into self-sufficiency. Instead, work requirements harm health, keep eligible people from obtaining needed assistance, and drive people and families already struggling to make ends meet deeper into poverty.[8]

Third, inflexible work requirements impose high administrative burdens on potential enrollees. Making it harder for otherwise eligible adults to obtain or renew benefits tends to discourage application at all and makes it easier to deny or revoke benefits for those who do apply. The result: fewer enrollees, and lower program spending – the entire idea.

Less appreciated is the administrative burdens inflexible work requirements place on *the states*, which must ensure that applicants meet considerable paperwork requirements to prove their eligibility, and do it all over again each time households seek to renew their benefits, which for ABAWDs is every three months. Put simply, work requirements are difficult and costly to administer, and states long sought waivers from enforcing them.[9] No more: one provision tucked into the OBBB now restricts states from seeking waivers on the three-month benefit time limit for ABAWDS unless an area has 10% or higher unemployment rate (Alaska and Hawaii get a little flexibility).

Put simply, broader and more rigid work requirements will impose more and costlier burdens for the states – just as the federal government is about to make the situation worse.

Step 2: Offload administrative costs to the states

While the federal government (still) fully funds SNAP benefits and sets rules on eligibility, the program is administered by the states, which obviously incur costs in screening applicants, calculating benefits, and ensuring program compliance. In the Food Stamp Program's first decade the federal government picked up only 30% of these administrative costs, leaving states on the hook for the rest. As one would expect, some states regarded those costs as prohibitive or not worth incurring and did little to nothing to enroll technically eligible households. In 1974, Congress raised the federal portion to 50% precisely to entice all states to participate. Program enrollments climbed thereafter, as intended.

The OBBB returns us to the Bad Old Days. Starting in October 2026, states will be required to cover 75% of SNAP's administrative costs, the highest fiscal burden in program history. While for large states like California and Texas this will mean hundreds of millions in new expenses, even small states will have to pony up more to implement an otherwise federal program.

The likely impact? Unlike the federal government states cannot run budget deficits, so higher costs to administer SNAP will force them to cut elsewhere or to do as little and as cheaply as possible to enroll technically eligible households. You would not be wrong if you bet that many, if not most states will do the latter. Deterring applicants is a cost-effective strategy. Let the austerity commence.

Step 3: Punish States for Administrative Errors

Starting in October 2027 – safely after the midterms – states with high SNAP "error rates" will be required to will pay up to 15% of program *benefits*, the first time in the sixty plus years of program history that the federal government will renege on its commitment to cover those costs. "Error rates" are not the same as fraud by enrollees or retailers, both of which are less common than the loudly parroted anecdotes on Fox News have one believe. Error rates reflect *mistakes by states* in enrolling applicants. Some errors are in approving benefits at all, but most are in calculating benefit levels – typically too high. The USDA in the past tried fining states with high administrative error rates but found that offering bonus funds to states with low error rates was a better way to encourage more accurate program implementation.

The likely outcome of this new rule? States will be desperate to avoid paying millions in program benefits on top of the extra administrative costs already layered on them, so they will focus on reducing error rates to as close to zero as possible. How best to do this? Make applying even more onerous. Demand more paperwork. Deny benefits to any but the most obvious and most "deserving" cases. Some states may even decide that SNAP isn't worth it. Despite SNAP's status as a federal program, states are not required to participate, although all have since the early 1970s because of federal inducements. While I doubt most states will pull out – SNAP still is seen as "free" federal money with considerable economic multiplier effects – they can do as little as possible to administer it, functionally the same result. Where you live will again determine your access to food assistance.

The rules changes in the OBBB thus insert administrative termites into SNAP's foundation.

Over time, the combination of higher administrative costs and the prospect of being forced to pay some portion of program benefits will lead to wildly variable state program administration, lower enrollments, and weakened program political clout as SNAP serves fewer and more marginal households. If enacted in full, these changes will put SNAP into a programmatic death spiral, just as conservatives intend. The bathtub awaits.

Notes

[1] See Christopher Bosso, *Why SNAP Works: A Political History – and Defense – of the Food Stamp Program* (University of California Press, 2023).

[2] The Heritage Foundation, *Project 2025: A Mandate for Leadership* (Wasington, DC: 2024), p. 299.

[3] Linley Sanders, "How Americans evaluate Social Security, Medicare, and six other entitlement programs," YouGov, February 8, 2023; at https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2023/02/08/americans-evaluate-social-security-medicare-poll

[4] Each 'farm bill' is titled something like the *Agricultural Act of 2018* but is known colloquially by its generic name.

[5] See Christopher Bosso, *Framing the Farm Bill*: *Ideology, Interests, and the Agricultural Act of 2014*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2017.

[6] Herd and Moynihan, *Administrative Burden: Policymaking by Other Means* New York: Russell Sage, 2018.

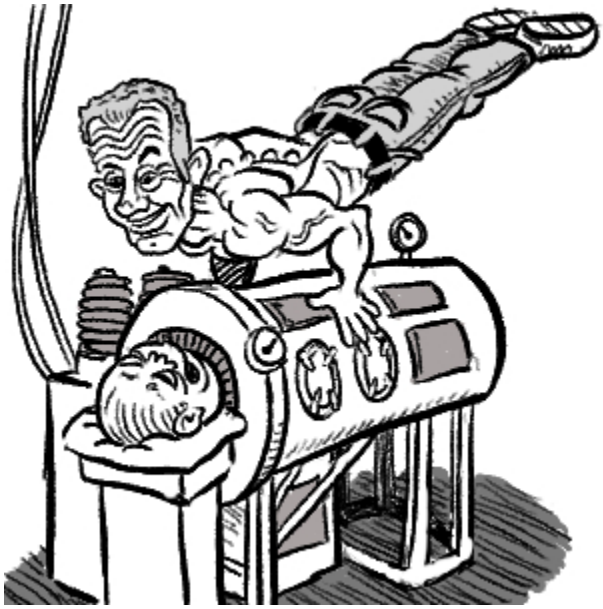
[7] See, for example, James Ziliak, "Why so many people on SNAP?" in Judith Bartfeld, et al., eds, *SNAP Matters: How Food Stamps Affect Health and Well-Being* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015):

[8] Issue Brief, “Work Requirements: What Are They? Do They Work?” Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, May 2023.

[9] For example, Ed Bolen and Stacy Dean, “Waivers Add Key State Flexibility to SNAP’s Three-Month Time Limit,” Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, February 6, 2018,

The Government Attack on Public Health Research

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3



I have been conducting transdisciplinary research on HIV/AIDS, COVID, overdose, and related topics for over forty years. In my HIV research, I have had to try to understand a virus that, without intervention, destroys its host human body within about ten years—which might look like a recipe for a viral disease's self-destruction. Underlying this, however, there is the logic of community transmission dynamics and the survival of HIV as a functioning pandemic. This background may be useful in trying to understand the attacks by Trump and his supporters on public health research. As Gregg Gonsalves (one of my heroes) writes in the July 10, 2025, issue of *The Nation ,* "Some might think that the effects of this crisis won't reach them. They're wrong." The government's actions in attacking public health institutions and research threaten the health of everyone in the United States and, in all probability, the world.

Nonetheless, this apparently idiotic attack on public health research does seem to have an underlying logic based on a need for wealth and power, belief in "free competition" as the best way to develop innovations, and racist arrogance. All of these have been dominant *motifs* in the discourse of American politics this century, and all have been exemplified most strongly by the actions of the current administration in Washington, which seems to be dominated by an alliance of what Sam Farber has called the "lumpenbourgeoisie" like real estate hustler Trump and the new rich owners of "high tech," many of whom exhibit beliefs in their own superiority, right to rule, and eugenic racism [1-3]. Although most readers of this article will agree with me that these people are evil, it is crucial to remember that they are not stupid and, within the somewhat-elastic constraints of their ideologies, capable of strategic and rational thoughts (directed to their ends).

Before going into this logic, I want to say a few words about the reality and scale of the attack on public health research. A particular target has been research on infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS, COVID, bird influenza, and measles, with particular focus on vaccine research. The cuts have also targeted research to reduce the racial differences in disease and death; presumably, this targeting aims to maintain the pattern whereby people who are not white live shorter and sicker lives, and to do so in an environment where cuts to public health in general mean that there is more disease and more mortality among the working classes. Another target has been research in foreign countries, which has been devastating for diseases that are concentrated (for example) in Africa.

Another characteristic of these attacks is that they are broad and massive, with thousands of research grants having been abruptly terminated, additional research ended at the time of annual renewal (which has previously usually been just a formality), and with additional targeting of certain universities (such as Columbia). Another theme is that, due to action in the courts or otherwise, research that is halted is sometimes resurrected—although still vulnerable to additional attacks. Given the huge cuts in research budgets passed by Congress, however, such as a 40% cut in the NIH research budget, federally-funded research on public health will plummet, and cuts in the numbers of NIH and other staff processing grant proposals will make getting them become ever more difficult.

Overall, this pattern also aims at intimidation of researchers, and has demoralized and/or ended the careers of many others—some of whom have been angered and radicalized (to the left) rather than intimidated. Many have been contemplating leaving the country to find jobs elsewhere, and I have myself urged some young colleagues to consider this. Undoubtedly, many will find themselves working for corporations or the US military—which is probably one of the current regime's goals.

One element that I have not seen previously discussed is that the pattern of cuts together with the desperation of students, post-docs, and faculty who need to publish may well set the stage

for corruption, which is a common theme both in authoritarian regimes and in the ethics of the Trump and his allies.[1] Some of it will be semi-legal corruption—what Robert Kennedy wants, Kennedy will fund (since the institutional limitations on this have been dismantled)—which means that blandishments and inducements may yield grant money. Some is likely to be clearly illegal, such as bribing public officials. In any case, such corruption will likely also corrupt the rigid honesty that effective scientific research requires. (Indeed, in recent years, instances of outright scientific fraud seem to have become more frequent under the competitive pressures researchers have faced—and this can only increase given government and corporate attacks on the budgetary, intellectual and ethical foundations of science.)

What Kind of Rationality Underlies These Attacks on Public Health Research?

In this section, I will try to lay out what may be the underlying logic behind these attacks. I recognize that many readers, and many colleagues, simply see them as insane and self-defeating for the Trump regime's own goals—and to some extent, they may be right. Nonetheless, even if these efforts are self-defeating, they do seem to have an inner logic.[2]

Despite all of their bluster about making America great again, the Trump regime is a product of an American ruling class in desperation. It faces at least two major threats for which it has no solution: The Chinese challenge to American economic and military domination and profits, and climate change.[3] Furthermore, looking around the world, it can forecast that failure to solve these problems will lead to major social unrest and perhaps rebellion in the United States itself.

Trump and his elite allies are a subset of the American ruling class that is following the lead of other countries' rulers facing parallel threats such as Putin, Xi, Modi, and Orban. Its strategy is authoritarian rule and armed force to keep the people under control and a focus on unleashing "free enterprise" to meet its other problems. Both the lumpenbourgeoisie and the billionaires of high tech see competition (with support for themselves from government) as the best way to innovate and profit, and thus as the most likely pathway to find technical solutions to climate change (since a bottom-up eco-socialism is beyond their ken). To meet the military threats to imperial rule, they have adopted the traditional American policy—more money for the military. Since unregulated free enterprise is in their opinion necessary to meet these challenges, their Congress has approved vast tax cuts to put investible cash in the hands of those whom they consider able to use it best—the rich, since the "free market" will guide them to invest it optimally. They are doing their best to make the US a low-wage, high productivity economy (like China) so they can compete with their imperial rivals—and for this reason, too, they are attacking unions and all elements of the social wage such as health care and education.

So Why Attack Public Health Research?

In addition to more general issues like (a) saving money that could go to the military or to profit-making and investment and (b) intimidating and demoralizing potential political

opposition, attacking public health research has several other effects in line with the Trump regime's goals. These include:

1. Hiding evidence about the dangers of fossil fuels, climate change, and other forms of ecological destruction.
2. Re-directing trained and innovative researchers to working for private industry or the military—which may help maintain American military dominance or cope with climate change.
3. Increasing the difficulties faced by the broad American working class. People who are sick or are caring for the sick or disabled are less able to organize militant opposition to employers' efforts to lower labor costs.
4. Reduce the numbers of people in "disposable" populations by reducing research discoveries that may keep them alive and healthy. One lesson of COVID has been that older people who are living off of pensions or Social Security are more likely to die, as were members of racial/ethnic groups Trump and his allies tend to look down upon (and who might be more likely to oppose them politically or vote against them) like Black and Brown people, and Native Americans. In addition, poor workers and undocumented immigrants are also disproportionately vulnerable to disease. This applies both within the United States and in other countries. The cutting off of public health and medical research in Africa, for example, is likely to lead to millions of people dying in the next decade.

Artist: Drew Martin

As I write this, I am fully aware that this paints a picture of the Trump regime as at best indifferent to the suffering and deaths their policies are causing. Such indifference is fully in accord with the racist, elitist, and eugenic beliefs that many of them hold and even boast of[2,3]. Further, this is in accord with a long history of actions and non-actions not only by the MAGA movement and its their reactionary forebears, but also by their "opponents" in the Democratic

Party wing of the capitalist class and political elites, who have actively supported genocide in Palestine for years now, and have been at best indifferent to the mass deaths caused by wars in Sudan and in Central Africa.

Resistance

Public health researchers and employees of public health agencies have mounted some resistance to these attacks, although with limited success to date. Defend Public Health, for example, was formed since the election of Trump to educate the public about the need for public health research and action, including by writing opinion pieces for local and national publications and by testifying before Congress and other legislative and administrative bodies. Pre-existing professional associations like the American Public Health Association have also engaged in a range of lobbying and testifying. Individual researchers and groups of researchers, sometimes aided by universities or other recipients of research grants, have sued for restoration of funds, sometimes with some success.

Like other forms of liberal response to the Trump regimes, none of these approaches will beat back the attacks. This is shown by the fact that Congress passed massive reductions in the NIH and CDC budgets, and this will reduce public health research drastically. Lobbying and pro forma demonstrations are forms of action appropriate for "normal times" (which may never return.)

Some forms of relatively "normal" opposition may have some success at continuing needed research. As long as this remains possible, for example, lobbying and mild protest may convince some states to increase or establish public health research programs. California, for example, funded a lot of AIDS-related research for decades. (It is not clear if this will be sustainable in the future.) Beyond that, various forms of "citizens' science" or mutual aid research may be possible. Gay communities organized this around AIDS in the late 1980s and the 1990s, and some forms have continued. The Patient-Led Research Collaborative has conducted important research on Long COVID.

None of these actions will suffice to replace the public health research the Trump regime is destroying, but they can help, and can also feed into the more general resistance against attacks on public health programming and, beyond that, attacks on the living standards and freedoms of people in the US and the world. Such efforts to defend ourselves against the authoritarian state the Trump regime is are organizing will not be easy. When the ruling classes are desperate due to threats to their power and wealth, and turn to authoritarian rule, it takes mass disruptive action and perhaps insurrectionary efforts like those in European Georgia to resist them. Whether for better or worse, we are in a period where the normal activities of scientists will not be very successful. The most effective ways to further public health now have to go beyond research and normal politics to include organizing for mass action, political strikes that support and grow from what are called economic strikes and "strikes for the common good," and deep political education of and by millions of people.

1. Farber S. Donald Trump, a Lumpen Capitalist. Jacobin2018.
2. Caplan A, Tabery J. Donald Trump Wants to Make Eugenics Great Again. Let's Not. *Scientific American*. October 17, 2024 2024;
3. Metraux J. Eugenics Isn't Dead—It's Thriving in Tech. Mother Jones2025.

[1] Even before now, the pressures of academic competition have led a number of researchers into what is politely called research misconduct. Here is one among many listings of incidents that have been uncovered, although I cannot vouch for its accuracy: https://research.uky.edu/research-misconduct/news. The current budget cuts and related fear create a climate for such corruption to become much more prevalent.

[2] I have discussed possible logics behind the broader attacks on science, including their links to religious obscurantist thinking and how capitalism generates a propensity for mystical thinking, in a previous article. See Friedman, Sam. 2025.Attacks on Science: Is there an underlying logic? *New Politics* 79. XX, NO. 3 SUMMER. pp. 21-29.

[3] Although some ruling capitalists and politicians may sincerely believe climate change not to be man-made, few are stupid enough to ignore Department of Defense warnings about its severity, the predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, or the increase in forest fires and extreme heat events.

American Higher Education in the Era of Trump

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

Introduction: The Faustian Bargain

Higher education in America long ago sold its soul to corporate America. Whether through its heavy dependence on corporate funding for business schools and scientific research, the rebranding of students as “customers,” the evisceration of tenure to promote flexibility in hiring, or the adoption of top-down, management-heavy infrastructures, universities have steadily drifted from their ostensible mission of education. College athletics, once part of a broad liberal education, have been transformed into big-money marketing spectacles.

Decades ago, American higher education fully embraced its role within a capitalist society—not as a bastion of independent thought, but as an institution subsidizing corporate profitability and producing the next generation of compliant workers.

Artist: Drew Martin

This transformation has not been accidental. From their inception in Europe, universities have been shaped by a fundamental contradiction: they are institutions of learning and creativity, embodying the Enlightenment ideal of "sapere aude"—"dare to know," as Immanuel Kant urged—while simultaneously serving as tools of domination and control. Francis Bacon's dictum "knowledge is power" captured this duality: knowledge could liberate, but it could also be harnessed to entrench authority. Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* argued that reason itself had become instrumentalized, reduced to a tool for control, calculation, and efficiency. The history of higher education is thus a story of competing forces—innovation and curiosity on one side, state and corporate control on the other. It has always been an institution of contradictions, and it persists today into the Trump era.

Origins in Exclusivity

American higher education began as an unapologetically elitist project. Its function was not to democratize opportunity but to reproduce privilege. The Ivy League prepared white, Protestant men to rule; elite women's colleges groomed the daughters of privilege for socially acceptable leadership roles as dutiful wives. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) offered a parallel track for a small segment of African Americans, but within a segregated structure that reinforced racial boundaries.

This was not a system designed to expand opportunity—it was designed to police it. The idea that higher education could serve as a ladder for social mobility was, for much of its history, a fiction. Its real function was to ensure the continuity of power across generations, right down to the legacy admissions that guaranteed family dynasties their place.

Post–World War II: Expansion with Strings Attached

The GI Bill after World War II marked the first large-scale breach in the fortress. Millions of returning soldiers entered universities, bringing with them a new set of needs and expectations. Here is where one of several contradictions in the mission of higher education became apparent. This expansion of higher education was a form of democratization, but it came with a Cold War twist: education was a tool for capitalist development and ideological warfare with communism. Free speech and thinking was good—so long as it was the right free speech and aided the Cold War and demonstrated the superiority of market capitalism.

While many remember the McCarthy hearings and the House Un-American Activities Committee targeting communism in the US government, it also went after alleged infiltration in colleges and universities, resulting in the requirement that professors sign loyalty oaths. The University of California system's 1949 oath is the most famous example, leading to the dismissal of dozens of faculty who resisted. Even when faculty were not formally sanctioned, the atmosphere of suspicion stifled debate. Courses in political economy, Marxist theory, and labor history were curtailed or quietly removed from curricula.

Universities were mobilized to fight the Soviet Union not with bullets but with ideas and technology. Federal dollars poured into scientific research, much of it serving military and corporate objectives. Tenure and academic freedom were paraded as proof of America's openness—symbols as much as protections.

But the expansion had unintended consequences. As universities opened their doors to a broader range of students, they also opened themselves to critique. The 1960s saw those students—many from outside the traditional elite—turn the tools of critical inquiry back against the state, the military-industrial complex, and the universities themselves.

The 1960s: The University as Counterculture

Colleges and universities thrived and grew and there was support for them in the 1950s and 1960s as they were seen as public goods worthy of public support. But then the universities got out of control. The university became both a sanctuary and a staging ground for dissent. Opposition to the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and anti-imperialist causes found a home on campus. For a brief moment, higher education seemed to fulfill its Enlightenment promise—serving as a space where reason could challenge power.

Students sought universities as a refuge from the draft, they were the epitome of counter cultural. It was not so much sex, drugs, and rock and roll, or Timothy Leary's "tune in turn on, drop out" as it was tune in, turn out, turn against. Higher ed was expanded to serve the needs of a capitalist elite but it produced its own critics. The democratization of higher education by expanding access produced counter cultural forces opposed to the institutions that created it.

But this same openness was intolerable to the political and corporate establishment. Ronald Reagan's governorship in California and Richard Nixon's presidency marked the beginning of a campaign to discipline universities back into compliance. The latter's vice-president, Spiro Agnew, captured their attitude perfectly when in his October 19, 1969, speech he indicted

higher education.

Education is being redefined at the demand of the uneducated to suit the ideas of the uneducated. The student now goes to college to proclaim rather than to learn. A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.

Reagan railed against “free speech” campuses as dens of anarchy; Nixon’s administration monitored and infiltrated student groups. Kent State’s “four dead in Ohio” became a literal warning shot to any who would mistake the university for a protected zone of dissent.

The First Counter-Revolution: The Corporate University

By the late 1970s, the economic crisis gave political leaders the perfect excuse to reshape higher education in the corporate image. State funding was slashed, and student grants were replaced with loans, tethering graduates to decades of debt. Universities began talking openly about “customers” and “products.” Administrative layers multiplied, often staffed by people with business backgrounds rather than academic ones. No longer was higher education seen as a public good—it was a private benefit that would now shift the costs to the student-customer.

Tenure lines were frozen or eliminated, replaced with contingent faculty who were cheaper and easier to control. Professional programs—especially MBAs—exploded, not because of student demand for critical management theory but because corporations demanded a steady supply of trained managers. Naming rights for business schools and sports facilities cemented the symbolic merger of university and corporation.

College sports, particularly football and basketball, became cash machines, commodifying athletes while maintaining the fiction of amateurism. The notion of athletics as part of a well-rounded education was replaced by the reality of athletics as entertainment branding.

The result was an institution that still claimed the rhetoric of the Enlightenment but had fully adopted the operating system of corporate capitalism.

The Second Democratization: A More Diverse Challenge

The early 21st century brought a new wave of students—more racially diverse, more likely to be immigrants or first-generation college-goers, and more willing to challenge institutional orthodoxies. They did not simply want access; they wanted transformation. They demanded that curricula reflect multiple histories, that faculty and leadership mirror the student body, and that universities take public stands on climate change, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives proliferated. Universities divested from industries like tobacco and fossil fuels. Courses on critical race theory, gender studies, and environmental justice flourished. For a moment, it seemed as if the university might again lean

toward its emancipatory potential.

Corporate Tolerance and the Backlash

Corporate America initially embraced DEI—up to a point. A diverse workforce was good for branding and recruitment. But when campus activism began questioning the deeper structures of inequality—labor practices, environmental destruction, political lobbying—tolerance evaporated. The university's critique had cut too close to the bone.

The cultural gap between the university and the 62% of Americans without a college degree widened. For many in this group, universities came to represent an alien set of values, from marriage equality to transgender rights. Conservative politicians and media seized on this gap, framing campuses as radical enclaves disconnected from "real America." Antonio Gramsci's "war of position" was playing out in real time: the battle to control intellectual life was no longer abstract—it was in the headlines, legislative bills, and trustee boardrooms.

Crises of Legitimacy

The 2008 financial crash ripped away any illusion of economic security for higher education. Over-reliance on tuition, ballooning student debt, and stagnant wages for graduates all fed a crisis of legitimacy. Stories of administrative bloat and $70,000-per-year tuition became political fodder. It is hard to democratize and promise equity and access at tuitions few can afford.

Inside the academy, inclusivity efforts sometimes collided with academic freedom, as in the Hamline University case (where I teach) where a contingent faculty member lost her job for showing an image of the Prophet Mohammed. This episode revealed a new contradiction: universities, in trying to appease a consumer-student model and corporate-style risk management, could end up undermining the very principles they claimed to protect. It also pitted liberal sensibilities of faculty against students who had been coddled into the belief that education was not meant to challenge their sensibilities but to reflect their world view.

Trump's Offensive: The Cultural Counterattack

By the time Donald Trump rose to power, the stage was set. The corporate university had already absorbed much of higher education's critical capacity, but the second democratization wave threatened to re-energize it. Trump's attacks on "woke" universities, DEI programs, and critical race theory were not isolated outbursts—they were the culmination of decades of backlash.

Ironically, his approach combined populist anti-elitism with elite interests' desire to discipline the academy. By casting universities as Democratic Party outposts, cultural enemies, and intellectual elites, Trump harnessed both the resentment of non-college-educated voters and the strategic goals of corporate and political elites.

The Costs of Control

Ironically, suppressing higher education's independence may backfire on capitalism itself. With birth rates declining and the "enrollment cliff" approaching, discouraging immigrants and international students from studying in the U.S. will deprive the economy of talent. Restricting research funding and academic freedom will slow innovation, ceding scientific and technological leadership to other countries.

Historically, universities have been a cost-effective way for corporations to outsource training and research. Undermining them in the name of ideological conformity risks dismantling that arrangement. The logic of "knowledge is power" cuts both ways: by narrowing the scope of inquiry, elites may find they have also narrowed their own future options.

The Weaponization of Higher Education: Trump, Project 2025, and the Elites

Trump's attacks on higher education—what some critics call his "Department of Government by Efficiency (DOGE) approach—should not be seen only as a series of personal vendettas but rather as part of a coordinated ideological campaign. His tirades against "woke professors," "indoctrination," and diversity initiatives are designed to resonate with populist resentment while serving deeper structural interests. This is not just culture war rhetoric; it is a deliberate effort to discredit institutions that produce knowledge, cultivate critical thinking, and often resist authoritarian politics.

The alignment between Trump's offensive and Project 2025, the sweeping policy blueprint drafted by conservative think tanks for a future Republican administration, makes this clear. Project 2025 explicitly calls for curtailing federal support for DEI programs, restructuring or even dismantling the Department of Education, and imposing new restrictions on federal research funding. These moves are designed to discipline universities, forcing them into ideological conformity, similar to the McCarthy era efforts, while undermining their ability to act as independent centers of critique. What Trump presents in rallies as spontaneous anger at "liberal elites" is codified in Project 2025 as a structural reorganization of higher education along authoritarian lines.

This campaign is also useful to segments of the tech and financial elite. For Silicon Valley leaders and hedge fund managers who have become increasingly vocal in their opposition to liberal universities, the attack serves multiple functions. First, by weakening elite institutions like Harvard and Columbia, they undermine centers of cultural authority that often critique corporate power. Second, by delegitimizing traditional universities, they create space for alternatives—online academies, credentialing platforms, and privatized educational ventures—that tech elites control and profit from. In this sense, Trump's assault on higher education dovetails with the libertarian ethos of the tech sector: dismantle the old institutions, then rebuild education as a marketplace for profit and influence.

The recent focus on Harvard and Columbia illustrates how this strategy works in practice. Both universities have faced intense scrutiny and political hearings over alleged failures to curb

antisemitism on campus. While antisemitism is a serious issue that deserves genuine attention, the political uses of these scandals are clear. Conservative politicians and media outlets seize on such controversies not primarily to protect Jewish students, but to delegitimize universities as bastions of liberalism and diversity. By painting Harvard and Columbia as hypocritical, corrupt, or hostile to “real American values,” Trump and his allies mobilize cultural resentment while weakening institutions that often serve as intellectual counterweights to his agenda. The attack on antisemitism thus becomes a pretext—a convenient wedge to advance the broader project of dismantling what the right sees as liberal strongholds.

What emerges is a strange alliance: Trumpist populism, conservative think tanks, and segments of the tech elite converging around the shared goal of disciplining higher education. Each has different motivations—cultural revenge, ideological control, or economic profit—but the convergence is powerful. Together, they threaten to redefine universities not as spaces of inquiry or democratic debate but as regulated factories of compliance. The irony is that in destroying these institutions, they may also erode the very infrastructures of innovation, research, and workforce development that American capitalism has long depended upon.

Conclusion: The Contradictions Endure

From the cloisters of medieval Europe to the sprawling campuses of 21st-century America, higher education has been a battlefield between liberation and control. It has served as a refuge for dissent and as a factory for conformity—often at the same time. The Enlightenment promise that knowledge could free us has always been shadowed by the reality that knowledge can also be harnessed to rule us.

In the United States, the democratizations of higher education—in the postwar era and in the early 21st century—each triggered waves of backlash that reshaped the university in more corporate, controlled forms. The current wave, sharpened under Trump, seeks to clamp down on the second democratization before it fully matures.

The contradictions are not going away. The corporate university can never entirely kill the critical university, and the critical university can never entirely escape the corporate university. They are two sides of the same institution, locked in a permanent struggle. What remains to be seen is which side will be ascendant when the next crisis hits—and whether the university will still be a place where daring to know is possible at all.

Mamdani, a “New Municipalism”, and the Undertow of Party Elites

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

The fight is on for the future of cities and with it the future of democracy in the country. The Trump administration’s ham-fisted deployment of federal troops and the National Guard to usurp local policing and bolster ICE roundups of “immigrant-looking” residents is being challenged by mayors and governors and by citizens outraged by the abuse of power. Elected city officials, critical state governors, and mobilized urban residents are pushing back.

In New York, Zohran Mamdani’s mayoral campaign has crystallized a new municipal politics determined to assert the right of cities to set their own taxing and spending priorities and make city life more affordable and humane. His campaign has also called forth an establishment opposition determined to thwart the “threat” of an urban democratic socialist agenda and the popular movement it has energized. A shifting coalition of interests ranging from the city’s largest real estate and financial corporations, to mainstream national Democratic Party leaders, to the racist and xenophobic Trump administration and its acolytes, is desperately searching for ways oppose Mamdani with a single “independent” candidate, most likely the deeply discredited Andrew Cuomo. The strategy implicitly subordinates municipalities to state and federal priorities. Even Trump, who has shown signs of resignation

to a Mamdani victory and called him “my little communist”, seems to believe that in the end, he could control him by claiming, “he has to come to Washington for money.”[1] The story is not new. Municipal socialists in the past have repeatedly confronted state and federal limits to their self-government. And they have faced opportunistic “fusion” candidates recruited by elites to undercut a new socialist politics in cities, or to undermine successful socialist administrations, once elected, by hamstringing local initiatives and giving ultimate control over key policy arenas and taxing authority to state and federal authorities.

Zohran Mamdani Speaking at DSA 101 Meeting, Church of the Village, Nov. 11, 2024.

But in cities today neither Mamdani’s campaign nor the longstanding fight for municipal socialism are isolated. Progressive political impulses growing out of working-class demands for affordable, livable cities have appeared in recent municipal campaigns from Boston to Chicago to Los Angeles. A “new municipalism” is animating politics at the local level with a potent political energy that workers and young people bring to an agenda that promises to make urban life more affordable, equitable, and democratic. Local coalitions in places as diverse as Boston, Chicago, and Portland, Richmond, CA, Nashville, TN, Detroit, MI, Somerville, MA, Richmond, VA , Seattle, WA and Minneapolis, MN are creating political space for a new people’s agenda and a rejuvenated politics of grassroots democracy.[2]

Why city (and state) politics matters

The power of cities and their right to self-government are inevitably shaped by state and national politics. Traditions of local control in the eighteenth-century North American colonies gave way to growing elite fears about local governance. James Madison, in *Federalist Paper* #10, worried that “a rage for paper money, for an abolition of debts, for an equal division of property, or for any other improper or wicked project, will be less apt to pervade the whole body of the Union than a particular member of it, in the same proportion as such a malady is more likely to taint a particular county or district than an entire state.”[3] While the US Constitution was silent on the powers of local government, a number of Supreme Court decisions in the nineteenth century enhanced the power of states over cities, culminating in what came to be called “Dillon’s Rule”, put forward in an 1868 Iowa Supreme Court decision.

> The true view is this: Municipal corporations owe their origin to and derive their powers and rights wholly from the legislature. It breathes into them the breath of life, without which they cannot exist. As it creates, so it may destroy. . .[Cities] are, so to phrase it, mere tenants at will of the legislature.[4]

That view did not go unchallenged. Michigan Supreme Court Justice Thomas M. Cooley argued that local self-government antedated state incorporation. "Local government is a matter of absolute right; the state cannot take it away."

> It is axiomatic that the management of purely local affairs belongs to the people concerned, not only because of being their own affairs, but because they will best understand, and be most competent to manage them.[5]

While states have continued to claim authority to set limits on municipal home rule, the determination of where those boundaries lie varies greatly from one state to another and over time. In the so-called "Progressive Era", cities sought to breach those boundaries in order to implement local municipalization of utilities and public transit or enact tax reforms to finance increased city services.[6] Mamdani, if elected, will face a similar contest with New York state and the federal government over implementation of tax initiatives and the expansion of municipal services that new taxes would finance.

Whose Party—national elites or local activists?

Then, like now, political elites within social democratic parties (or in today's Democratic Party) saw cities as "stepchildren" and gave short shrift to the municipal arena. In Germany, Social Democratic Party leaders, Karl Kautsky and Paul Singer, repeatedly subordinated municipal activists' agendas to the party's national priorities.[7] In Britain, the emergence of a "Parliamentary Labour Party" shifted power from the locally grounded Independent Labour Party branches toward a national party, which became, according to municipal socialist Russell Smart,

> A mere machine for registering the decrees of the three or four able men who for so many years, have formed the inner circle . . .all the wires are in their hands. . . even when the general sentiment of the Party is in opposition to them.[8]

In Sweden, even as the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SAP) was born in 1889, Axel Danielsson, the militant leader of Malmö's local socialists, warned that municipal agendas might be subordinated to the party's national priorities as "a paltry program for a purely parliamentary party."[9] Cooperation at the national level between social democrats and liberal governments led to a moderate reformism which paid lip service to municipal priorities.

At the founding convention of the Socialist Party of America the debate between "impossibilists" and "constructivists" echoed controversies among social democrats globally, where the tension over local vs. national strategies was equally pronounced. Socialists divided sharply over whether to pursue "immediate demands" in city politics that would have a

tangible impact on workers' lives. At the Party's 1901 convention, Max Hayes, Cleveland printer and socialist doctrinaire, argued against a platform of "immediate demands" that promised piecemeal progress in cities. The abolitionist movement, he said, "did not say 'Let us free one slave at a time'. . .You know it was no compromise. . .when the crash came the entire slave power was destroyed and all the slaves were thereupon set free."[10] At the next general convention, the debate over immediate demands continued, now framed in a new "municipal and state platform"—what one critic claimed might be mistaken for "a hat rack" of incremental reforms. Alternatively, a defender of immediate demands made the analogy of two factions of a shipwrecked crew. One faction simply argued for getting to shore but with no practical plan; the other suggested bailing the boat in order to reach the shore. Another local activist took the long, evolutionary view.

> This movement at the present time is a municipal movement; it will grow and develop within the states, and you will take possession of them long before you do of the national government. The municipalities are the natural homes of the proletariat. It will first assert its strength there. You will first be obliged to assume a constructive course.

Success in the municipalities would bring new "responsibility thrust upon our shoulders" for implementing all "that will enable the proletarians to raise their standard of living and contribute to their well-being."[11]

Victor Berger of Milwaukee was the most prominent advocate of a local, constructivist strategy built on immediate action.

> Progress is not attained by simply waiting for a majority of people, for the general reconstruction, for the promised hour of deliverance. . .We want to reconstruct society, and we must go to work without delay, and work ceaselessly for the cooperative Commonwealth, the ideal of the future. But we want to change conditions now.[12]

A municipal socialist legacy

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a rising tide of municipal socialism laid the foundation globally for making cities livable for all people. It faced the formidable opposition of deeply entrenched urban elites. Today's political moment has resurfaced the class tensions that lay at the heart of ruling elites' longstanding assertion of their right to govern in defense of their property interests, with a presumption that only they could provide the necessary managerial expertise. But workers in the 1890s showed new determination to claim *their* "right" to run cities in their own name on behalf of their own interests. This conflict manifested itself historically in successful socialist victories from Bradford, England to Bielefeld, Germany to Christchurch, New Zealand to Vienna, Austria and countless other towns and cities across the globe. The United States witnessed literally hundreds of municipal socialist victories in cities as diverse as Schenectady, NY, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Butte, Montana, Barre, Vermont, and Hamilton and Dayton, Ohio.[13]

Workers recognized the city as a unique laboratory for building the foundations of a more

humane, democratic, and cooperative social order. As a Melbourne (Australia) labor newspaper wrote, workers saw that, "the municipality is around them, is part of their daily lives, ministers to their comfort and their health, and is (to coin a word) watchable by them individually. Therefore, if anywhere, [there] they can learn the first lessons of that social cooperation. . ."[14] And in 1911 workers in Sydney, Australia took note of their "right to the city".

> Of all the fields of political activity the municipal one is in some respects the most important inasmuch as it is nearer to us than any other, touches our daily life closer, and has the most intimate bearing on the great social problems we are all striving to solve. Our municipalities are in fact the nearest thing to practical Socialism we possess.[15]

Crafting a city platform. . .challenging a national leadership

Social democracy came of age in a period of surging nationalism in which the dramas of everyday life at the local level seemed pedestrian to national elites, and because of the constraints imposed by state pre-emption and municipal franchise restrictions, the remedies available to cities appeared wholly inadequate to address the depth of their problems. Nonetheless, a growing cadre of local working-class activists asserted the importance of what seemed to others, small victories. Italian socialist, Giuseppe Zibordi in 1910 noted that progress in cities may have been "about little struggles, humble battles that would make an outside observer laugh. But still there, where socialism vanquished the stupid competition of personalistic parties. . .these immediate struggles [had] an immense moral value."[16]

A "joyful" campaign for a Labour city

The struggle between local activists and national party leaders frequently came down to the content of party platforms and the priority given to local campaigns. In the North of England local Labour Party activists argued for the primacy of the municipality. Russell Smart, in an influential pamphlet on "municipal socialism", argued that "[t]he Socialist looks to the Municipality and the Parish Council rather than to the national government as the means where the problems of democracy may be successfully solved."[17] But he also warned that the path from "competitive anarchy" to "orderly collectivism" would not necessarily be "heroic" or "captivate the senses or charm the imagination." Victory would not come in a single battle, but rather from a "never-ending series of desultory fights between the well-disciplined, officered forces of the enemy, amply supplied with the sinews of war, and the looser formed battalions of the labour army blindly struggling for social justice."[18] Others, like an ILP candidate in Bristol, professed little time for parliamentary campaigns, "indeed we find our hands pretty full with local elections" and candidates "who are able to do some practical work, and are to a great degree controlled by those who elect and run them". They were "*very* keen on the subject of Labour Representation, especially *local* representation, *where one is least liable to be sold*."[19] (emphasis in the original) The national leadership of the emerging Parliamentary Labour Party found these developments disquieting to the point that in 1900 party head and future Prime Minister, J. Ramsey MacDonald, refused to publish and circulate

the proceedings of a meeting of local “Socialist and Labour Elected Persons”[20]

Many local activists recalled not the drudgery of the campaign, but “a labour of joy”. Those were, according to a Nottingham worker, “glad, creative days”.

> Even those of us who lived through them did not realize how happy and privileged we were. . .Arid minded highbrows thought that it was trivial, politically orthodox disliked it, socialist doctrinaires declared that its economic basis was not sound, but the man in the street accepted its teaching to which he gave the intense fervor of a happy convert.[21]

They were “happy warriors” indeed, reminiscent of the rank-and-file labor and Democratic Party activists who brought the New Deal to life in 1933-36, or the latest generation of young local activists who are lifting up the campaign of Zohran Mamdani and other municipal struggles today.[22]

Socialist “revisionism” for the city

Theoretical debates over the value of municipal politics and reform have shaped the social democratic movement almost from its outset. Nowhere was that debate more heated than among German social democrats. The conflict lay in part in the studied ambiguity of one of the party’s key founding documents, the *Erfurter Program*m, drafted in 1891. The “radical” theory of part one, drafted by national party leaders, stood in contrast to the specific demands of the practical “social-democratic program of action”, reportedly drafted by future revisionist Eduard Bernstein, much of which focused on cities—free education and health care, progressive local taxes, and equal, direct voting rights.[23] These tensions would play out in the famous “revisionist controversy” among German social democrats, with Bernstein arguing for flexibility and experimentation in the face of the constantly changing realities of capitalist evolution. He perceived the “democratization of local and municipal government” as key. And he believed that “increasing the functions and powers of local elected bodies” would lead to the state becoming “a real commonwealth—not a power above Society but a tool in the hands of an organized Democracy”. He understood that enhanced power of the municipality would be a necessity “if a socialist policy of local government is to be possible”, and in turn “municipal socialism” would be “an indispensable lever for forming or completely realizing. . .’the democratic right of labour’”.

Mamdani’s challenges

Zohran Mamdani faces analogous challenges today with much of the national leadership of the Democratic Party being reluctant to endorse either his candidacy or the “social democratic” thrust of his municipal platform. He repeatedly insists that his focus is on New York and an agenda for improving the lives of its residents. Democratic Party elites allege his “inexperience” and the “radicalism” of his proposals to address the affordability of life for workers in New York City, including his determination to tax billionaires in order to fund his proposals for universal child care, free public transportation, and the construction of affordable housing. New York Governor Kathy Hochul, Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer,

and House Democratic leader Hakim Jeffries implicitly challenge the new popular politics his campaign represents. That political movement has energized the Mamdani campaign and brought in tens of thousands of volunteers. It also poses a threat to the national political strategy of party leaders. The silence of Barack Obama, the Clintons, and the political allies of Biden is deafening, as they almost certainly work the levers of power behind the scenes to undercut the Mamdani movement. Simultaneously, the Trump administration dangles high profile jobs before Mayor Eric Adams and Republican Curtis Sliwa in order to persuade them to withdraw and unify behind Andrew Cuomo's "independent" candidacy, a move not so quietly endorsed by Trump.

Where do we go from here?

Cities have been (and are) generative of new political energy that brings into focus the tangible possibilities of concrete and immediate improvements in people's daily lives. They do so by renewing the promise of democracy at the most basic, local level. The agendas draw energy from the unique circumstances of the moment and address the needs in new, creative ways. In the case of New York, this means new solutions to the crises of housing affordability, public transit, access to lower cost food, and childcare.

Mamdani with MTA NYC Transit President Richard Davey and MTA Construction and Development President Jamie Torres-Springer. (Marc A. Hermann / MTA)

But to carry forward this fight, new municipal movements must contend with the resistance of political elites, whether through the realignment of entrenched leaders behind fusion candidates or state preemption of the right of cities to govern their own affairs. Only a mobilized electorate at local (and state) levels can overcome these barriers. This may mean, among other things, building new democratic structures for participation in civic life—like participatory budgeting assemblies—alongside existing governing structures as part of a struggle for a genuinely "democratic control of urban space."[24]

The "right to the city", as David Harvey has argued represents a claim by those who "produce"

the city—the workers who have "always been temporary, insecure, itinerant and precarious"—to a voice in the traditional realms of electoral politics. It is also embodied in informal living spaces and neighborhoods, where the "right to the city" also means, in Henri Lefebvre words, a "right to difference" as an antidote to "intolerance and segregation." According to Harvey, it means "claiming back the right of everyone to live in a decent house in a decent living environment."[25] And that is precisely the program that Mamdani and the "new municipalism" movement are putting forward for cities in celebration of their diversity and their social democratic heritage.

Notes

[1] "Trump says it looks like Mamdani is 'Going to Win'," *NYT*, 9/12/25

[2] The outcroppings of this "new municipalism" are evident across the country. See Steve Early, "Richmond Progressive Alliance's Lessons for Local Organizers," *Jacobin*, 10/15/24, Barcelona En Comú, Debbie Bookchin and Ada Colau, eds., *Fearless Cities: A Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement* (Oxford, UK: New Internationalist Publications, 2019) and David Harvey's classic, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso Press, 2012 [2019]). An important hub of the new municipalism is https://municipalism.org/partners/ and its "Municipalism Learning Series", a project of the Solidarity Research Center in Los Angeles.

[3] Publius [James Madison], "No. 10", *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Penguin, 1961 1787-88]), 84.

[4] "City of Clinton v. Cedar Rapids and Missouri River Railroad Company" (1868), quoted in Dale Krane, et al., *Home Rule in America: A Fifty-State Handbook* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2001), 8. See the legal analysis of shifting state and local claims in Gerald E. Frug, *City Making: Building Communities without Building Walls* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 43-47.

[5] Quoted in Frug, 47-51; also, Dale Krane, 10.

[6] On the shifting legal interpretations restricting or supporting municipal home rule, see Frug, 36-53; also Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing 'the People': The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 76-82.

[7] For a rebuttal of the SPD leadership critique, see Hugo Lindemann, "Zur Kritik der sozialdemokratischen Communal programme," *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, Heft 4, 1902, 277-8.

[8] *Labour Leader* (UK), May 22, 1908.

[9] Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 8. Shelton Stromquist, *Claiming the City: A Global History of Workers' Fight for*

Municipal Socialism(London: Verso Press, 2023), 141-2.

[10] Socialist Party of America, Unity Convention, *Proceedings,* August 1901, Sixth Session, 36-7.

[11] Socialist Party of American, National Convention, *Proceedings at Chicago, May 1-6, 1904*, 253, 258.

[12] *Social Democratic Herald*, February 22, 1902.

[13] See Stromquist, *Claiming the City*, and idem., "Municipal Socialism", *The Cambridge History of Socialism*, Marcel van der Linden, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[14] *Tocsin* (Melbourne), August 31, 1905.

[15] *The Worker* (Sydney), January 13, 1911.

[16] Giuseppe Zibordi, "Primavera di vita Municipale," *Avanti* (1910) quoted in Margaret Kohn, *Radical Space: Building the House of the People* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 137-8.

[17] H. Russell Smart, "Municipal Socialism", Manchester Labour Library, 1895, 2.

[18] Smart, "Municipal Socialism," 2.

[19] J.A. Cunningham, Bristol Trades Council Labour Electoral Association to J. Ramsey MacDonald, May 10, July 6, 1900, Labour Party Archives, Manchester.

[20] Independent Labour Party (ILP), *Report of the eighth Annual Conference*, Glasgow, April 16-17, 1900, 11-12.

[21] Ben Turner, *About Myself* (London: Cayme Press, 1930), 79-80 and Alex M. Thompson, *Here I Lie*(London: 1937) quoted in Stephen Yeo, "A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896," *History Workshop*, n. 4 (Autumn 1977), 8.

[22] For the latest "Building Power in Place" Municipalism Learning Series, "Direct Democracy & Popular Assemblies," see https://municipalism.org/offerings/panels/

[23] *Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des Parteitages der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, Abgehaften zu Erfurt, vom 14 bis 20. Oktober 1891* (Berlin: *Vorwärts,* 1891, 5-6; see also, Manfred Steger, *The Quest for Evolutionary Socialism: Eduard Bernstein and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.

[24] Mike Davis, "Who will build the Ark?" in Davis, *Old Gods, New Enigmas: Marx's Lost Theory* (London: Verso, 2018), 219.

[25] Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, 131, 133; Chris Butler, *Henri Lefebvre: Spatial Politics, Everyday Life and the Right to the City* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 150.

A Socialist Mayor for New York? What History Suggests

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

In the spring of 1910 newspapers around the country speculated about what was going to happen in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, as the result of the election of a Socialist mayor in that city. The mayor, Emil Seidel, tried to calm the fears of those who predicted a dangerous revolution was about to take place. Still, after he took office, one writer noted: “Some people are a little surprised that Milwaukee’s socialist mayor did not appear at his desk with a red flag in his teeth and a bomb under each arm.”

Artist: Drew Martin

Similar concerns have been expressed by the possible election of a socialist as mayor of New York in November 2025. While predicting events is always risky and no attempt is made here to do so, a look back suggests a history of socialist mayors that is a bit more comforting to those fearful of a drastic step toward radicalism in New York should a socialist be elected.

The Controversy

In the late 1890s, socialists in the United States began to focus on political activity on the municipal level. These practically minded Socialists with a strong working-class, pro-labor, bias began breaking away from a doctrine-based party of ideologues and outsiders to join an on-going drive to improve the operation, structure, and performance of municipal governments. Many of them hoped to become insiders as office holders at the municipal level, and, from that status, to facilitate the revolutionary cause as much as possible while, and at the same time, bringing meaningful improvements in the quality of life for ordinary people in their communities.

During the early 1900s those, in the right wing, conservative faction of the party, were political action was favored, put considerable emphasis on securing victories on the local level. They argued that winning local offices would give the party a chance to demonstrate that it could be trusted to govern, thus paving the way for success on the state and national levels where more meaningful reforms could be made. It also provided an opportunity to further educate the people in the principles of Socialism, generate support for broader and more fundamental changes, give Socialists experience in governing which would be drawn upon when the opportunity to do bigger things came along, and, on a more practical level, build the party by providing employment for party members. One Socialist editor argued that the prime benefit of capturing local office was that the public “will find that Socialists are merely people who are honestly seeking to promote the public good and the false things that have been told of them

will cease to have effect."

Those on the left side of the party remained opposed to the idea of socialists getting involved in political party activity, feeling it was a waste of time and effort. To them emphasis had to be placed on direct action against employers to bring the capitalist system down as soon as possible. In responding to right-winger's call for local political activity, leftists supplemented their arguments against political activity in general by arguing, as did several others, that local activity was especially unlikely to accomplish much of anything even if by some miracle a Socialist slate of candidates captured a city or town. In power, they could only do what the state would allow them to – which was not much of real value. If socialists had to get into politics, it would make far more sense to compete for offices on the state and national levels which were in a far better position to do something for the workers.

Beyond the legal and financial limitations on local action, questions were raised not only by Socialists on the left but non-Socialist observers as to whether Socialists in office would want to or dare to do much of anything to seriously promote the Socialist revolutionary cause. Socialist office holders, they argued, were likely to get mired down in trivia, dealing with day to day problems all local officials had to face and take their eye off the revolutionary goals. Such goals, moreover, were likely to take second place at best to the goal of doing what had to be done to win and keep winning office. All in all, they argued, power was going to shift from idealists to practical pragmatic people, bringing watered-down platforms and comprise with the party's principals in addressing issues.

Along with this came the prediction that simply winning an election would effectively sober up Socialist candidates, making them more conservative and cautions, fearful of taking chances, because they actually had to face reality, make hard decisions and accept responsibility for what happened under their watch. In the end, Socialists in power would wind up losing much of their revolutionary zeal and their parties would be little different than the political parties they condemned. Moreover, whatever meaningful reform, if any at all, that came out of a Socialist administration would likely be undone or used in the interest of the privileged few when the Socialists fell from power as was bound to happen.

Winning Elections

Despite all the controversy, a surprising large number of socialists were elected to office of mayor or a comparable position of chief executive under different titles, such a Village President. Voters were willing to experiment with having a socialist mayor, to see what they could do, and socialist mayors were often able to demonstrate their ability to govern. My research, presented in *Socialist Mayors in the United States* (2022) found that from 1898 to 1920, voters in 216 municipalities in 34 states chose a socialist mayor or chief executive. Some of these places had more than one socialist mayor bringing the total of mayors to 237.

Socialists started out slowly when it came to victories. With the momentum built up by the victory in Milwaukee in 1910 they hit a high point in 1911 with the election of 80 mayors, doing

particularly well in Ohio, Illinois and other places in the Midwest. They held on to 30 or so victories in elections immediately in the few years that followed but picked up only a few wins in the years after 1917, when the “red scare” led to their suppression because of the party’s opposition to U.S. entry in the first world war.

Campaign Postcard of the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin, 1910

Unlike the situation in New York, today, where we find a self-identified socialist running as candidate of the Democratic Party, nearly all the socialist candidates for office in this earlier period were nominated by local chapters of the Socialist Party of America, over time, officially doing so in compliance with primary election laws the nature of which varied from state to state. Then, as now, a socialist running as a Democrat for mayor in a large city dominated by Democrats, had a far better chance of victory than a candidate of the Socialist Party, though getting the Democratic nomination would as now an earth-shaking event. In the early 1900s, however, socialist leaders were bent on making their party the party of reform (and ultimately more fundamental change) and were inviting others to join their party and support their candidates rather than trying to influence the nominations of other parties (though some party members did do this).

In running for office, the socialist candidates generally sought to assure the voters that they were not, as often charged, wild-eyed un American radicals bent on destruction, but well established citizens concerned about the welfare of the community. They still felt Socialism, meaning the collective ownership of the means of production and the establishment of a cooperative commonwealth would follow capitalism, but only gradually one step at a time through the political process and would be brought about without violence. But rather than talk about these things, they focused on immediate practical problems facing the voters in employment, education, taxation and a variety of other areas. They wanted to win.

Like non-socialist progressive candidates in the races for mayor socialist candidates called for greater honesty and efficiency in running municipal governments. This was a time when the reputation of municipal governments was at an all-time low – they were commonly viewed as captured by corrupt political machines that governed in their own interests. Socialists stood out in their call for greater democracy on the local level, including the addition of the initiative referendum and recall. They also led in the call for the creation of municipally owned and operated enterprises relating to the supply of water, electricity, transportation and many other services.

Many of them saw the Socialist Party's future closely linked to the growing labor movement. The trade unionists though were practical people. To win them over socialists had to focus more on immediate problems of concern to workers rather than the reasons for wage slavery and what could be accomplished in the eventual revolution. The politically minded Socialists also sought to reach out to the middle class as well as the lower working-class and to farmers as well as industrial workers, and, indeed, to whomever they could get to vote for them. As they saw it, the party had the choice of either becoming politically active in a practical sense or accepting the status of a limited doctrinal party of outsiders basing its appeal on principals and moral argumentation, being kept alive by a small cadre of true believers but having little if any effect on the political life of the country other than possibly in the realm of ideas.

The socialist candidate's best chance of winning the office of mayor in a general election was in competing in a three way race, facing candidates from both major parties, where they could win by getting the most votes but did not need a majority of the votes, and their worst chances came when Democrats and Republicans fused, so that the contest was one in which the socialist faced a candidate supported by both of major parties and needed a majority of the votes to win. Major party fusing became a major barrier to the election or re-election of a socialist mayor.

Socialists initially felt they would do especially well in large cities because of the concentration of the working class in these places. As it turned out, several factors gave them a better chance in medium-sized and small, often very small, towns than large cities. While the size of the working class was not large enough as a percentage of the total population in most large cities to do much for the Socialists in city-wide elections, it was sometimes large enough in smaller places to have a significant impact on the Socialist vote for mayor. This was true in heavily industrialized and unionized small towns and mining camps where Socialists enjoyed much of their success.

Overall, it was also relatively easy for workers in smaller places to dominate the political process because of their numbers and their economic importance to the community. Workers and their political spokespersons could form social and political ties with local businesses and professionals they patronized and knew on a personal basis. They could find middle and upper-middle class citizens who sympathized with their resistance to the control and abuses of large corporations headquartered elsewhere. More generally, it was also far easier for Socialists to organize and conduct campaigns in smaller jurisdictions and the face- to- face personal nature

of politics in these places greatly reduced the significance of partisanship ties, thus taking away a huge advantage enjoyed by major party candidates in larger jurisdictions where party ties were virtually all that most voters knew about the candidates.

Constraints and Accomplishments

Once in office, socialist mayors often found other socialists to be a major problem. They continued to hear complaints from socialists on the left about wasting time and resources doing the wrong thing, though when it came to putting controls on the police during labor disputes, those on the left were happy to have a socialist mayor. Socialist mayors in many places had a difficult time with leaders of the local social party that nominated them. Party constitutions and rules gave local party leaders control over what their nominees did if elected to office. Their nominees signed advanced letters of resignation from their public office, which, should they happen to become mayor or any other official, party leaders could submit to the city council, removing the socialist from office in the event they found the official was ignoring their directives.

Local party leaders expected to call the shots –to them the citizens had voted for and expressed their confidence in the socialist party, not the mayor or another official as an individual. Socialist mayors were generally willing to work with the party but sometimes acted on the assumption that citizen demands and interests, not those of the party, came first and, in the event of a conflict, the mayors had to listen to the people. On these occasions mayors ignored or downplayed the significance of their letters of resignation. Mayor-party disputes produced a great deal of tension and turmoil. The letters of resignation were seldom, if ever, accepted by the councils but on several occasions, mayors had enough with party intrusions and resigned from the party or were expelled from membership in the party by equally irritated party members.

Political Cartoon from Chicago Daily Socialist on Occassion of Seidel's Election,

Mayors were also often in conflict with other socialist officials including those elected to the city council. Socialists had a hard time agreeing about anything (and still do). In many cases, there were not enough socialists elected to council positions to back up the socialist mayor's position even if they were inclined to do so, and little could be accomplished. The lack of socialist representation in city councils reflected in part the use of elections at large rather than neighborhood districts to select council people. Socialists opposed inclusion of elections at large as part of the municipal reform package.

Like most politicians the socialist mayors wanted to be re-elected, as evidence of success not only themselves but their party, as a way of demonstrating that a socialist mayor could do the job. Many saw themselves and their party on trial — the voters had decided to give them a chance, to show what they could do and they had to do well, more exactly, do well enough to win enough votes to get returned to office.

When socialists mayors won it was usually because a lot of non-socialists voted for them. Some, perhaps many of the non-socialists, simply voted for change in response to the evident failures of one or both of the major parties. To keep their coalition together socialist mayors had to do more than please the socialists. Re-election required some flexibility as to position taking, a search for issues that would work regardless of how they related to socialism and a toning down on the use of radical rhetoric.

It would be wrong, however, to say that Socialist mayors were only "Socialist politicians" without any fixed principles or beliefs or, alternatively, indistinguishable from Progressive mayors who were Republicans, Democrats, or independents. Socialist mayors were different. They were more ideologically inclined, more innovative, more disruptive of the status quo, and more likely to take on the powers that be. They were also more strongly resisted.

If Socialist administrations did not do much or fell short of expectations it was not because they did not try, but because of the condition of places where they won. Socialist mayors, like other mayors of the time who served in these smaller places were limited by the lack of authority, financial resources, staff, and time brought about by short terms and term limits. Mayors in all cities found that their powers and resources were kept in check by hostile state legislatures (socialists generally had little representation in these bodies) and hostile courts. As suggested, further difficulties stemmed from the conflict within the party between the right and left wings, and the constant interference of party members who insisted on exercising control over the mayor's actions.

More importantly, just being a socialist also meant being associated with a party that the business community and powerful interests associated with it, perceived as a definite threat. Socialist mayors could only go so far without losing a bid for re-election. As Daniel Hoan, who won several election bids as Socialist mayor of Milwaukee, serving from 1916 to 1940, observed in a letter he wrote a Socialist alderman in 1913, if he became mayor of Milwaukee "I

may be able to give them some Socialism" but he'd "have to feed it to them in small doses."

Socialist mayors played a distinctive role in pursuit of working class objectives and the cause of municipal reform around the country in the 1900-1920 period and, while faced with a number of serious obstacles, and sometimes frustrated because of the slow pace of reform, generally held on, and demonstrated their ability to govern. When it comes to accomplishments one can reasonably argue that Socialist mayors equaled or excelled the performance of other mayors.

*This article is largely drawn from the author's book, *Socialist Mayors in the United States, Governing in an Era of Municipal Reform, 1900-1920*.

Reflections on Shelley's The Cenci: Transgression, Exorcism, Sacrifice

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The true difference between Byron and Shelley consists in this, that those who understand and love them consider it fortunate that Byron died in his thirty-sixth year, for he would have become a reactionary bourgeoise had he lived longer; conversely, they regret Shelley's death at the age of twenty-nine, because he was a revolutionary through and through and would consistently have stood with the vanguard of socialism.

– KARL MARX, On Literature and Art (320-21)

I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves. It is justice, not charity….All the sacred rights of humanity are violated by insisting on blind obedience…A slavish bondage to parents cramps every faculty of the mind.

– MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT-GODWIN, A Vindication of the Rights of Women (167-70)

Once a darling of Romantic pantheon-worshippers, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) suffered a decline after Eliot and American New Criticism elevated the metaphysicals and a modernist standard in the decades between the two World Wars. At least one college anthology, *Literature of the Western World* edited by Brian Wilkie and James Hurt, omitted Shelley at the apex of the Cold War. Surely not because Shelley was a visionary idealist or a sentimental dreamer. He scandalized his peers because of his anarchist belief in the perfectibility of mankind inspired by William Godwin. More scandalous was Shelley's manifesto on *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811) for which he was expelled from Oxford. None of the detractors have seriously taken into account Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform* (composed in 1820 but not publlshed until 1920), or the political resonance of *The Cenci* in the context of first-person accounts such as that of Neige Sinno (Christensen 2025), to contextuallize Shelley's radical but nuanced view of the need for profound social changes and transvaluation of values.

The Establishment rejection of Shelley's poetry was laid out by F.R. Leavis in the Thirties. Leavis applied an "individualistic explanatory code" that allowed him to attribute Shelley's "abstract subjectivism" to the poet's childhood. That period of growing up "left him bereft of any social or religious tradition which would have grounded self-expression in a wider context" (McCallum 1983, 165). In *Revaluations* (1936), Leavis privileged the idiosyncratic, arbitrary predispositions of the poet as the basis for his dismissal of certain writers excluded from his canon. Decades after, in 1957, D.W. Harding's formalist appraisal followed Leavis' cue in blaming Shelley's narcissism, a view influenced by Mario Praz's study, *The Romantic Agony* (1933), However, Harding perceives "discursive thought" amid the direct "expression of emotional states," of moods and attitudes not dependent on intellectual analysis and ordering, as in some lines of "Adonais," "Ozymandias, and 'Ode to the West Wind" (1957, 210-29). This suggests that we need another standard of judgment to understand and appreciate Shelley's poetics.

The academic orthodoxy may be sampled in this comment from the widely used entry in The *Reader's Companion To World Literature* (1973). It attempts to mediate opposing views. Matthew Arnold's "picture of Shelley as the 'beautiful and ineffectual angel beating in the void his luminous wings in vain' is a narrow judgment even on his poetry. And his prose is clear, vigorous, and brilliant, certainly never ineffectual or in vain, or in a void. Yet…Shelley moved in a world of abstract ideas, without reference to practical considerations or the everyday world,….without a sense of proportion or…a sense of humor" (Hornstein et al, 484).

A symptomatic exhibit is Shelley's letter to his pregnant wife Harriet. complaining that she betrayed and abandoned him, and instructing her to repair the "injustice" by sending him "stocking, hanks & Mrs. Wollstonecraft's posthumous works" (Davidson 219)–shades of Marquis de Sade's ironic, deconstructive humor?

The bias against Shelley persists today. In the fifties, Raymond D. Havens cited T.S. Eliot's stigmatization of Shelley with an example of the New Critic's biographical optic. Eliot could not separate the man from his writing: "I find his ideas repellent…and makes it difficult to read the poetry without remembering the man [who was] humorless, pedantic, self-centered, and sometimes almost a blackguard" (quoted by Havens 169-70). If so, forget Shelley. The most recent sledgehammer stroke is from Paul Johnson who called the poet "a lifelong absconder and cheat." Why? Because he abused "well-meaning and sensitive men like Castlereagh and Sir Robert Peel in 'The Mask of Anarchy,' just as he abused his creditors and discarded women" (49) So obsessed with Shelley's "sexual and financial misdemeanors," Johnson's tirade becomes a symptom of malice and self-righteous vindictiveness. Against this moralizing dogmatism, we can take the efforts of Earl Wasserman, Harold Bloom, C. S. Lewis, and other scholars to reinscribe Shelley's utopian, prophetic imagination as part of the Western canon, not to mention Paul de Man's praise of the undecidable rhetoric of 'The Triumph of Life" as certainly postmodern (93-124). Further confirmation is supplied by Donald Reiman's tabulation of new appraisals in the 2002 Norton Critical Second Edition of Shelley's works.

Beyond the Establishment Bias

In the thirty years of his life, Shelley composed verses noted for their intensity, sensuous imagery, and rhapsodic quality. Their themes and rhetoric sought to prove that, as he proclaims in *Defence of Poetry* (1821), poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Proof of this ranges from the celebration of freedom and progress, "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound, Queen Mab, The Revolt of Islam,* "The Mask of Anarchy," and *Hellas.* All these are confirmed worthwhile pondering, except for the verse-drama *The Cenci* (1819) which, neglected for so long, acquired notoriety with Artaud's version as an exemplum of his "theater of cruelty." Shelley was surely an anarchist but not yet a metaphysical nihilist, as E.P. Thompson remarked with reference to Shelley's influence on the socialist poems of William Morris (669) On the other hand, in a laudatory

essay on “Shelley’s revolutionary poetry” (2022), Tess Lee Ack cites the 1819 “To the Men of England” and “The Mask of Anarchy” as proofs of Shelley’s radicalism, but fails to mention *The Cenci.*

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Substantial commentary has been given to this closet drama from its initial publication by Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, among others. In *The Cenci,* we are surely far from parsing abstract universals and cosmic ideals since the killing of the patriarch by his children and the violation of the incest taboo confronts us with the imperatives of casuistry and juridical ambiguity (Curran; Nicholl). We face the explosion of implacable emotions delivered in impassioned language. What is the story about? In 1577, Beatrice Cenci and her stepmother were beheaded for killing Count Cenci (1549-1599), widely known as a debauched, corrupt, cynical tyrant. He imprisoned and tortured the two women at his isolated castle Rocca Petrella. In their trial, violent abuse and rape of Beatrice was mentioned, as Stendhal cites from a contemporary account (163-202). But Pope Clement VIII discounted the Count’s criminality and approved the beheading of the women for fear that clemency might encourage homicide among the nobility. Today, offenders of the incest-taboo are judged felons guilty of statutory rape, having abused a blood relation; the rape is a crime deserving imprisonment. Given the traditional plebeian animus against the upper class, the Roman populace watching the execution sympathized with the fate of the victims, upholding Beatrice as a martyr of a tyrant-master and a proto-symbol of modern feminist solidarity.

Feminist scholars have of course noted the poet’s militant defense of the oppressed women, Beatrice and Lucretia. One may ask the simple preliminary question: Why was Shelley fascinated with the incestuous aristocrat whose cruelty seems out of proportion to the sociopolitical circumstances surrounding his actions? What intrigued Shelley in this exorbitant rapacity and the women’s ambiguous if ambivalent responses? We set aside here the question

of why Shelley departed, if at all, from the view that Beatrice was not raped at all, only threatened, and that she had sexual relations with one of the murderers. We focus on the plot and its theatrical effects to discover why the defilement and the exorcism of its evil resonance served Shelley's aim of exalting the female protagonist as sacrificial offering to the restoration of social order (emblematized by mother and daughter), and as agent of exorcism–purging the sin of violating the taboo and its transgressor. The play excites terror at the violence of the patriarch and the torturers, while enveloping the victimized women with the pathos of resignation.

Disrupting Everyday Life

The feudal lord Francesco Cenci (1549-1599) lived at the height of the Counter-Reformation led by Pope Paul IV and the Jesuits. The Roman inquisition was set up in 1541, while the Council of Trent proceeded from1545 to 1563. The St Bartholomew Massacre in France occurred in 1572. Pope Pius IV reasserted papal authority, a revised Index of Prohibited Books, henceforth "an ascetic quality unknown for centuries settled over Roman life" (Garraty and Gay 545). But during the Cenci affair, Pope Clement VIII was preoccupied with the intra-European conflict between the Dominicans and Jesuits over the issue of free will, God's grace, and original sin; he died before he could decide this internecine war that involved feudal principalities (Fulop-Miller 96-99). It was in this milieu that Clement VIII in effect rejected the Jesuit Molina's *Concordia* thesis on human free will, offering the Cencis as sacrificial victims to expiate the sin of the fathers and purge the violation of sacred taboos. He also embodied the voracity of the Church for real estate, confiscating the Cenci's property and enlarging the Papal fiefdom, thus making it the prime defender of feudalism against peasant and guild revolts (Tigar and Levy 41).

All accounts center on Count Cenci's cruelty and abuse of his family, the murder of his sons, and in particular the rape of his daughter. Other debauched patriarchs may have done the same, even more; but why focus on this violence, the torture of his family in his castle, Rocca Petrella, in the Kigdom of Naples? With his seigneurial estates diminished, the Count seems to lack the *virtu* that Machiavelli (1977, 193-206) ascribed to an effective Renaissance ruler such as Cesare Borgia. In fact, the Count seeks to prove his virility by abusing his first wife Ersiliaa Santacroce, and then his daughter (*Britannica* 2019, 660-661). Public accounts indicate that in 1598, Beatrice, her stepmother Lucrezia and brother Giacomo conspired to kill the Count and they were subsequently beheaded in 1599 by order of the Pope despite the community's clamor for their pardon. On the surface, this "tragic resistance" of the three victims of patriarchal tyranny was etched in the public memory and became part of Italian/European folklore, inspiring Stendhal's retellling, Alberto Moravia's play, and Frederic Prokosch's novel *A Tale for Midnight,* among other artistic versions. Are the scandalous acts of incest and barbaric sadism what attracted Shelley to.compose the play?

In his dedication of the work to Leigh Hunt, Shelley calls it “a sad reality” devoid of “presumptuous” instruction. in his “Preface,” he points to the Count’s “incestuous passion, aggravated by every circumstance of cruelty and violence’” toward his daughter, pushing her to escape from a “perpetual contamination both of body and mind.” She was urged to kill the Count “by an impulse which overpowered its horror’ (Shelley, *Cenci* 5). But what Shelley adds reveals his real motive: to expose the corruption of the Papacy whose motive was not “love of justice,” but rather because “whoever killed the Count Cenci deprived his [the Pope’s] treasury of a certain and copious source of revenue.” At any rate, Shelley attempts to justify the “fearful and monstrous” story with his realism and refusal to insist on a didactic purpose, a claim redolent of irony and shrewd suasion: “The person who would treat such a subject must increase the ideal, and diminish the actual horror of the events, so that the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestuous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring…The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama [not necessarily Shelley’s] is the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself…Imagination is as the immortal God which should assume flesh fo the redemption of mortal passion” (*Cenci* 7, 9)

Portrait Believed to be of Beatrice Cenci

As his “Preface” indicates, Shelley believes that whatever injury or wrong has been committed, Beatrice should not resort to retaliation or revenge. And if she did, “she would have been wiser and better; but she would never have been a tragic character….It is in the restless and anatomizihg casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge, that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists (*Cenci* 7). Indeed, this seductive “superstitious horror” is what Shelley harnessed to discover the enigma of Beatrice’s affective conduct, her explanation of her action transcending

secular norms. Her emphasis on kinship and love approximates Antigone's invocation of an ancient, subterranean "law of the heart" from which Hegel's Spirit drew its power (Bloch 121). However, Beatrice can only invoke her act of parricide as an exorcism by "the angel of His wrath" against "Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,/ In deed, a Cain" (*Cenci* 101, 106)

Pathos Sublimates Terror

The terror involves a class or stratum of society, not a single individual. What really drives Count Cenci to such vile deeds, one may naively ask. Like most aristocrats of his time, the Count boasts of his power by ranting against the Pope's intent to grab his property. His sarcasm betrays a countervailing hubris against the Church since he supplies their income with his bribes and cynically lauds his mock servility:

> …No doubt Pope Clement
>
> And his most charitable nephews, pray
>
> That the Apostle Peter and the Saints
>
> Will grant for their sake that I long enjoy
>
> Strength, wealth, and pride, and lust, and length of day
>
> Wherein to act the deeds which are the stewards
>
> Of their revenue…

The secular power that the Count enjoys cohabits with the ecclesiastical hegemon, and thus feels free to do whatever he wants–'to act the deeds" which include violence on his wife and daughter, unaware of his undermining the stability of his domestic bulwark. Is this a contest or competition between secular and ecclesiastical regimes? Or a display of that famous privilege accruing from Renaissance *virtu.*

Let us give the benefit of treating the Count's lust, his perverse sensuality, as a manifestation of the absence of *virtu*. What does this entail? He kills someone who showed interest in his wife and daughter. He declares that his crime is to enjoy "sensual luxury, revenge, tortures, etc., vindicating that right "with force or guile." He confides to Cardinal Camillo: "I love/The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,…/And I have no remorse and little fear"–sadistic but also erotic acts are "his natural food"(*Cenci* 15-16). When young, the Count obtained pleasure from lust, and later pleasure from hearing the children of his foes groan when he kills their father, Now he ruminates on a future "deed to act/Whose horror might make sharp an appetite/ Duller than mine." As he grows old, he seeks for stronger delight:

> ….I the rather
>
> Look on such pangs as terror ill conceals.
>
> The dry fixed eyeball; the pale quivering lip,
>
> Which tell me that the spirit weeps within
>
> Tears bitterer than the bloody sweat of Christ,
>
> I rarely kill the body, which preserves,
>
> Like a strong prison, the soul within my power,
>
> Wherein I feel it with the breath of fear
>
> For hourly pain. (*Cenc*i 16-17).

What Count Cenci wants is to dominate not only physically but spiritually. He assumes the role of totem of the primal horde when he eliminates his two sons. During the banquet, the Count rejoices in reporting the death of his "disobedient and rebellious sons." He exults in the death of his "accursed sons," tasting it like "a sacrament, and pledge with thee [wine like blood] the mighty Devil in Hell." He warns anyone chiding him: "Beware! For my revenge /Is as the sealed commission of a king / That kills, and none dare name the murderer" (*Cenci* 24). Disrupting the world of routine work, Count Cenci's transgressions against taboos opens up the domain of the sacred which, for Georges Bataille, ushers separate individualities into continuity with all being,"the limitless, infinite nature of sacred things" (85). So do the killing of Count Cenci and the execution of Beatrice and Lucrecia contribute to the affirmation of the reciprocity or interface of life and death, the profane world of taboos and the sacred world of religious life which relies on such prohibitions and interdictions.

The primal horde remains intact. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud hypothesized the founding of social bonds with the collective slaying of the father who monopolized the women and wealth of the group. Relying on anthropological findings, Freud speculated that the brothers "renounced the women for whose sake they had killed the father, and agreed to practice exogamy. The power of the father was broken and the families were regulated by matriarchy" (Freud 168-69).This accords with the theory of exogamy and Claude Levi-Strauss' explanation of the incest-taboo as the practice which distinguishes civilized humans from the animal kingdom (see Bataille 194-217). With Count Cenci suppressing his sons, we are left with the patriarch still at the helm, this time threatening to suppress "the wild girl," Beatrice, who was horrified by the father's "tyranny and impious hate." Afflicted with fear and shame, In Act I, she pleads the assembled guests to condemn her father, but no one dares to censure the Count's "firm, cold, subtle villainy" whose last words before retiring cues us to his next outrage, addressing Beatrice as "painted viper! /Beast that thou art! Fair and yet terrible!"

The Count will not spare Beatrice, as the narrative confirms. There are no brothers whose guilt would atone for the father's death. Beatrice, Lucretia and Giacomo would not seek an animal or any fetish to serve as a totem-substitute for the dead Count. But the retelling of their deed would serve as the feast, "a solemn repetition of the father-murder in which social order, moral laws, and religion had had their beginnings" (Freud 169). The parricide discloses the sacred realm administered by the Church, the defender of patriarchal authority. Act IV stages the collaboration of daughter, mother-in-law and brother to prevent the Count from pursuing the plan of pollution–the rape of the daughter, making her taboo and sanctified at the same time. Their plotting to kill the father may be conceived as the sacrificial feast, the "occasion on which individuals rose joyously above their own interests and stressed the mutual dependence existing between one another and their god" (Freud *Reader* 496). However, historically, it was the Pope's authority that upheld the patriarchal order by punishing the family that took revenge on its representative.

Paradoxically, it was this same act that created the demarcation between the sacred and profane since the polluted Beatrice acquires charisma as the violated person. She functions as the tabooed object which becomes the agency of affirming popular solidarity and will to sustain the power of the generative matrix in society. The surrogate totem, the embodiment of the community, is identified with Beatrice whose immolation may be interpreted as purgation or catharsis of the polluting patriarch and its vehicle of contagion, the Papal authority. But the dual figure of Demeter-Persephone (Beatrice and Lucrecia) may be Shelley's answer to the irrationallity of the Papal authority, which recalls Shelley's argument in *The Necessity of Atheism*, that God is an unproved hypothesis while the universe is pervaded by a "generative power" which so far remains incomprehensible. And since belief "is a passion of the mind, no degree of criminality can be attached to disbelief," such as Beatrice's disbelief in the justice of

their punishment by the papal court.

Anatomy of Transgression

Shelley was an intransigent foe of conservatism and reaction, Since his expulsion from the academy due to *The Necessity of Atheism,* though sprung from a patrician family, he brooked no compromise with the privileged feudal lords and bourgeois merchants. He defied monarchic , imperial authority in his defense of Ireland's independence. His partisanship for all revolutionaries are displayed in *Prometheus Unbound*, "The Mask of Anarchy," "Ode to Liberty," "The Revolt of Islam," and other poems. There is no doubt of Shelley's militant partisanship with the victims of inordinate bourgeois power and masculinist privilege.

In his 1821 discourse, "A Defence of Poetry," he affirmed his allegiance to art as a teacher and inspiring critic. He praised the pedagogical value of the imagination in its grasp of a concrete organic whole, the dynamic activity in the evolving reality of life. Because poetry as the exercise of the human imaginative potential seeks to reveal "the image of life expressed in eternal truth," in the dialectic of ultimate universal forms and sensuous experience, it performs a formative, educative role; hence poets/artists are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (Shelley, *Defence* 435). While traces of transcendental Platonic idealism may be discerned in his emphasis on the organic character of reality, he stressed the value of love or the "going out of one's own nature." This habit of sympathizing with others' plight– (e.g.,Beatrice's tragedy), as Shelley asserts, has already elicited universal sympathy– is what poetry cultivates in us, combining both its mimetic and expressive qualities (Abrams 130).

This complex dialectic of representation and expression informs the ambiguity of *The Cenci,* reproducing the social relations of domination while subverting it. Contradictions need to be recognized before resolving them, though the resolution remains in the imaginary realm (Balibar and Macherey). Paradoxically, mother-right–Freud alludes to 'gynaecocracy" during the fatherless period (*Group Psychology* 87)–requires patriarchy to be eventually legitimized. This double motivation informing the *Defence* explains Shelley's repudiation of any didactic, moralizing purpose in composing the drama. Perhaps, the courage and dignity of Beatrice may be interpreted as a riposte to Friedrich Engel's widely held theory that "the overthrow of mother right was the world-historic defeat of the female sex" (736). But the ignominy of defeat is compensated for by the remembrance of the resistance.The beheading of Beatrice and Lucretia seems to uphold traditional patriarchal supremacy. However, it does not prevent us noticing how the Pope's killing-power is ridiculed, with Camillo describing the Pope as "the engine/ Which tortures and which kills…a marble form,/A rite, a law, a custom: not a man" (*Cenci* 102).

Shelley's perspective then is communalist-humanist, fundamentally antithetical to otherwoldly

individualism. It rejects the possessive individualism of Count Cenci or the acquisitive individualism of the Papacy. While recognizing the religious sensibility of the Catholic masses, Shelley located it within the framework of the tragic situation, as in Lucretia's intent of inducing the Count to confess before he dies (Act IV, scene 1). What demands explanation is the role of incest by rape in the representation of the fate of Beatrice and Lucretia, its meaning in the "political economy of signification" (Weimann 41). Shelley hoped to combine the mimetic or realist vocation of poetry with its Platonic/expressive impulse, using the Cenci narrative to construct a theater representing the transgression of limits: the limit of patriarchal/feudal authority and the limit of death/corruption of the body. Both transgressions–against the incest-taboo and against parricide–are sacramental acts "forming the synthesis between animal nature and humanity through the persistence of the taboo; we enter a sacred world, a world of holy things" (Bataille 79). We enter this world by way of Beatrice's speech invoking the dead father's ghost in Act V, Scene 1: "Even though dead, / Does not his spirit live in all that breathe, / And work for me and mine still the same ruin, /Scorn, pain, despair?" (*Cenci* 105).

One wonders about the alleged cathartic benefit of this tragic spectacle. Is Shelley simply aiming to arouse pity and fear, intending to produce catharsis, the generic motive of tragedies such as those of Sophocles and Shakespeare that he cites? Or can one perceive via a symptomatic reading the representation of the pleasure-principle juxtaposed with the death-drive, eros and thanatos, heuristic propositions elaborated by Bataille's thesis on the erotic force of violating taboos as sacramental acts? Paul Ricoeur's comment on Job's disclaiming any retribution for this suffering seems appropriate to Beatrice's situation: at the end, Beatrice relents, "ready to convert freedom and necessity into fate," a tragic wisdom…that triumphs over the ethical vision of the world" (321-22).

The Sacred Contagion

We saw earlier the Count's confession of his worship of the pleasure-principle: his hunger for "sensual luxury" and exorbitant delights. But more than this, he wants to control Beatrice's will. In Act 2, he is infuriated: "yesternight you dared to look / With disobedient insolence upon me." He curses her "fearless eye, and brow superior, and unaltered cheek," vilifying her as "loathed image of thy cursed mother." So it is not just physical pleasure that drives the Count but also suppression of Beatrice's will, subjugation of conscience. He accuses Lucretia of teaching Bernardo, her son, "Parricide with his alphabet" (Cenci 33). He suspects the wife of plotting to do away with him, claiming to be God's executioner, answering her denial with "I'll kill you." He forecasts the wickedness he has in mind when they are brought to their prison in the Castle of Petrella. The Count has no scruples in informing us of his diabolic, erotically-charged scheme:

> Come darkness! Yet, what is the day to me

And wherefore should I wish for night, who do

A deed which shall confound both night and day?

'Tis she shall grope through a bewildering mist

Of horror….

The act I think shall soon extinguish all

For me: I bear a darker deadlier gloom

Than the earth's shade, or interlunar air,

Or constellations quenched in murkiest cloud….(*Cenci* 35).

The Count's purpose of imprisoning his wife and daughter in the Castle of Petrella is part of his scheme to impose his desire on Beatrice's "stubborn will" so that ultimately he will gain his "greater point, which was / to poison and corrupt her soul" (*Cenci* 63). He seeks confirmation of his despotic authority. When we see him again at the opening of Act IV, before his death, he boasts that he has rendered Beatrice "vanquished and faint,"so that her infamy (the Count is given foreknowledge of the future) "shall have a fascination to entrap / Her loathing will…Her name shall be the terror of the earth….I will make / Body and soul a monstrous hump of ruin" (*Cenci* 65). This urge to ruin another human to meaningless matter, "the nauseating slime of negativity" which, for Terry Eagleton, is the essence of evil, involving "a megalomaniac overvaluing of the self, and an equally pathological devaluing ot it" (Eagleton 102-03). The drive to defile the daughter's virginity kindles a transgression that voids the divide between the human and animal, unleashing the violence of the ensuing parricide.

At the opening of Act III, the Count's scheme has been carried out when we behold the effect in Beatrice's entrance, staggering and speaking wildly: "My brain is hurt; My eyes are full of blood." Ominous marks of violation confront us, with their symbolic clues that the victim tries to articulate, confirming her pollution and her virtual reduction to a sanctified corpse:

Hope comes this hair undone?

Its wandering strings must be what blind me so,

And yet I tied it fast,–O, horrible!…..My God!

The beautiful blue heaven is flecked with blood!

….The air

Is changed to vapours such as the dead breathe

In charnel pits! Pah! I am choked! There creeps

A clinging. black, contaminating mist

About me….'tis substantial, heavy, thick

And eats into my sinews, and dissolves

My flesh to a pollution, poisoning

The subtle, pure, an inmost spirit of life!

{More wildly) No, I am dead! These putrefying limbs

Shut round and sepulchre the panting soul

Which would burst forth into the wandering air~

Evil has emerged as absence, the negation, the emptiness to be filled. The pollution sprung from violation of the incest-taboo creates the sacred locus of awe. The miserable Beatrice is transformed into a corpse, not to be touched or profaned, Lucretia asks her the source of her misery, and Beatrice responds: "Like Parricide…./ Misery has killed its father: yet its father/Never like mine….O, God! What thing am I?" (*Cenci* 43). Beatrice, the dramatic persona, has entered a zone of the uncanny, the unspeakable, the chaos of indifference. When Lucretia asks Beatrice what has your father done, Beatrice replies: "Who art thou, questioner? I have no father." Sheer animal energy supersedes the taboos defining humanity. Beatrice's description of her wretched condition evokes the reptiles and beasts of an imagined jungle overflowing with "prodigious mixtures and confusions strange."

Resembling Persephone's abduction, Beatrice's misery drags her into a miasmc phantasmagoria. But she wakes up from the nightmare. Eventually, she restores the social

norm ordained by birth, as if to seal the folkloric legend of the Cenci, legitimizing both the fact and the popular consensus of belief about her tragic fate. She acknowledges the presence of her mother, not the fancied "madhouse nurse" she thought. The traditional family is restored via a simulacra of mother-right. She marks the turning point between truth and fable, as she counsels her mother: "Yet speak it not, / For then if this be truth, that other too / Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth, / Linked with each lasting circumstance of life" (*Cenci* 44).The curse of her father's rape transforms her into "a ghost shrouded and folded up / In its own formless horror." But she vows to God to "keep these limbs, the unworthy temple of Thy spirit. / As a foul den from which what Thou abhorrest /Me mock Thee, unavenged….it shall not be!" She tells Orsino: I have endured a wrong'/ Which, though it be expressionless, is such / As asks atonement" (*Cenci* 50). Atonement as vengeance or retribution equals the parricide we witnessed in Act IV that violates the taboo of murder.

Given the incest taboo distinguishing humans from animals, women married outside the clan engender social organization and lawful exchange. Paradoxically, while the incest-taboo enables commodity exchange, as Emile Durkheim notes, it also creates the sacred sphere disclosed by defiling taboos. The violated daughter becomes the locus of awe and interdiction. Beatrice as index of the polluted place, the vessel of charisma, becomes the basis of social classification. The incest-taboo is the keystone for generalized exchange, the emergence of kinship relations (Levi-Strauss) and the patriarchal family as, for feminists, "the lynchpin of he systematic social and psychological subordination of women" (Minson 202). But the defilement does not lead immediately to the overthrow of the monopolizing patriarch until the women deploy Orsino and Giacomo, the surrogate sons, to kill the father with the help of Marzio and Olimpio–evidence that masculinity still prevails in the implementation of women's needs and wants. Thus the traffic or exchange of women (as gifts, dowry, ransom, etc.) persists even with the vindication of their rights in the modern world.

The profane world of work asserts itself against the holy, sacramental realm of sacrifice. Before his death, Count Cenci savours his liquidation of his sons Rocco and Cristofano, anticipating the ordeal of Giacomo and Beatrice. He tries to defy the world of utilitarian, market-centered economy with an act of renouncing his worldly goods in a simulation of archaic potlatch, dispensing gifts to everyone in an orgy of abnormal extravagance:

> When all is done, out in the wide Campagna,
>
> I will pile up my silver and my gold;
>
> My costly robes, paintings and tapestries;

My parchments and all records of my wealth,

And make a bonfire in my joy, and leave

Of my possessions nothing but my name;

Which shall be an inheritance to strip

Its wearer bare as infamy. That done,

My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign

Into the hands of him who wielded it.… (*Cenci* 64)

The Count appears to enact his own sacrifice. Not satisfied with this gesture of acknowledging "the sacred truth of God," the Count vows to Lucretia: "For Beatrice worse terrors are in store," to the point where "Body and soul a monstrous lump of ruin." His extended prayer to God as he kneels before Lucretia exceeds all plausible claim to piety, a perverted plea that "this most specious mass of flesh," "my bane and my disease, / Whose sight infects and poisons me, this devil/Which sprung from me as from a hell.…Earth, in the name of God, let her food be/Poisoned, until she be encrusted round / With leprous stains!" The malice here knows no bounds, exploding with spontaneous force. Impurity, the blemish or stain of some filthy matter, reflects the Count's own contagion, fashioning that taboo of polluted, infected matter that creates the demarcation line between the sacred from the profane, the untouchable terrifying object of hate/desire projected by the violator/guilty offender. The Count enacts the definition of evil as not only privation of good (as Saint Thomas Aquinas averred) but as a symptom of an unrelenting contradiction: 'Evil involves a split between body and spirit–between an abstract will to dominate and destroy, and the meaningless piece of flesh that this will inhabits" (Eagleton 21).

The urbane and agnostic Shelley, however, will not indulge the Count's satanic hubris. Shelley declared that he handled the "fearful and monstrous" act of incest "with delicacy" (*Cenci* 112). In allusion to the incestous injury he inflicted on his daughter, the Count pronounces his curse that Beatrice's children will grow "more wicked and deformed, / Turning her mother's love to misery." The Count revels in cursing Beatrice, confessing that he feels like a "fiend appointed to chastise / The offences of some unremembered world, invoking a "multitudinous Hell" (*Cenci* 68). Contemptuous rage, anger, fear and loathing exude from the Count's farewell address to Lucretia, the inconsolable stepmother. Erotic rapture blends with horror, "a fearful pleasure"

augmented by “a giddy sickness of strange awe.” the Count’s heart “beating with an expectation/Of horrid joy.” Such ecstasy becomes a premonition of his death, mindful of its coming as he exits from Scene 1. Act IV.

The Father’s Killing as Exorcism

For Beatrice the sybilline protagonist, “All mortal things must hasten thus / To their dark end.” Thus the death of the predatory father is for her “a high and holy deed.” Before Olimpio and Marzio carry out Beatrice’s command, Beatrice sees the father’s death as “A dark continuance of the Hell within him.” Beatrice chides the male accessories for their scruples and brands them “cowards and traitors.” It would be a “deadly crime” not to stop “a thousand daily acts disgracing men.” In Prokosch’s novelistic retelling of the story, both Beatrice and Lucrezia were present at the actual killling (84-87). In Shelley’s play, the killing occurs offstage. After Olimpio and Marzio declare the Count dead, Beatrice celebrates the tyrant’s demise: “Darkness and Hell / Have swallowed up the vapours they sent forth / To blacken the sweet light of life….and the jellied blood / Runs freely through my veins.” She calls Marzio “a weapon in the hand of God / To a just use.” She exults in her llberation. Seeking to assuage Lucretia’s “agony of fear” at that “strange horror” of incest alluded to in a captured letter of Orsino, Beatrice counsels the mother in this memorable speech of vindication:

> “What is done wisely, is done well…..
>
> ….The deed is done.
>
> And what may follow now regards not me.
>
> I am as universal as the light;
>
> Free as the earth-surrounding air; as firm
>
> As the world’s centre. Consequence, to me,
>
> Is as the wind which strikes the solid rock
>
> But shakes it not. (*Cenci* 77-78)

She is determined but not burdened with hubris. When Savella, the Pope’s Legate, arrests the

daughter and wife, Beatrice declares boldly: “I am more innocent of parricide / Than is a child born fatherless.” Marzio accused of the murder, for her, was “a sword in the right hand of justest God” who avenged “The crimes which mortal tongue dare never name” (*Cenci* 81). Beatrice virtually confessed that it was her “fierce desire,” otherwise: “There was no other rest for me on earth / No other hope in Heaven.” Sheer frustration and desperation afflicted her since no authority tried to dissuade the Count from committing atrocities. This compelled Beatrice’s plea of self-defence. The last three speeches condense her argument for acting in self-defence against unjust, beastly power:

> And yet, if you arrest me,
>
> You are the judge and executioner
>
> Of that which is the life of life: the breath
>
> Of accusation kills an innocent name….
>
> ….”Tis most false
>
> That I am guilty of foul parricide….
>
> [*Addressing Lucretia]* Our innocence is an armed heel
>
> To trample accusation. God is there
>
> As here, and with His shadow ever clothes
>
> The innocent, the injured, and the weak;
>
> And such are we. Cheer up, dear Lady, lean
>
> On me; collect your wandering thoughts…(*Cenci* 92-83)

But Shelley's tragic vision disavows any happy ending. Before they appear for trial in Rome, Beatrice foreshadows their conviction. Her insight into secular/church authority resembles that of Shelley in *The Necessity of Atheism* and in *Prometheus Unbound,* Defiant to the core, Beatrice tells her stepmother that "power is as a beast which grasps and loosens not: a snake whose look transmutes / All things to guilt which is its nutriment." She forecasts Pope Clement's verdict of decapitation for fear their acquittal will expel that nutriment, the victims that it needs to sustain its domination. Compared to Orsino's treachery and cowardice, Giacomo has the courage to defend his sister who "Stands like God's angel ministered upon / By fiends avenging such a nameless wrong / As turns black parricide to piety." Who is really guilty? Who is answerable for the Count's death? Hearing Beatrice's description of her wrongs that "could not be told," and how her feat "stabbed with one blow my everlasting soul," Marzio is subdued by Beatrice's wounding look, "stern yet piteous," and confesses to the judge that "'Tis I alone am guilty." After Marzio's death, Cardinal Camillo rules the proceedings to stop so that he can intervene with the Pope, the ultimate secular judge.

In the scene with Bernardo in a prison-cell, Beatrice wakes up from sleep. She tells her brother that we were all in Paradise, the cell resembling it without the father's presence. Patriarchal authority is on trial in Beatrice's response to the Judge's question whether she is guilty of her feather's death: "Or wilt thou rather tax high-judging God / That He permitted such an act as that / Which I have suffered, and which He beheld; made it untterable. and took from it / All refuge, all revenge, all consequence." Does she resign herself to the verdict of Providence?

Not at all. She responds to Lucretia's pathetic confession of yielding to admitting her guilt with a justification that God is still on their side, "the God who knew my wrong, and made /Our speedy act the angel of his wrath" (*Cenci* 101). The agnostic Shelley permits Beatrice to appeal to a mythical Athena for justice, a providential court free from Papal prejudice.

In the last scene of the play, Cardinal Camillo conveys the news to the family that the Pope has pronounced the final verdict of death for Beatrice, Lucretia and Giacomo. At first, Beatrice responds wildly, lamenting "No God, no Heaven, no Earth in the void world," envisioning herself haunted by the father's shape "which tortured me on earth,…he should come/And wind me in his hellish arms, and fix / His eye on mine, and drag me down, down, down" (104). Anguish, not remorse, overwhelms her. Shelley intensifies the pathos here, arousing not so much pity but awe and wonder that Beatrice might be forced to harm herself or others. What we read here is a clamor against the cold formalistic power of Papal authority (as the Cardinal himself suggests), an engine or machinery for torturing people to confess sins without knowing the circumstances or situations that drove people to sin. Beatrice's final words signal a knowledge of her legend fostered by the portrait made by Guido Reni (disputed by many to be genuinely accurate) and the folklore nourished by ordinary folks. Her defiance of overbearing authority echoes Shelley's radical poetics and the tragic vision of fate as inescapable necessity. Addressing Cardinal Camillo, Beatrice speaks libidinal truth to obscurantist power, affirming

her dignity and self-worth:

> For was he [the Count, with allusion to the Pope] not alone omnipotent
>
> On Earth, and ever present? Even though dead,
>
> Does not his spirit live in all that breathe,
>
> And work for me and mine still the same ruin,
>
> Scorn, pain, despair?…. [*Addressing Lucretia*]:
>
> ….I
>
> Have met with much injustice in this world;
>
> No difference has been made by God or man,
>
> Or any power moulding my wretched lot. *(Cenci* 105)

Beatrice doubts Lucretia's hope that the Pope will pardon them, a hope that resembles a bellef that Nature's force can be persuaded to relent. Shelley's realism and apprehension of the family as a locus of sympathy emerge here, with the maternal sentiment prevailing over patriarchal power, with Beatrice sharing penalties with brother and stepmother. We sense the erotic power of the death-drive manifest here in the pathos of the maternal embrace:

> …Oh, plead
>
> With famine, or wind-walking Pestilence,
>
> Blind lightning,or the deaf sea, not with man!
>
> Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words,

In deeds a Cain. No, Mother, we must die:

Since such is the reward of innocent lives;

Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.

And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,

Smiling and slow, walk through a world of tears

To death as to life's sleep; 'twere just the grave

Were some strange joy for us. Come, obscure Death,

And wind me in thy all-embracing arms!

Like a fond mother hide me in thy bosom,

And rock me to the sleep from which none wake.

Live ye, who live, subject to one another

As we were once, who now…. (*Cenc*i 106)

The sentiment of communal solidarity appears poignantly in Beatrice's farewell speech to her brother Bernardo, who will be the only survivor of the family. Beatrice counsels Bernardo to nourish "mild, pitying thoughts" to lighten "sorrow's load," an element of the tragic vision in which Shelley frames the rationale of Beatrice's final if grudging acceptance of her submission to the prevailing authority:

…..Err not in harsh despair,

But tears and patience. One thing more, my child,

For thine own sake be constant to the love

Thou bearest us; and to the faith that I,

Though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,

Lived ever holy and unstained. And though

Ill tongues shall wound me, and our common name

Be as a mark stamped on thine innocent brow

For men to point at as they pass, do thou

Forbear, and never think a thought unkind

Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves.

So mayest thou die as I do, fear and pain

Being subdued. Farewell! Farewell! Farewell! (*Cenci* 107-108)

Pathos sublimates the resurgence of fear and pity. The tragic edge is neatly blunted here by the impulse of solidarity and sharing of burden expressed by Beatrice, somehow cognizant of her folkloric fame in the years after their execution. Shelley modulates the pathos by inserting Beatrice's uncanny belief that the memory of their deeds will not be wholly negative as long as humans are rational and understand the true nature of what happened to them. Beatrice seems to aknowledge Shelley's intent to surround the horror not with vulgar moralizing but with the idealizing pleasure of verbal art, having suppressed the cry for revenge and retribution. But is Shelley serious in claiming that his strategy of juxtaposing "beautiful idealisms of moral excellence" (Wilcox 202) will end the "anatomizing casuistry" and 'superstitious horror" usually accompanying talk of the Cenci's deeds? I conclude that Shelley's materialist-realist craft succeeded in articulating the outcome of transgressing taboos (incest, parricide) and exorcising their repressive effects by plotting the trajectory of Beatrice's responses. This particular arrangement of words (rhetoric, imagery, etc.) illustrates the imaginary resolution of real-life contradictions, whence arises the impact of Shelley's theater as an aesthetic

construction, an ideological artifact. Whether that has changed the public's judgment of the whole Cenci affair, or advanced the poet's revolutionary project at the time of performance, is a topic for another occasion,

One example of the latter is Fredric Prokosch's 1955 novel, *A Tale for Midnight.* Its focus on brutality and excruciating pain, especially the harrowing effect of the rack on the witnesses, undercuts the narrator's impulse to endorse the commiserating ethos of the Roman people. The crowd of plebeians and aristocrats were both flummoxed by the mysterious operations of the court and its functionaries. They were also bewildered by Beatrice as "a thing not quite Roman: somber, defiant, and a bit inhuman" (Prokosch 296). Melodramatic scenes and surprising reversals of fortune are the conventional elements deployed by the novelist to stir up a consumerist audience already numb from watching televised catastrophes and obscene destruction of millions.

Only the dramatist Antonin Artaud's foregrounding of "cruelty" or the excessive force of nature, surpasses the novel's morbid fascination with atrocities performed by actors inured to any conceivable horror. Artaud discerned the mythical aura of the characters invented by Shelley; for Artaud, the *dramatis personae* in Shelley's artifice are amoral: "Neither innocent nor guilty, they are in the power of the same essential amorality which possessed those gods of the Mysteries of Antiquity from whom all tragedy had emanated." characters endowed with "fabulous amorality that belongs to lightning as it strikes, and to the boiling explosion of a tidal wave" (Artaud x-xi). True enough, this myth-making resourcefulnes that Artaud grasped in Shelley's play is none other than the prophetic, religious poetics that Harold Boom praised, imbued with an urbane irony that "civilizes the sublime, and makes a renovated universe a subject for gentlemanly conversation" (*Visionary Company* 297-98).

Knowledge of the Heart

Incest and parricide may be juicy fodder for scandal-hungry newspapers, but not proper themes for respectable bourgeois art. Shelley's tragedy was never performed during his lifetime. Precisely the presence of incest and familial violence served to justify Lucio Fulci's 1969 film *La Vera storia di Beatrice Cenci,* as well as subsequent versions. In his preface to the tragedy, Shelley acknowledged the violent passions in the report and, in his poetic rendering, aimed to "diminish the actual horror of the events" by increasing the ideal, "the pleasure which arises from the poetry which exists in these tempestous sufferings and crimes may mitigate the pain of the contemplation of the moral deformity from which they spring" (*Cenci* 7). Consequently, Shelley compressed the events and concentrated on Beatrice's character and the flux of her emotions. From another angle, Shelley may also be heeding Aristotle's dictum that "Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents" (233). And the action here really pivots on Beatrice's defense of her dignity and integrity against the Judge and Cardinal Camillo.

Consider her long answer to the Cardinal in Scene 2, Act V: “What evil have we done thee?” Defending her “everlasting soul” and “untainted fame,” she cries out against the tyrannical patriarch and his advocates, the Roman Court and the Papacy:

> But the wound was not mortal; so my hate
>
> Became the only worship I could lift
>
> To our great father, who in pity and love,
>
> Armed thee, as thou dost say, to cut him off
>
> And thus his wrong becomes my accusation;
>
> And art thou the accuser? If thou hopest
>
> Mercy in heaven, show justice upon earth:
>
> Worse than a bloody hand is a hard heart.
>
> If thou has done murders, made thy life’s path
>
> Over the trampled laws of God and man,
>
> Rush not before thy Judge, and say: “My maker,
>
> I have done this and more; for there was one
>
> Who was most pure and innocent on earth;
>
> And because she endured what never any
>
> Guilty or innocent endured before:

Because her wrongs could not be told, nor thought…

Think what it is to strangle infant pity,

Cradled in the belief of guileless looks,

Till it become a crime to suffer. Think

What ’tis to blot with infamy and blood

All that which shows like innocence, and is,

Hear me, great God! I swear, most innocent,

So that the world lose all discrimination

Between the sly, fierce, wild regard of guilt,

And that which now compels thee to reply

To what I ask: Am I, or am I not

A parricide? (*Cenci* 94)

This speech posits a rhetorical question that begs for no answer, only vigilant silence. It center-stages the question of parity, of justice: is killing the despotic father more heinous and culpable than defending one’s dignity and vulnerable personhood? What is at stake here? We are faced with the age-old predicament: can the standard of justice applied by the court be divorced from the power-hierarchy, the same authority that conceals the depravity of the father and the abuse of his daughter? Is the incest-taboo just a stage prop to advance the fall of the guilty party?

Grappling with those questions, we find Alberto Moravia (in his play *Beatrice Cenci*) foregrounding this problem of deciding whose scale of justice should prevail. At the end of

Moravia's drama, we watch Carlo Tirone, chief justice of the Abruzzi province, pronounce Beatrice guilty of parricide, to which she replies: "According to *your* justice, you will certainly be able to prove I am guilty of my father's death. But you will never be able to prove that I am not at the same time innocent according to another justice–a justice which you can neither know nor, even less, administer" (186). Skepticism and relativism sneak into the *mise en scene*. Justice needs historical contextualization at this point, the balancing of what's at stake. And this is where the general audience is compelled to choose either the Established authority of the masculinist, feudal Papacy, or uphold the dignity of women as an oppressed, subjugated class. To be sure, Shelley's libertarian partisanship is not equivocal here.

Patriarchal hegemony proves itself irresistible. Clearly the authority of the feudal, monolithic Papacy asserted its verdict; the rest is history. But history's slaughter-house is not neutral, as Hegel has warned us. The vicious Count may be a ruthless sadistic father but not a tyrant–he is the absolute ruler of the family (the original *familia* referred to slaves under the *pater*). Parricide, not tyrannicide, is the Pope's conception of *felix culpa*, fearful of destabilizing the status quo. Even Thomas Aquinas restricted rebellion against tyrants to private assasination or community removal, because "bad people may take advantage of the moral licence to kill good rulers" (Childress and Macquarrie 634-35). Tyrants will do everything to make their desire the law for all, provided he can harness the power to implement it, as Machiavelli (1469-1527) already demonstrated in *The Prince* (see also Brinton 250-51). If Count Cenci is not a perverse, barbaric tyrant, how do we categorize him in his glee at the death of his sons and the persecution of his wife and daughter? Shelley considered the Count an "atrocious villain," if not a monster, though his function as destroyer grounds the myth-making potentiality of the tragic vision embodied by the drama's moments of reversal (*peripeteia)* and recognition (*anagnorisis)* the intricacies of which can be reduced to the formula of psychoanalytic transference (see Hogle).

The Defiled Virgin's Sovereignty

Shelley believed that our knowledge of the heart will convert anguish into calm acceptance of fate, the trajectory of Beatrice's affects. After such knowledge, what foregiveness? Catharsis of fear and pity will neutralize the aura of "superstitious horror" surrounding the catastrophes that struck the Cenci family. But Shelley omits the actual torture depicted in Prokosch's novel and records only Beatrice's tormented reflections of what torture will yield: "My pangs are of the mind, and of the heart, and of the soul, which weeps…/ To see, in this ill world where none are true, / My kindred false to their deserted selves" (*Cenci* 99). Our awe is replaced with compassion when Beatrice resigns herself to whatever the Judge finds worthy of belief. Let us begin with the intense pathos generated by the last Act. The scenario seems to distract or turn our attention away from the Count's beastly crimes and the conniving Papacy. Beatrice's speech seems more an acceptance of her punishment than a denunciation of vicious patriarchal aggression. Beatrice rejects hope and indicts "Cruel, cold, formal man; righteous in words; / In

deeds a Cain." Resignation to earthly wickedness overcomes wrath in Beatrice's attempt to console her mother:

> …No, Mother, we must die:
>
> Since such is the reward of innocent lives;
>
> Such the alleviation of worst wrongs.
>
> And whilst our murderers live, and hard, cold men,
>
> Smiling and slow, walk through a world of tears
>
> To death, as to life's sleep; 'twere just the grave
>
> Were some strange joy for us. Come, obscure Death,
>
> And wind me in thine all-embracing arms!
>
> Like a fond mother hide me in thy bosom,
>
> And rock me to the sleep from which none wake,
>
> Live ye, who live, subject to one another
>
> As we were once, who now….

We apprehend here allusions to the maternal earth (Demeter/Persephone motif) and death's sheltering cave, the sanctuary of slaves and fugitives presided over by female divinities. In ancient Rome, the emancipation of slaves took place at the altar of Feronia, who was a goddess related to mother earth (for the daughter's mother-complex, see Jung 21-23). Beatrice's reply to the Judge threatening her with torture universalizes her individual fate: "…what a tyrant thou art, /And what slaves these; and what a world we make,/The oppressor and the oppressed." We can compare this, in Sophocles' play, with Antigone's reply to King Creon's charge that she disobeyed the law. Ernst Bloch observes that Antigone "regards Creon's

commandment as a violence and injustice, and opposes it with the ancient unwritten law of the relationship of blood," the law of piety nourished by chthonian powers and its affinity with the humanity of natural law–"in general, to all the interruptions of the *jus factum*…within the perimeter of Bona Dea…As natural law matures it feels itself drawn all the more to the invisible undercurrents of nature conceived as a woman" 114-115). The narrative of fertility rituals and worship of mother-right (from the pastoral age to the time of settled agriculture) intrude here. Beatrice's resigned attitude at the end may be deemed analogous to the Stoic virtue of resignation in the face of misfortune, actualizing freedom as the recognition and acceptance of necessity with the advent of the Enlightenment (for alternative views, see Kasner; Curran. *Shelley's Cenci*). This informs also her advice to her mother to "Take cheer! The God who knew my wrong, and made / Our speedy act the angel of His wrath" (*Cenci* 101).

Beyond Eschatology

Beatrice's last farewell to her brother and mother contain no anger or despair, but a reminder of bearing only "mild, pitying thoughts" and truth in the faith that Beatrice "though wrapped in a strange cloud of crime and shame,/ Lived ever holy and unstained…and never think a thought unkind / Of those, who perhaps love thee in their graves" (*Cenci* 107). Her last speech to her mother is a remembrance of their affection as mother and child, a reaffirmation of maternal force uniting mother and daughter (the Demeter-Persephone bond). This symbolic gesture prefigures the solidarity of peasants, artisans, and merchants converging in the Reformation and the birth of individualism in the Renaissance and the concomitant rise of colonies and the imperial global market.

Plaque of House where Shelley wrote The Cenci in Rome.

Shelley's attack on kings, priests and statesmen in *Queen Mab* and other poems may be flawed because of the failure of words, of language and metaphors congealed into totalizing

ideologies. This linguistic inadequacy is what Stuart Curran ("End(s) of Ideology," 600-607) sees as the basic problem that undercuts Shelley's Necessitarianism and problematizes the ideology of Italian Catholicism in shaping the actions of the characters in *The Cenci*. But this objection is, in my view, simplistic. The reason is that language is not just a medium or means of communication or expression; rather, it is "a constitutive element of material social practice, the practice of human sociality" (Williams 165).The prior question then is how language as material- social practice operates, how this "practical consciousness" (Marx 158) is rooted in, and enabled by, the specific mode of production and reproduction of social life at any given concrete stage of history. Refusing the inadequacies of language/ideologies is what Artaud tried to do, succumbing instead to the devious, tangled semiotics of sound and spectacle which paradoxically generates its own ideological fixities, abstractions, and mystifications.

Shelley's prophetic radicalism is not simply linguistic or verbal but actualized in its effects on readers, in the public sphere. Its locutionary power is performative. But his intuitive repudiation of ideologies as psychological/linguistic traps (relativized in Curran; Hogle) remains empty if its individualistic framework–the bourgeois sensibility and its Lockean/Cartesian hubris–is not replaced by a more communitarian or socialist-oriented praxis, as our emphasis on mother-daughter linkage proposes, and on the persistences of the feudal matrix of patriarchy (see Wolfson; Cafarelli). Beatrice finally ends her plea with the Judge: "If ye desire it thus, thus let it be, / And so an end of all. Now do your will," given the torture rack as the signifier terminating communication. Here the archetypal image of the 'Suffering Servant" appears, whereby "the suffering of the innocent broke the schema of retribution in pieces; sin [Beatrice's guilt] and suffering are separated by an abyss of irrationality" (Ricoeur 325), enabling a tragic vision of the world where evil/necessity challenges reason and organic sensibility.

Beatrice's suffering follows Wollstonecraft's rationale for affirming women's self-consciousness as gendered collectivity. Beatrice is not just a single, isolated person; she stands for all victims of patriarchal-lordship hegemony. Neither materialist nor idealist paradigm is the issue; rather, it is the efficacy of art/discourse as mediated by historical groups and collectivities in actual political struggles. I would argue that the hypothetical "end of ideology" is not a question of refining interpretation or deconstructing the claims of diverse ideologies, but rather a task of transforming the social-productive contracts and structures that articulate the synergesis of minds/bodies with the historical circumstances that limit or enable their potentials. A historical-materialist, fallibilist point of view would be useful in clarifying the issues here. Re-reading *The Cenci* and articulating its political entailments is one way of resolving the linguistic-ideological blind-alleys and dead-ends already noted, unless the idea that one can one can get beyond language to reach the ultimate substratum of raw, unmediated experience is an alibi for cynical indifference or acquiescence to the status quo.

Ultimately, the dialectic of historical catastrophes teaches us the way out of a self-inflicted

predicament. Shelley condensed the antinomies and aporias of his time in the figure of Beatrice Cenci with her compromised stand, born from Shelley's prophetic myth-making. From another perspective, Bertrand Russell, an admirer of Shelley's writing, offers a hint of a solution in his remarks on the eclipse of the Papacy. With the conquest of Constantinople and the revival of Greek learning in the Renaissance after the Cenci family's executions, Russell comments, "This sublunary sphere appeared no longer as a vale of tears, a place of painful pilgrimage to another world, but as affording opportunity for pagan delight, for fame and beauty and adventure" (486-87; see Brinton 176-211). *The Cenci* is one such adventure. One may hazard to suggest that Beatrice Cenci as the "angel of God's wrath" serves as the herald of a new age in which Shelley's imagination aspires to be "the immortal God which should assume flesh for the redemption of mortal passion" (*Cenci 9*).

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The Metonymy of Light: Three Early Works by Stan Brakhage

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At the heart of preeminent American avant-gardist Stan Brakhage's cinema, there lies a central tension or struggle between abstraction and representation. Film critic and Brakhage chronicler Fred Camper has posited *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972) as a kind of central work in this regard, arguing for that film as a turning point in Brakhage's work which anticipates his later "closed-eye vision" films (*Roman Numeral Series* (1979), *Arabics* (1982), *Egyptian Series* (1983)) in its steps toward a further degree of abstraction than had been previously seen in his work, while still retaining in the finished film a faint semblance or recollection of the objects being filmed. If Brakhage's later "closed-eye" films might be said to give themselves over more completely to abstraction, then some of the films that followed these mysterious and jewel-like works, such as *A Child's Garden and the Serious Sea* (1991), seem to forge a paradoxical unity

out of this central difference, wherein floating bodies of light become paired with photographic effects within spaces of skeletal physicality. In this regard, light itself occasionally seems to acquire a metonymic or metaphoric status in Brakhage's cinema, a capacity to hold a part of the meanings of the objects that it touches and illuminates, as well as a capacity to extend or transform those meanings. Of course, the luminous bodies that the viewer encounters in Brakhage's cinema are not merely meant to illuminate objects in the physical world, but also in some sense become the main subject of some of Brakhage's films, at times rendering material entities in the physical realm rather ephemeral. (Camper has himself called *The Riddle of Lumen* an "inventory of different kinds of light," a notion which might also apply to the filmmaker's more famous *The Text of Light* (1974).) Though this argument might be said to apply more meaningfully to Brakhage's photographic works than it does to his later hand-painted films, it might be worth examining the different qualities that bodies of light possess, acquire, and emanate across a range of Brakhage's films in relation to other aspects of form.

Stan Brakhage, The Wonder Ring (1955)

Brakhage's *The Wonder Ring* (1955), which has been regarded by the critic Michael Sicinski and some others as the filmmaker's earliest masterpiece, uses various forms of glistening luminosity to create palpable visual textures which transform the space of New York's Third Avenue elevated railway into a charged, impossible, and otherworldly zone. (This film was commissioned by the avant-garde artist Joseph Cornell, who not long after made his own reversal companion piece comprised of outtakes from Brakhage's film, entitled *Gnir Rednow* (1955).) Following the film's distinctive, hand-scrawled "By Brakhage" title cards, the viewer becomes sensitized early on to the ways in which light will become a source of enchantment and delight in this film. In the second shot, Brakhage applies an upward-vertical, hand-held camera movement to a shot of the staircase leading up to the elevated railway station. But because Brakhage elects to use only readily available lighting sources for this film, and because there are no artificial sources of light in this particular space, the industrial staircase itself becomes very difficult to discern within the enveloping darkness of the stairwell. Rather, the abstract pattern of light glowing onto the stairs from the sun outside, fragmented in spots by shadows from the hand railing, appears to be the "main subject" of this shot, a tilted vertical grid of long, rectangular blocks which Brakhage's camera appears to survey with reverence,

contemplating it slowly upward like a rising, majestic skyscraper. The luminous pattern is both the main interest of the composition and appears to supersede in importance the industrial structure which it touches. Though light will be used in more complicated ways later in the film, this early shot seems to in some sense give the viewer instruction on how to proceed in functionally reading the rest of the film, a way of subtly suggesting that a sensitivity to light will be required to unlock the mysterious nature of this work.

Brakhage increases the complexity of his approach by collecting and contrasting several different types of light in the next sequence of shots, which examine the elevated floor and platform of the railway station before the enchanted ride has commenced. Brakhage begins this section of *The Wonder Ring* with a series of horizontal pans which survey details from the upper walls of the station, replete with different kinds of signs, windows, and window frames decorating its chipped walls. Brakhage here inaugurates a technique that he will deploy throughout the rest of the film, in which he reverses the direction of apparent camera motion from the shot that preceded it, creating a reversal of movement that imbues the paired shots with a feeling of symmetry even when they are not surveying the exact same section of the station, and which seems intended to create a kind of hypnotic effect on the viewer through its illusion of back-and-forth motion. In these shots, the viewer may observe at least four different kinds of light: 1) artificial light emanating from visible sources within the shot, such as lighting fixtures; 2) artificial light emanating into the shot from unseen sources (these first two kinds of light often create striking, contrasting colors within the frame); 3) natural light emanating into the station from the sun outside; and 4) reflected light beaming off the glass windows around the station, which act as mirrors and sometimes show a reflection of their source (this last kind of light can be either natural or artificial).

Stan Brakhage, The Wonder Ring (1955)

The voluminous, varied array of types of luminosity being collected here (Camper's decision to call it a kind of "inventory" feels apt) might at first seem an attempt to disorient the viewer, but by being paired with the hypnotic reversals of Brakhage's subjective "camera-eye", they instead have the effect of making strange (in the Shklovskian sense of the term) a familiar public space, disrupting our perception of the everyday and imbuing the open-air chambers of

the station with a charged and vibrant atmospheric potency marked by its utter unfamiliarity. While light was first introduced in *The Wonder Ring* as a source of enchantment and delight, it now also seems to carry an air of unfathomable mystery, an otherworldliness which becomes one of the film's key strengths. Layered reflections and unaccountable, floating orbs of rich hue alter our perception of the structural surfaces which they glisten and glow upon. Softly textured halos around objects and lighting fixtures become combined with multiple reflections viewed simultaneously, creating a kind of alien collage of luminous effects. The lulling reversals of the camera seem designed to gesture the viewer deeper into this world which has gradually become one of deep visual strangeness.

Once the train ride which will comprise the remainder of the film begins, hitherto unseen effects emerge: while previous camera movements in the film had been generated by the motion of Brakhage himself, he now contrasts these generated movements with the automatic movement provided by the train itself, allowing his camera to remain still while the viewer is granted scenic views of the city which fly past almost as quickly as one can apprehend them, recalling the first camera movement films of the late nineteenth century, done by the Lumière company, which were also created by placing the camera aboard a locomotive. While these spectacular views of 1950s Manhattan in bright, natural light might at first seem like a startling contrast to the beginning of the film in their uncluttered splendor, Brakhage quickly distances the viewer from the outside world by privileging shots which emphasize the mediated quality of our vision: window reflections create odd, naturally derived superimpositions which act as barriers between the camera/viewer and the architectural structures on display, and Brakhage twice includes an effect in which the glass panes of the train window create a striking rippling effect across the buildings, optically transforming them from a solid state into a kind of liquid one. The way these compositions seem to reflect on the various ways that light passing through a surface (in this case, glass) can alter one's perception of the exterior, material world serves as a reminder that the tension between abstraction and representation was present in embryonic form even in this early work by Brakhage, though here this fundamental tension feels more playful and enchanting than serious and intense, a magic carpet ride of sorts.

The overt beauty of these views of the urban world beyond the railway become interspersed in the editing with more hermetic shots of details within the interior of the train car, which some viewers have commented on as feeling strangely depopulated of passengers, but this may merely be because Brakhage's camera displays an interest above all in non-human entities. One memorable shot in this section contrasts the shaking, turbulent motion of the train car doorway with the transitory serenity of patches of sunlight pouring onto the carriage floor. The way these blocks of natural light flash in and out of existence (depending on whether they are being blocked by structures from the outside world) seems to act as a foreshadowing to the film's fourth and final section, in which light gradually recedes, becoming enveloped and fragmented by the darkness of shadows created by the contours of the city. Brakhage announces the arrival of this fourth section by having the train ride begin to move in the opposite direction, which can be seen as a kind of automatic reflection of the earlier reversals of movement he had been performing at the station, an eloquent formal device writ large.

Brakhage's prior interest in forms of artificial light gradually decreases and fades out in this last section of the film, becoming replaced by shots in which pieces of reflective natural light, viewed through the train windows, have been reduced to discrete blocks within images of greater darkness, possibly filmed during a later part of the day. The earlier tone of playfulness becomes replaced in this section by a feeling of hushed reverence, with Brakhage in some sense appearing to lay bare the secret that light had been the true subject of his film all along. A large part of the pleasure of viewing *The Wonder Ring* resides in the alert viewer's gradually increasing awareness of how to perceptively read the film, how to become sensitive to its disparate and contrasting luminous properties. What this ultimately amounts to is a work in which the effects created by light itself, and the way that these effects intersect with movement, seem to contain a greater part of the work's pleasures and meanings than the objects and surfaces they are cast upon. The film is less a document of the Third Avenue elevated railway than it is a tour of light-effects both spectacular and spectral. The metonymic relationship between light-object and material-object, the way that physical structures become reflected but also distorted into glowing, otherworldly entities, acquires a powerful sense of mediation which makes *The Wonder Ring* a special and groundbreaking work in Brakhage's early filmography.

Stan Brakhage, Window Water Baby Moving (1959)

In Brakhage's later film *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), a genuine classic of the American avant-garde which records the birth of the filmmaker's first child, light seems to forcefully assert its innate qualities of elemental intensity in a way which gestures the status of the film away from being a mere personal documentary on a natural event, instead rendering the work into a kind of love-film. The varied ways in which natural light interacts with and illuminates the small, closed set of physical entities one encounters in the film, the way that light at times seem to match in intensity the pains of childbirth while at other times existing outside of it, imbues this pungently physical work with a mysterious and charged air of ritual. Indeed, the very title of the film, "Window Water Baby Moving," when uttered aloud repeatedly, begins to take on a quality of hypnotic incantation or spell, rhythmically gesturing the speaker toward a different and perhaps trance-like state, a quality which becomes reflected in the film's

repetition of shots. The bewitching, incandescent quality of the colored light in this film, and the way that it interacts with the list of other elements revealed in the title, seems to possess a similarly transformative energy. It may be easy to overlook the fact that the first word of this title, "window," is also the first thing one sees in the film's opening shot, an opening to the outside world through which light can pass and illuminate the proceedings. The open window of the Brakhage home, shown repeatedly throughout the film, is no less important to an understanding of the work than the "water" or the "baby" are.

Window Water Baby Moving neatly divides itself into sections that are clearly separated by frames of black leader which act as caesuras, brief moments of respite which allow the film to approximate a sense of breathing as well as a form of poetry. (In this latter regard, the film resembles a much later Brakhage film, the exquisite, hand-painted work *From: First Hymn to the Night – Novalis* (1994), in which hand-scrawled frames of text writing out fragments of a German romantic poem are deployed throughout the work, rather than merely at the very beginning or very end as they are in most of Brakhage's films.) In the first section, the interplay of incandescent red light and a purer, but no less intense, white light creates stunning, rippling illuminations on moving water and human skin, often simultaneously as one sees Jane Brakhage's various limbs and body parts become submerged into the water of a bathtub. The pervasive red light filling the frames of these early shots seems to convey a potent sense of atmospheric foreboding, though crucially not a kind of foreboding which implies a spirit of malevolence or menace (as reddish light will in Brakhage's later *The God of Day Had Gone Down Upon Him* (2000)), but rather a deep sense of anticipation, a kind of bracing of subject, filmmaker, and viewer alike ahead of the difficult and painful (yet also beautiful and natural) event which is about to unfold.

Brakhage often films a section of Jane's body engulfed in total light, while another section remains in a darker visual field, illuminated only by a faint, wavy glow from the water. While it seems unlikely that the filmmaker was giving much direction to Jane during the progression of such an important event in their personal lives, this unusual way of lighting the human figure has a way of gesturing the viewer toward a more natural and more primal state, allowing us to, for once, regard the human body with a kind of purity of vision and in a way which feels divorced from the way nude bodies have been presented in most commercial contexts, without any trace of consumerism or pornography. (In this regard, the film might be cross-referenced with Brakhage's *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959) from the same period, which makes fornication look as strange and beautifully alien as childbirth does here.) This sense of returning to a kind of pure state of vision remains one of the clearest and most successful demonstrations of Brakhage's quest, as discussed in his *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), of restoring the perceptual visions of infancy, of the way a child might see the world.

Once Brakhage begins to show Jane's water-dappled belly heaving from contractions, he cuts to a shot of her face in labored concentration, and at this moment an explosion of blinding white light fills the frame, temporarily cutting off the viewer's access to any subject in the visual field. This moment remains striking for the way that light seems to momentarily take on the painful intensity of Jane's labor, or at least for the way that a luminous body has

temporarily become aligned with a physical state within the vision of the film. This moment might also be regarded as a kind of apotheosis, a climax or turning point of sorts, which is quickly followed by a series of very lovely shots of the filmmaker kissing his wife, which represent a tonal shift. The filmmaker's decision to include his own presence and his own face in the finished film remains an interesting one, as *Window Water Baby Moving* differs from many (but not all) Brakhage films in this respect, and the shots in which he and Jane occupy the same frame appear to be bathed in a softer, more golden light which emanates a feeling of sanctity. (This is one of many aspects of the film which seem almost miraculous, as though Brakhage could not have foreseen or authorized it due to the spontaneous nature of the event he was filming, and which gives this film a special status within his vast filmography.)

Stan Brakhage, Window Water Baby Moving (1959)

It's in these shots of the filmmaker touching his wife's labored body, while still somehow remaining sensitive to the changing qualities of light from shot to shot, that the film announces itself as a form of love-film, not a romantic film in the conventional sense but a work which appears to show heterosexual love in a way which approaches nature and biology. Yet far from being documentary-like or coldly scientific, as this subject matter might typically call for (and which the unflinching shots examining female genitalia and its liquid discharge sometimes are), the film instead communicates a deeply emotional current of this love between man and woman which seems to be achieved through the film's sensitivity in capturing different forms and textures of luminosity. If one were to view this film alongside Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* (1970), which examines the human body after the moment of death just as this one does at the moment of birth, one would observe stark differences in the way that Brakhage lights and films the human figure. While the later film might be said to veer toward the status of documentary in its more sterile lighting and frontal presentation, the light in this earlier film grants it an awesome sense of beauty which at times borders on holiness. But the way that Brakhage achieved these effects in *Window Water Baby Moving* ultimately remains mysterious, a source of the film's seemingly inexhaustible fascination and richness.

Though *Window Water Baby Moving* does not delve as forthrightly into abstraction as *The Wonder Ring* and most of Brakhage's other films do, its journey from bewitching nature-ritual

to rapturous love-film becomes achieved in part through a sensitivity toward the various ways in which luminosity may alter the viewer's perception of the human figure and human action. And while it might be added that these two films have an antithetical relationship to one another in terms of the respective levels of interest and disinterest they display toward the human, in both cases light seems to extend the meanings of what Brakhage chooses to show us, in a way which departs extremely from, and goes beyond, the way lighting typically functions as mere accent in most forms of non-experimental cinema. While light-effects in *The Wonder Ring* seem to exist as discrete elements within the image (reflections and patterns which seem to float and hover around objects, operating distinctly from one another), the quality of the light in *Window Water Baby Moving* possesses a more totalizing effect, subjecting all objects and entities within the frame to undergo a kind of mass transmutation. The critic P. Adams Sitney identifies *Window Water Baby Moving* as one of a group of "lyrical films" which Brakhage made between his great breakthrough work *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) and his major "epic of mythopoeia", *Dog Star Man* (1965). But while *Anticipation of the Night* predates *Window Water Baby Moving* in the chronology of Brakhage's filmography, it exceeds its successor in terms of both length and formal complexity, while also offering a broader range of variation in luminosity.

Stan Brakhage, Anticipation of the Night (1958)

While the nature of the event being filmed in *Window Water Baby Moving* occasionally brought issues of authorship and intent into question, one never feels this way when confronted with the grand design of *Anticipation of the Night*, a work which self-consciously divides itself into sections, movements, and reprisals, and which evinces a structural ambition up to that point unseen in Brakhage's oeuvre. In *Anticipation of the Night*, the relationship between light (both natural and artificial) and movement (both camera movement and figurative movement) implies an act of searching, perhaps a kind of spiritual searching, which forms a structural counterpoint against the film's submerged narrative, which acts as an intimation of suicide. Broadly speaking, the compositions one encounters in this film may be divided and categorized into two dominant strains: 1) shots which provide information about the film's central figure, clearly a man, and often interpreted as a version of the filmmaker (which seems appropriate given the personal and subjective nature of Brakhage's cinema), and 2) more abstract and

external shots which feel isolated from any narrative or subtext, and which as such may be read more openly, perhaps as subjective visions of what the film's central character is seeing or perhaps not. It's in this second strain that a tonal counterpoint becomes developed and resides within the work, one which allows the film to avoid becoming overly monotonous or depressive, thereby enriching its emotional texture and thematic complexity.

Within the first compositional strain, Brakhage often films expressionistic shadows moving within vivid pools of bright, natural light in darkened interiors as a way implying figuration without photographing himself or another human subject directly. These shots, which begin quite early in the film's duration, might be described as quite unlike anything one sees in Brakhage's subsequent work, not only because of their angular expressionism, but because they seem definitively intended to impart an aspect of drama onto the film – not precisely a sense of fiction or of narrative, but certainly a sense of internal conflict and, given the powerful feeling of solitude that they convey, perhaps even a sense of anguished personhood. Though Sitney has put forth the argument that *Anticipation of the Night* represents a break from Brakhage's earlier psychodramas and the beginning of his period of lyric films, it might be more accurate to say that the film represents a kind of grappling, a struggle between the psychodrama and the lyric film, in which the filmmaker has not yet completely ridded himself of the last traces of the former. In this regard, one could even surmise that *Anticipation of the Night* is a film that Brakhage needed to make as a means of becoming the artist we now know him to be.

The second compositional strain might be described as much more characteristic of Brakhage's mature style in the sense that its shots more closely resemble the kinds of images one sees in later films. Most critics, Sitney included, have chosen to interpret these shots (which far outnumber those of the first strain in their frequency of appearance) as being visual representations of what the film's central male figure is optically seeing. (Sitney: "The great achievement of *Anticipation of the Night* is the distillation of an intense and complex interior crisis into an orchestration of sights and associations which cohere in a new formal rhetoric of camera movement and montage.") While this interpretation does carry some validity, the body of the film itself doesn't seem to be inviting the viewer to definitively read it in this way, and these compositions might instead be regarded with equal validity as free-floating entities which exist in counterpoint to the veneer of drama one encounters in the first strain, a lyrical opposition which works to corrode the psychodrama undergirding the film.

Even by the high standards of Brakhage's cinema, *Anticipation of the Night* remains a stunning visual tour-de-force by virtue of the sheer variety of types of shots one encounters in this second strain, a sense of variety which extends to the objects being filmed, the types of movement which are enacted by the camera, and the types of luminosity which are captured by the camera, all of which combine to create near-constant feelings of surprise within the viewer through their contrastive placement in the editing. Rapid, back-and-forth hand-held camera movements upon brightly artificial light, generated by streetlamps and amusement park rides filmed in total darkness, provide a sense of thrilling visual pleasure which bears resemblance to a fireworks display, and which starkly contrast with the sense of isolation one encounters in

the more still, shadowy compositions of the work. More decisively, a series of low-angle, upward-vertical camera movements (which echo the one Brakhage enacted earlier in *The Wonder Ring*) within the outdoor settings of a forest and a grassy lawn convey a profound sense of search. Though the meanings of a work as radically open as *Anticipation of the Night* ultimately belong to the individual viewer (and Brakhage likely would have agreed), these upward-vertical camera movements, which begins at ground-level and end by looking upward at the intense light of the sun pouring into the camera lens through the tree branches above, may be imaginatively interpreted as a kind of lifting, an action which implies an attempt to overcome some obstacle or to escape from some low place or position. The way these compositions embrace beauty and forms of movement at times seems to narrate an attempt to overcome despair rather than accept it, and they imbue the work with a sense of struggle, a kind of war between two contrasting emotive forces.

Even more than in *The Wonder Ring* and *Window Water Baby Moving*, light seems to take on the status of primary subject in much of *Anticipation of the Night*: in the sequences described above, the directionality of camera movement seems to be motivated above all by the position of luminous objects, rather than objects which belong to the physical world. The way that Brakhage's camera-eye appears to be drawn toward this light, moving toward it in violent, labored, or haphazard ways like a moth toward a flame, instills much of the work with a quality of seeking, a search for light within vast regions of visual and emotional darkness. In this regard, the use of light in *Anticipation of the Night* might be said to transgress the metonymic quality seen in earlier films, moving instead toward a kind of metaphoric status. Here, light itself finally becomes allowed to occupy a position of equal importance within the work's organization and construction as the latent meanings generated by the film's protagonist and drama are, and in fact seems to be placed into a kind of dialectical relation with those elements, elements which Brakhage himself will soon be moving away from in his work.

And what does this metaphor describe, exactly? Camper has provocatively called *Anticipation of the Night* a "testament to the failure of imaginative seeing", and this profound sense of failure haunting the work can of course be related most obviously to the act of suicide that ends the film, which Brakhage narrates by showing the protagonist's hand tying a noose to the branch of a tree, followed by the silhouette of his head and neck hanging from it for several moments as his shadow writhes in a kind of struggle. The final event one sees in the film, though, is not precisely this despairing act, but rather an orb of orange light flickering and then enveloping the dim gray-blue sky, expanding in size and eventually turning to a blistering white as it overshadows our view of the protagonist's struggle. Given the importance that luminous objects have assumed throughout the work's duration, this final detail should not be seen as trivial, and it gives the ending a different quality than a more conventional cut to black would. Brakhage seems to be, in some mysterious and submerged way, metaphorically relating the protagonist's "failure" with an inability to properly see light and to properly heed the beauty that its illumination provides, and the way that light finally outlasts this anguished struggle residing in the material world (a struggle which has informed much of the body of the film) appears to be an illustration of this idea, a notion which can also be seen as a statement of artistic intent informing the rest of Brakhage's cinema. Abstraction finally triumphs over

representation at the end of *Anticipation of the Night*, which at a mere 42 minutes begins to acquire the contours of an epic in the grand scope of its ambitious construction and in the depth of its ideas.

Stan Brakhage, Anticipation of the Night (1958)

If *Anticipation of the Night* has often been (rightly) regarded as a work of central importance in Brakhage's cinema and in his artistic development, this is partly because the filmmaker's subsequent films seem to have in some sense absorbed the reconciliation of the struggle he enacts in this work and the lessons that this experience provided. Brakhage himself spoke about this through the lens of leaving behind the influence of drama: "I would say I grew very quickly as a film artist once I got rid of drama as a prime source of inspiration. I began to feel all history, all life, all that I would have as material with which to work, would have to come from the inside of me out rather than as some form imposed from the outside in." But it isn't merely this changing attitude toward drama and external influence which makes the film a watershed for the filmmaker; it can also be felt in the way the film represents both a culmination and a next step within an evolving approach toward light and abstraction in his cinema. The transformation from light as a source of metonymic power in earlier works like *The Wonder Ring* into one of metaphoric power in *Anticipation of the Night* eventually leads to more hermetic experiments which examine the potentiality of luminous abstraction on its own terms.

Subsequent works like *The Riddle of Lumen* and *Sol* (1974) seem to display an interest in exploring and contrasting different levels of abstraction for their own sake and in a way which does not possess any kind of fictive or metaphoric relation to the material objects being filmed. This general plunge toward abstraction culminates in Brakhage's late films, the majority of which were hand-painted and have no (or only a very tangential) relation to notions of the photographic or the indexical. Revisiting early works like *The Wonder Ring*, *Window Water Baby Moving*, and *Anticipation of the Night* remains a thrilling experience, not only because watching these films represents an opportunity to witness the filmmaker's development in action, but also because one can see in them a more direct or causal relationship between physical and abstract elements of the image, a relationship which would become more difficult

to define in the latter part of Brakhage's career.

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On Michael J. Thompson’s Twilight of the Self

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Michael J. Thompson’s *Twilight of the Self* is a highly sophisticated theoretical analysis of the present day, deeply informed by the first generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Thompson reawakens the antecedents and the legacies of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and updates them for the twenty-first century. The book demands much of its reader, and at the same time, offers several trenchant insights. It presumes familiarity with Western philosophy, beginning with Plato and Aristotle for whom the “good life” was rational contemplation and civic involvement. Thompson argues that the enfeebled, atrophied, colonized self of today has internalized the dominant reified norms, values, and logic of contemporary capitalism—what he terms “cybernetic society”—and enacts its standardized routines of work, leisure, and even religion. Echoing C. Wright Mills’s call for a sociological imagination, Thompson insists the contemporary self has little understanding of society or of how its own subjectivity has been shaped, especially in ways that alienate the individual, stifle autonomy and creativity, fragment community, and reproduce domination. Bereft of critical reason and devoid of intentionality, the self is rendered incapable of envisioning alternatives to the system that benefits the few.

Touching on Spinoza, Rousseau, and—above all—German idealism (primarily Kant and Hegel), Thompson then turns to Marx and Lukács, who were among the major influences on the early Frankfurt school, especially Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, and Marcuse. The relevance of this intellectual inheritance today is often obscured by later developments within the Frankfurt School, that gradually “domesticated” critical theory—moving it away from an *emancipatory theory* rooted in Marxist critique toward a more “acceptable” and uncritical philosophical perspective. At the same time, various post-structuralist and postmodern approaches, popular among cultural theorists and identitarian movements, have further distracted from the critical perspective demanded by our times. Nevertheless, many of the early Frankfurt insights into instrumental reason, the reification of consciousness, the erosion of paternal authority, the authoritarian drift towards fascism, and the colonization of consciousness by the “culture industries require reexamination.

Perhaps the most fitting starting point for *Twilight of the Self* is with Hegel, especially his writings on alienation, the struggle for recognition between Lord and bondsman, the “unhappy consciousness” and dialectical movement of Spirit, the collective Geist, moving through history in various stages, impelled by negation and its overcoming, culminating in a telos of freedom and Absolute Knowledge. The alienation of consciousness was an essential concern of Hegel’s epistemology, ontology, and perhaps ethics. Critical Theory’s indebtedness to Hegel can be traced through Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts* (Fromm and Marcuse were among the first readers),

The German Ideology, and *Kapital*. In these works, the commodity plays a central role in deconstructing capitalism. How so? “Abstract labor”—wages paid to workers producing commodities for the capitalist class to be sold in the “free” market—becomes the fundamental basis of (surplus) value, class differences, and class domination. The understanding of that social relationship—based on property ownership and class conflict—is obscured by ideology, which, like a *camera obscura*, “turns things upside down,” legitimating the social order and systematically obscuring the fundamental nature of “normalized” private property, capitalism, and commodity production to secure “consent”. It is not by accident that Marx began Kapital with the critique of the commodity or more specifically, “commodity fetishism”, in which the commodity, qua appearance, embodied the alienated human labor that produced it yet the underlying social relationship was rendered invisible.

But Marx was writing primarily in the nineteenth century. By the twentieth century capitalism had been radically transformed by mass production. What became especially important however, was the general rationalization of society. As Weber pointed out, rationality, calculability, and predictability had already been essential to the rise of capitalism, enabling the development of corporations, meritocratic/hierarchical organization, and double-entry bookkeeping to track costs and profits. Drawing upon both Marx and Weber, Lukács’ critique of reification of consciousness becomes central to Thompson’s analysis of the atrophied self of today—at cognitive, evaluative, and affective levels.

With the rise of the Enlightenment, came “civil society,” the realm of interaction apart from kinship, and its “public spheres,” inaugurated as an emancipatory moment based on freedom from the Church and dynastic rule. The historical movement toward freedom that informed Critical Theory, dialectically fosters its own negation. Eventually, following the explosion of bureaucratic government and industrial capital the Enlightenment itself, extolling “freedom” of the marketplace along with Instrumental Reason, became a new form of domination and dehumanization as people became entrapped in the “cage of reason” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947). Moreover, by the early twentieth century, Freudian psychoanalysis with its views on character, desire, defense and consciousness were incorporated into the perspective of the Frankfurt school, with authoritarianism understood as a particular kind of social character, and/or response to crises. Finally, between advances in printing, photography, film, radio, we saw the beginning of what would later be considered the “culture industries.” It was at this point in the late 20s, that a group of Hegelian Marxist scholars founded the Institute for Social Research, and attempted to update Marxist theory from its official “economism” by including cultural and psychological factors. Given the social context of the time, namely the psychological allure of fascist movements, authoritarianism was seen as a palliative response to capitalist crises (Fromm 1941; Adorno,1950).

Twilight of the Self revisits and updates several themes of the early Frankfurt School to provide a critical, emancipatory, interdisciplinary theory of the present age. In the process, Thompson also criticizes the later Frankfurt School trajectory away from its critical roots toward a more “acceptable” liberal bourgeois perspective—beginning with the later Habermas, whose “chatterbox” theory of society focuses on discourse abandoning both political economy and the

underlying psychodynamics of character. Axel Honneth and his students have moved even further in this direction. In its latest iteration, Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance—communing with the trees outside Heidegger's hut—hardly qualifies as a theory at all. Similarly, Thompson finds post-structuralism, especially the work of Foucault, irrelevant to his critique. For Thompson, the power of contemporary capitalism is not diffuse, but part and parcel of "cybernetic society" that fosters compliant, powerless subjects dominated by a power invisible to them that benefits the few.

Twilight of the Self is difficult to summarize briefly, but revisiting many of the central themes of the early Frankfurt school covers some of the major points. Thompson incorporates Weber's analysis of rationalization—the domination of Instrumental Reason, routinization, and calculation—showing how these processes demystify the world. As Lukács shows, the reification of consciousness insinuates bourgeois logic, in which contemporary expressions of "false consciousness" thwart class consciousness and ultimately, genuine freedom and autonomy. At the same time, a decline in paternal power and associated "ego weakness" leads to the internalization and acceptance of alienation, false consciousness, and domination. Thompson's argument, if his complex analysis can be abridged, is that contemporary capitalism—or "cybernetic society"—is a globalized, digitalized system, legitimated by neoliberalism, with almost total control of the socialization of character by a variety of interconnected institutions. These institutions—including the modern family, and mass media (especially online "communities" like Facebook or X)—collectively shape socialization and character development and have "displaced the organic forms of community and mechanical forms of solidarity and replaces them with an ideology rooted in efficiency, control and confirmed socialization" (p. 22). The result is attenuated subjectivity: "the subsumption of self becomes incorporated into the self-regulating matrix of social norms and practices that erode critical autonomy," both cognitively and emotionally, limiting the capacity for intentionality and a proper understanding of the social structures and processes benefiting an affluent minority (p. 23). A seamless web linking political, economic, technological, and cultural spheres privileges administrative rationality—the context in which meanings, values, and subjectivity now form—securing power and profits for an elite while producing cultural, economic, and psychic disadvantages for the rest. By valorizing control and hierarchical organization devoid of ethical values, the cybernetic society erodes autonomous, critical selfhood. The internalized norms that enforce conformity, consumerism, superficiality, and social emptiness serve to consolidate the wealth of capitalist elites.

One of the most important aspects of Thompson's argument is his insistence on "bringing alienation back in". He treats alienation as a crucial concept for the critique of capitalism—one obscured by methodological positivism (which often reduces alienation to a measurable individual trait rather than an intrinsic aspect of capitalism) and dismissed by postmodernism as a component of a "grand narrative." Rooted in Hegel and embraced by Marx, alienation names the objectification and estrangement of workers from raw materials and tools they did not own and from labor processes that they did not control. By such alienation workers were rendered powerless and dehumanized within fragmented, atomistic communities—estranged from their unique human potentials and their fundamental human nature as "species beings."

In a rationalized, demystified society—the "iron cage"—alienation migrated from the factory floors of industry to the many bureaucracies within social life, where reified work processes foster mindless conformity. As Erich Fromm put it, once people feared becoming slaves, now they were becoming robots serving to reproduce social order and deaden critical thought in a process of "automaton conformity." "The institutions and values of the society become intuitive [to the] individual who comes to see his or her world as self-justified and lacking any need for moral reflection" (p. 132). With the almost complete loss of ethical autonomy, this atrophied moral cognition reproduces conditions benefiting only a few.

Building on this analysis, Thompson describes contemporary alienation as a "pathology of self-consciousness and agency." He argues that the ideological consequence of contemporary alienation is a disposition toward "false consciousness". Yet he's careful in distancing this from the crude Second Internationale view in which the elites of a vanguard party alone possess the "truths" hidden by ideology and demand uncritical acceptance of its "official" views. Rather, the institutional norms of "cybernetic society" socialize actors into limited cognitive and epistemic capacities, naturalizing the world and rendering power relationships opaque. As Lukács noted, it is not just the contents of consciousness, but the very ways and styles of thinking, *qua* routinization and reification that reproduce capitalist domination and produce an "uncritical compliance" that is the essence of irrationality. False consciousness is thus not simply the coercive power of structures, nor a form of individual pathology, but a dialectical interaction culminating in the "incapacity to distinguish essence from appearance." Gramsci observed that, "awareness and criticism can only begin once individuals have abandoned ways of thinking" that keep them from understanding the objective world by embracing schemas and concepts fostered by institutions, especially, the ideological institutions from families to schools to media and "national populars."

For Thompson, the result of alienation and the embrace of false consciousness is compliance to the system and the erasure of autonomous critical thought. Thinkers as different as Weber and Gramsci have long pointed out how consent, arising from within, is far more effective for domination than coercion, which merely forces a choice under threat. Compliance renders submission to domination invisible as "common sense," producing what Gramsci called "willing assent." Crucially for Thompson's analysis of compliance, it is not only erroneous ideas that matter but the socialization and internalization of norms and values that shape cognition and emotional dispositions alike. While Gramsci understood how hegemonic discourses constructed, normalized, and naturalized the system, he neglected to chart the extent to which the normalization of the status quo was the systematic consequence of the socialization of the subject by agents and institutions that were part of the power structure. Again, as Erich Fromm put it, people become socialized to "want to do that which the political economy requires them to do."

The early post-Enlightenment stages of capitalism—though emancipating society from the domination of church and dynastic rule—still allowed space for autonomy and critiques of Enlightenment impulses towards "robust individuality … and democratic citizenship." This helped shape the bourgeois public spheres that did "envision a better world," as well as spaces

for aesthetic creativity. However, that space narrowed with industrialized mass production and its norms of rationality, efficiency, calculability, and predictability, together with new systems of hierarchy and instrumental logics of control. Thompson's "cybernetic society" is a fundamentally different iteration of capitalism, legitimated by globalized neoliberalism—a shift from the production of material commodities to financialization for the elites and, for the masses, privatized hedonism through consumption, valorization of "having over being", and the proliferation of mass consumption and mass media (Fromm). The ultimate consequence has been the intertwining of reification, routinization, alienation, and false consciousness within socialization. The "withering [constriction] of the self and regression of the ego," result in a loss of the capacity for self-governing and critical examination of the structures of social domination. This, in turn, thwarts the intentionality that might otherwise expose or challenge the more invisible structures and processes of contemporary power. One consequence is the bifurcation of relationships into those that are exploitative versus those that are mutually enhancing. Too often relationships today are based on some form of instrumental advantage. The predominance of such relationships undermines any commitment to the "public good"—especially at the cost of personal sacrifice. Contemporary anxiety fosters a compensatory "malignant group narcissism," deepening atomization and further weakening the possibility of collective critique. In his discussions of theorists from Hegel to Kohut to Sennett, Thompson develops an ontology of the social commitment to genuine democracy that has been undermined by cybernetic society.

Is this a hopeless predicament? While on the one hand, Thompson's analysis appears a bit pessimistic, he resists the assumption of an "over socialized" view of character. Instead, he suggests that the erosion of meaningful social relationships has produced an "under socialized" character—solitary, often lonely narcissists seeking personal advantages and gratification while dialectically undermining the capacity for meaningful social connection, self-awareness, fulfillment, and critical autonomy. What, then, is to be done? Thompson concludes with a very strong appeal to "regenerate the individual, and value autonomy as critical agency as an antidote to the many adversities of cybernetic society." What is needed is a new form of reason that can challenge reification and cultivate the self-awareness to perceive, understand, and critique the contemporary norms, practices, and systems of domination that obstruct autonomous self-determination. Genuine self-fulfillment and a society oriented around the common good, he insists, depend upon "autonomy as critical agency—as a cloud able to resist and questions the ends and purposes inscribed in our reality and permeate our inner world well the same time reclaiming the capacity to deposit new engine purposes to become genuine authors of new values and forms of meaning in the world." (p 231). Importantly, however, Thompson does not embrace any form of unfettered, "monadic" individualism. Drawing on Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, as well as contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives, he emphasizes that human beings are social creatures whose fundamental ontology is geared toward "the kinds of reason utilized in one's reflection about self and world to overcome the alienated and reified structures of self and world offered by the systems of domination (p. 231).

Here I begin to question the analysis, which in some ways seems closer to that of Adorno and Horkheimer, rather than a more optimistic vision of a postcapitalist society dependent on the

prefigurative emergence of a new form of social character suggested by Fromm, the Marcuse's "new sensibility," or Block's utopianism. There is, of course, no question that a transformation of consciousness, requiring a degree of openness, is *sine qua non* for progressive social change. Indeed, such a vision was already prefigured in Hegel's notion of Spirit (*Geist*) moving through history, impelled by negation and the negation of negation, culminating in freedom and Absolute Knowledge. Marx accepted Hegel's dialectical perspective, but grounded it in material conditions, envisioning that a revolutionary proletariat class facing exploitation, alienation, precarity, and poverty would gain an awareness of the structural basis of its immiseration and move from a class in itself, to a class for itself. This did not occur, for many reasons: nationalism, rights of citizenship and political participation, improvements in wages and benefits, as well as consumerism in which privatized hedonism obscured the collective good. As Fromm put it, having consumer goods would become more gratifying to elites in the short run than being fully human. Thompson is absolutely right about the necessity of a transformation of consciousness, but what follows? History suggests that educating, organizing, and mobilizing groups becomes a way of realizing social changes that may be progressive or indeed reactionary. This has traditionally been the role of the public sphere which for Habermas has been a place "undistorted communication"—a seedbed for various ideas which ultimately became a political force. Historically, this change has been spearheaded by organizations like labor unions or political parties, but today, much of the organizing, mobilizing, and direct action consists of youth-led, bottom-up, grassroots—think of Greenpeace, #Me too, BLM, Slut Walk, Earth Justice, and Greta Thunberg. In reaction to the general shift toward the authoritarian right, young people have also flocked to a variety of political organizations like Our Revolution or the Democratic Socialists of America which has recently quintupled its membership, noting that the average age of its members has plummeted to 33 years old. Karl Mannheim's insight into generations helps explain why: coming-of-age under neoliberal precarity, many Gen Z college graduates experience the crunch personally—low pay, student loan indebtedness, and a return to a parental home—predisposing them toward more progressive orientations. Their politics aren't gleaned from reading *Kapital* or the *Grundrisse*, but rather felt adversities among themselves, friends, and families. Here Fromm's concept of "dynamic character change," suggesting that one's character is not fully formed but can continually change and adapt as society changes comes into play. If we locate these progressive social movements, as the driving force of *Geist* moving through history, impelled by contradiction and resolution, the youth voters of today will become the dominant generations of tomorrow and carry with them progressive skills as well as organizing experience. Thus, while older voters are generally more conservative and resistant, if not recalcitrant to efforts to change society, the younger generations have personally experienced the adversities of globalization and will seek major transformation. While "generation" as a concept never captures everyone, large shares of Gen Z prefer socialism to capitalism and reject the binaries and prejudices. Research on social movements shows that strong supporters of certain causes undergo lasting shifts in consciousness that shape future political commitments.

Twilight of the Self is a major book whose erudition and scope should have a considerable impact, not just for Critical Theory, but also for political theory in general and debates over

norms, including Thompson's engagements with figures like Rawls. Thompson's analysis of the internalization of rationality and reification within a disempowered subjectivity—lacking awareness and understanding of the dominant social order, yet viewing it as "normal and natural"—adds a crucial psychological dimension to Gramsci's account of hegemony: why it is embraced and how it can be challenged by organic intellectuals. His discussions of epistemology and ontology likewise warrant serious consideration.

Domination, Weirdness, and Art: On Michael Thompson's Twilight of the Self

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Introduction: The Problem of the Cybernetic Society

Michael Thompson, over the past ten or so years, has created a considerable corpus of significant work which has established him as a leading next generation critical theorist. In *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, Thompson offers a critique of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth for abandoning a Marxist analysis for one that privileges interpersonal recognition over power (2016). He has written extensively on the ontological dimension of the concepts of the social and society in works by Lukács, the Frankfurt School, Hegel, and Adorno. In *The Specter of Babel*, Thompson further develops a critical social ontology that goes beyond a limited intersubjectivity, and instead arises from given social structures with their inherent *telos* (2020). His current work builds upon the literature of critical theory, with an emphasis on the fate of the self as a concept and as a lived experience under neo-liberal regimes. The key concepts in *The Twilight of the Self* are domination and the ego in its relation to the possibility of an emancipatory politics.

Is human character determined by the society in which we live? If so, to what extent and under what conditions? In *The Sociological Imagination* C. Wright Mills raised this question about the emerging American character structure:

> What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of `human nature' are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for 'human nature' of each and every feature of the society we are examining (Mills 1976:3)

Here, Mills asks us to consider the average conduct and character of citizens when we analyze institutions, social structures, and the historical conditions and outcomes of "this society" in "this period."

Earlier, in the 1950s, David Riesman, et al, in their popular book, *The Lonely Crowd*, addressed this question by tracing the historical development of three characterological types: tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed. They trace the evolution of society from a tradition-directed culture, followed by one that moved in a direction defined with the notion of inner-directedness, derived from Max Weber's notion of a "Protestant Ethic" (Weber, 1930) or, in Reisman's image, a "gyroscope." The last of these is "other-directedness," which they see as emerging after World War Two, with the explosion of norm-based patterns of consumption, the

influence of mass media, and secularized peer group pressures. The characterological problem posed by other-directedness is that the individual becomes a mere reflection of social forces, a "radar dish," in the book's pithy term, and loses the sense of personal autonomy and self-knowledge (Reisman, et al, 1963:15;22). Each type Reisman presents is a societally based tendency. However, Reisman and his co-authors were critical of the idea that social structures "over-determine" individuality.

Consequently, Reisman was also critical of grand, causal concepts, such as Mill's notion of the importance of "power.'" As well as Hannah Arendt's idea of totalitarianism, Reisman wrote that she "overinterprets specific actions in terms of long-range goals, and does not allow for any more or less accidental … bureaucratic forces, slip-ups, careerisms, as explanatory factors" (as cited in Menand, 2021:118-121). Similarly, in "The Role of Business in 'Executive Suite,'" Larabee and Reisman write that "The inability of the managers to manage is ironically… underlined…" (1964 :334). In fact, and despite the reception of his book, Reisman is a classic liberal, critical of determinism in society.

Michael Thompson's contribution to the question raised by Mills and Reisman places the idea of institutions and their functions with the concept of domination and its implication not of tendencies but of limitations that narrow the expressive and critical potentials of human personality. To this end, he describes what has been theorized as the social system as a projected system of domination, that he refers to as the cybernetic society, which has become massive and all-encompassing. Thompson provides a theory of the ego that qualifies domination from below, tying critical thinking to a critical capacity of the human psyche. The "twilight of the self" is still "light." There are precedents to Thompson's account of domination, but he goes further than they do in showing the element of power when they were conceptualized as institutions and legitimating authority.

Thompson's Part I is aptly titled "Our Steely Encasement," which is a more accurate translation than Talcott Parson's well-known "iron cage." In this section Thompson traces the development of this concept from Weber and beyond. He notes that Max Weber believed that the iron cage of societal rationalization might extend to all forms of social life, not just economic forms. Thompson describes this as inexorable, but Weber himself was alert to countertendencies, such as the strength of tradition, not yet erased by rationalization. Rationalization produces unintended consequences, which lead to forms of resistance, even to a possible "re-enchantment of the world."

Weber points to the power of the erotic and the esthetic to resist rationalization, although he was pessimistic as to the outcome of these efforts. (Weber, 1958:155; 341; 342; 347; and cf. Halley 1991:229.) At the end of his life, he was fascinated by the potential of the Russian revolution as a new departure in history (Mommsen 1997).

Following Thompson's outline of the development of what he calls "the cybernetic society, in the 1940s, Horkheimer and Adorno spoke of the "totally administered society" as a practical likelihood of an increasingly technologically driven culture (1972). Debord and the

Situationists, as well as Deleuze, wrote about the extension of commodification to all forms of life (Debord 1994; Deleuze 1992). And, of course, Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* contributed to this line of analysis (1964).] Thompson explores the nooks and crannies of domination under capitalist conditions, through his examination and systematic elaboration of the notion of our increasingly cybernetic society, but with an eye toward the possibility of societal change, and a theory of radical agency as a human possibility. He extends Lukács' account of the increasing reification or thingification of everyday life and qualifies it by an application of a psychoanalytic dialectic of the ego as mediator between the internalization of external domination and the assertiveness of the self even in its apparent twilight.

But how exactly does character structure arise from society? Can it be predicted? If not, how are social progressive and societal change to be understood as possible? While nothing in the writings of Mills, Reisman, and the Frankfurt School entails that character structure will be compliant, it is the possibility of non-compliance that Thompson considers crucial to a humanly practical theory of societal change, from an irrational formation to an aesthetic and rational society. In this regard the relation of "self" to "ego," is of special importance to an attempt to establish a noncompliant aspect to the human psyche.

What models available in the literature contribute to the problem Thompson sets out that would point the way to a plausible solution? Two examples come to mind.

Mobilization and Action: Dewey, Sartre, and Thompson

There is a long history in philosophy and the social sciences of social theorists trying to avoid determinism while sustaining the critique of domination. I consider two philosophers who address this as a control issue for a theory of social change in the Twentieth Century, John Dewey and Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Individualism Old and New* (1999), Dewey presents a picture of critical agency, and considers what type of person would not be compliant and would, at the same time, be a kind of herald of social progress as radical change. Presumably, such a type would reflect a general human disposition able, in certain cases, to express itself under conditions in which it would be reasonable to do so.

One problem with this solution is that it begs the question of mobilization, therefore of organization as struggle, and the possibility of violence. Dewey's individualism, as conceived by pragmatism, begs the question of collective action, necessary for the idea of social change.

Sartre addresses this very question in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume One (2004). There, he develops Hegel's concept of "unhappy consciousness". For Hegel, this attitude begins with a certainty about oneself, and therefore without a realizable concern with the world at large: such a certainty must be surpassed in any theory of societal transformation (Desan, 1966:44; Sartre, 1968:13-30.) For Sartre, the feeling of discontent, tied to alienation, is a lived experience for people not happy with their situation not being more than it is. They are unhappy in being caught up in a situation of exploitation. The very alienation that constitutes the basis of discontent both sustains compliance but, at the same time, destabilizes the

situation and gives it a degree of mobility and, thus, the possibility of change through collective action and its possible modes of organization.

For Sartre, the "unhappy consciousness" is not something that remains static but is immanently mobilizable. It can grasp the irrationality of things in a way that is at least open to, and available for, a movement for change. The lived experience demands that the person extends beyond the boundaries of compliance. Given the possibility of association and organization, mobilization is possible and likely. In realizing itself, lived experience realizes itself in a consciousness that gets into the world through action. How is it possible to turn this into political action shared with others? It needs to be projected into the world as an association on the way to organization and struggle.

There is, then, a combative aspect to organization, in that it coalesces "against" and therefore raises the specter of violence and a need for rationalization in the face of conflict.

Thompson, throughout his book, and especially in the last chapter entitled "Autonomy as Critical Agency," deserves credit for raising the question of exactly what kind of consciousness would be needed to be at least ready for action. Such a readiness is already a movement towards others, and this book sets the stage for understanding the awareness of that process.

A utopian perspective on the problem of domination would make the case that domination can be overcome. A simple and idealistic formulation of this utopian belief would be as follows: if only we can convince people to acknowledge their feelings, we can change the world. This appears as an ideal to ascribe to. A more complex, but no less idealistic utopian perspective was espoused by Ernst Bloch. Aside from being orthodox in other aspects of his Marxism, he emphasized the notion of the "not-yet." By this Bloch means images of social change that belong to our history and that are retrievable. They are practical possibilities that depend on what he calls the "hope principal" (Bloch, 1995). This view is more social and historical, and sees reality as something unfinished, as "…a real possibility, not yet frozen" (Bloch, 1977:485, my translation). But, still, this analysis appears to ignore the prospects of resistance and struggle. Terry Eagleton has characterized this attitude, which glosses over the catastrophes of his age, as "hope without optimism" (2015).

In contrast, materialist analyses address pessimism by identifying a collectively constituted consciousness that is, in its very form, incompatible with exploitation and domination. This possibility is dramatically shown, in Marx's *Capital*, by the impossibility of the capitalist mode of production to become a totality and to reproduce the "society of producers" that its own revolution required. This is due to the series of existential contradictions that is the historicizing incompatibility of the forces and the relations of production, and within capital's reifying instantiation of exchange (the market). Not the least of these constantly decomposing contradictions is the inability to sustain in the relations of production the realization of value essential even for a semblance of a self-sustaining free market. Along with this is the constant increase in the scale of production that undermines the society from which "surplus value" must be extracted, the growth of surplus population in the face of the progressive

dehumanization of production by technology, and what Marx saw as the most general contradiction of the capitalist mode of production, namely, the circulation of “fictitious capital” against the ”society of producers” (Marx, 1981:358; Brown, 1986:53). It is in this context that Marxian theory provided a conceptual foundation for a radical consciousness of both the self-destructive aspect of capitalism and the possibility of what Thompson calls a rational society.

We can consider Thompson’s book in regard to Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, *Volume One*. For Sartre, a fragile radical consciousness develops under capitalism within associations not yet coherently organized. In the course of becoming a “class–for-itself,” association becomes more and more societal, always against what Sartre refers to as the possibility of disintegrative “serialization.” It is then that the class requires the organizational form necessary for a class-conscious class-for-itself in the face of the for-itself aspect of capital for which the very possibility of a politicized proletariat posed an existential threat to a mode of production already oriented to the private accumulation of wealth. Thus, Sartre describes the Storming of the Bastille as giving rise to a “fused group,” mobilized for action, but not yet a “pledged group” or an organization. At each stage the collective had to resist disintegration and realize itself through struggle. Awareness does not come first (Sartre, 2004:351-5). In what he calls the “pledged group,” members swear an oath which binds them together in mutuality of suspicion. The continuation of the group depends on sustaining solidarity and becomes an organization in class struggle (Sartre 2004: 430-438). Nothing here is guaranteed, and Sartre points to the fragility of any gains and the possibility of a “serialization,” a disintegration. The pledged group, no less than the other forms, cannot guarantee the continuance of the group. Therefore, mobilization is a necessarily continuing process.

Consequently , through collective action it is possible to overcome the individual isolation of the unhappy consciousness which finds its purpose in class struggle. Sartre’s theory begins with the concept of association, a coming together with a sense of a problem. This incidental mobilization finds itself transformed into a succession of increasingly rational social formations that give focus to solidarity and increased clarity about class struggle and its stakes.

The question Thompson raises is how to get from an irrational to a rational society. For Sartre, mobilization precedes essence. People must find themselves in motion, beyond mere criticism, in order to find themselves within the movement towards solidarity and the struggle of class against class. Thompson’s focus is on individuals prior to the social movement from association to organization. While this may be adequate to a theory of the type of character that is immanently open to change, it is necessary to show how the line between the irrational and rational society can be, as a practical matter, crossed. Thompson pushes his analytic towards the possibility of a critical subjectivity that is a necessary condition of a movement against the irrational society, but he allows us to wonder how a situation of struggle becomes visible, and to what sort of generalized consciousness of the possibility of radical change would it appeal.

Particulars and Totalities in Overcoming Domination

In Thompson’s masterful essay, “From Negative Dialectics to Critical Metaphysics: Adorno,

Hegel and Marx on the Structure of Critical Reason," he valorizes the notion of totality in Hegel's work against Adorno's negative dialectic (2023). But it can be argued that there is a Hegelian aspect to Adorno's work not only in his *Hegel: Three Studies*, but throughout, and even in his *Negative Dialectics* (written around the same time) (1993; 1973). For Hegel, the concept is always concrete, within a context, and not simply negative. This aspect can be shown in Adorno's discussion of avant-garde art, and his notion of "particulars." Although Adorno focused on the works of Samuel Beckett (1991), he also wrote about expressionist artists such as Anton von Webern, synthetic cubism, and instances of the Dada soirees, in which each work, as presented, was "one-off," not repeated or repeatable. This particularity preserved the monadic power of an "entity," a performance in its own right:

> …by allowing expression to present itself as directly as possible, without mediation… for this type of sensitivity, which really forbids repetition and must modify itself, it transpires very quickly, very early on, [so] that it is impossible to stay at the sheer point of expression. The pure 'this-here,' the art that seeks to present the pure 'this -here,' the pure moment of expression, the absolute sound, so to speak, as absolute nature – this art approaches in an almost literal sense, one could say, the threshold of silence. It cannot unfold in time or in space and cannot actually objectify itself at all. In fact, all it could do would be what Dada– which is rigorous on this point -utters in its name, namely to say 'Da' [there], really just take a breath. For everything beyond would be a betrayal of this pure sound… (Adorno 2018:60)

Adorno goes on to link this immediacy to mediation, in that "consequently the need is aroused… to go beyond this pure 'there,'" as in Webern's works and in synthetic cubism. This is what he calls the "dialectic of expressionism," in that, after cleansing the material, it leads to the construction of new forms (Adorno, 2018:60-64).

This suggests that on the one hand, particulars are always linked up and intensional: therefore, not simply particular, and are related to large entities – totalities. But the idea of particularity does not support the *distinction* between part and whole, since the particular, to be intelligible as such, must be a particular of something beyond itself. One of my graduate teachers always asked, "what are they against," in the sense of what is the larger context of this apparent particular?

Sartre, in polemizing against the traditional Marxism of his time, argues for a more dialectical or reciprocal notion between part and whole, and warns that the "totalizing investigation has given way to a Scholasticism of the totality. The heuristic principal – 'to search for the whole in its parts '– has become the terrorist practice of 'liquidating the particularity'" (Sartre, 1968:28). He further notes that, whereas …Hegel at least allowed the particular to continue to exist as a surpassed particularly" …the aim of Marxist formalism "is not to integrate what is different as such, while preserving for it a relative autonomy, but rather to suppress it… and, under this pretext, replace particularly by a universal (Sartre, 1968:48).

Reflecting upon the part-whole relation, the musician Pierre Boulez asks, "Is the work as we

know it a genuine totality, or is it rather the restricted fragment of a much larger project, without boundaries, but without which this fragment could not exist or give the illusion of wholeness" He uses the analogy of book versus album, where the album is flexible and detachable, linked to something larger, yet resisting "connectedness and single ordering" (Boulez, 2019: 592; 631). The effect on the listener of this fragmentary reception of non-repeating sections is "the grasp of the instant as such," but the fragment is never absolute, in that memory reconnects the fragments (Boulez, 2019: 603-4.) Boulez concludes that "…having no reality but the fragment, the whole is nothing but an endlessly renewed, endlessly sought-after illusion (Boulez, 2019:631).

The immediacy of a particular Dada moment presupposes a "horizon" within which it finds itself and possibly in contention with other entities. To underscore the immediacy and particularity of events in the Dada soirees, I have called Dada a "moment," not a movement (Halley 1991:241). The parts are moments in a larger organic flow or totality. If, as Hegel explains, the concept is thought in activity, there is therefore no dualism of part and whole, form and content. This movement is dialectical and presupposes a link between every particularity and a larger social environment. Thus, I see Adorno's negative dialectics as a corrective "moment" of Hegel's organic totality, and I see the two philosophers as actually closer to each other than they might appear. For Hegel, "… the particular contradicts the universal, so that the latter does not fulfill itself in the former" (Marcuse, 1960:37). In speaking of "life" in the *Theologische Jungendschriften*, Hegel remarks that … In life, "…the particular … is at the same time a branch of the infinite tree of Life; every part outside the whole is at the same time the whole, Life" (*Theologische Jungendschriften,* p. 307, as cited in Marcuse, 1960: 37). Eventually, dialectically, the totality "wins out," but it should not be prematurely foreclosing: as organic, it must allow for movement.

So, we must preserve this principle of movement, of dialectics. This is why I would argue that there is no such thing as "relativism" in itself — each moment is always linked polemically against something else, and therefore standing as a denial of hegemony. Conversely, the totality can easily appear to relativize everything, subsuming each particular to itself. In this sense, the idea of totality dictates that all art is relative to conditions beyond its control. This subsumption of the merely momentary diminishes the critical aspect of the moment. But, at the same time, the attempted subsumption itself, as power, reinstates what it was intended to neutralize: e. g., Dada begets Dada in one way or another. Thus, the particular, in art or politics, can stand as a weapon against a totality that has inadvertently denied the very moment on which it depends for its own organic constitution, against a false or dominating totality. In art and politics, critique can be denied, but it cannot be negated. This is its power and its de-reifying power.

There are some particulars that are not relativist, which seem to escape this net. We can posit that no particular individual can bring about societal change when society is conceived of as a totality that determines and does not merely receive or take its particularities. In addressing the problem of change posed by the cybersociety being conceived as such a totality, Thompson seems to assume that, even if every person, or self, is potentially critical, what is at issue for a

theory of change from one totality to another is not the effort of an aggregate of selves but the counter-mobilization of a population already mobilized as determined by the existing totality. It will not do, as Thompson does, to assume that it is sufficient to explain societal change by conditions that primarily motivate dominated persons whose aggregated anger somehow envisions a future society *and* its possible attainment. This theoretical lapse, at the point at which the totality at issue is shown as "irrational," gives the impression of pessimism: his totality appears too much of a totality. In order to imagine a change from absolute domination to the humanly rational totality envisioned by Thompson as both emancipatory and self-reproducing, it seems necessary to weaken the idea of domination as absolute determination, *and* to shift from individuality as effective in the aggregate to a concept of "self" that is already socially mobilized toward a critical subjectivity that is oriented by its own collective aspect as both a present and possible future.

Domination, Weirdness, and Art

There is a radical dimension to art. Art, culture, and the term "avant-garde" is used when a work or performance cannot be assimilated to convention and to the world in which actions are made interpretable in advance. It is that aspect of "new art" that stands for and encourages resistance to domination. Such art must be recognized as mobilizing audiences, which explains why authorities are wary of it and do all that they can to suppress it.

It is generally understood by social psychologists who have noted that systems of control cannot avoid producing weird outcomes often referred to, misleadingly, as deviance. This capacity to mobilize can be conceived of as part of what is missing in Thompson's account of radical consciousness. Art is one example, and recent currents in the theory of culture recognize this same dynamic in culture itself.

Domination aims to produce conformity. Its hidden assumption is that conformity points to the mean and not to a curve in which "deviations" often account for more than the normative force of the rule, providing something like a subversive background to what is meant to be controlled.

Thus, domination is often described as "non-culture or anti-culture" in the sense of the statement that the Nazi playwright Hanns Johst, misattributed to Joseph Goebbels: "when I hear the word culture… I release the safety on my Browning" (Johst, 1984, Act 1, Scene 1). The role of culture in history has often been seen by both sides in political struggles as resisting domination.

In *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse notes:

> Reality is other and more than codified in the logic and language of facts. Here is the inner link between dialectical thought and the effort of avant-garde literature: the effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which is not the language of those who establish, enforce, and benefit from the facts (Marcuse, 1960:x).

For Marcuse, the power of facts has a tendency to become totalitarian, and this reference to facts is what Sartre vividly called the "inert. "Art offers the possibility of an authentic language, a "Great Refusal" to accept the rules of the game in which the dice are loaded" (Marcuse, 1960:x).

There is a convergence of Thompson's notion of autonomy as critical agency and Russian Futurist avant-garde practices described by Roman Jacobson, in *My Futurist Years* (1994). In Thompson's discussion of false consciousness and heteronomy – internalizing, uncritically, external "knowledge" — he notes that the demand for conformity affects "the ways that individuals come to bypass attempts at rational thinking and instead rely automatically on the normative concepts that they have internalized" (Thompson 2022:162) In this manner, he integrates the concept of "automaticity" into his analysis of false consciousness (Thompson 2022:162; 302, n. 19. For Thompson, it is both necessary and possible to move from the taken-for granted, unreflected *ontic* world to the *ontological* one, which involves critique of the existing structures, a political will that is both critical of the irrational totality and positively oriented to a rational future:

> Once the second nature of my social world shatters, the *ontic is ontologized:* I begin to perceive how the world is open and malleable, rooted in practices and norms that I, in coordination with others, shape and articulate. Even more, autonomous agency must call into question the existing structures and systems of meaning that underpin the ontic realm (Thompson 2022:245).

In his essay, "What is Poetry," Roman Jacobson describes the very same socio-cultural process as "de- automatization." He notes that the distance between sign and object sharpens our perception and arrests the automatization of our perception. The relation of sign and object is contradictory, which allows for the mobility of signs and objects. If this does not happen, the relation between them "becomes automatized" (Jacobson, 1934, as cited in Jacobson, 1994: xx) Jacobson's focus is on the irreducibly dynamic relationship between signifier and signified, and sign and object. This provides a theoretical underpinning for a critical consciousness and guarantees some degree of mobilization in the very uncertainties of language and speech.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is difficult to understand and conceptualize how capitalist society can be resisted in the face of the damaged subjectivity that Thompson describes. His book, *The Twilight of the Self,* goes a long way toward helping us think through the first part of this problem, though he does not address the fragilities of totalities. In focusing on these totalities and an overarching character structure, we lose the importance of their instability and the effect of cultural innovation in the direction of social change. The relative indeterminacy of culture is bound to be a factor, since it is not an easily managed part of any larger "system." This can defer our discussion of the immanence of change to totalistic formations, and can place the emphasis on the role of organization and power in the very course of change.

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From Critical Agency to Critical Solidarity

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Introduction: Against Positivism and Relativism and For an Objective Basis of Critique

Michael J. Thompson's *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism* is a book of fundamental importance. It stands within the Frankfurt School critical theory tradition, which it continues, critiques, corrects, and resets on a truly productive path. Written with articulacy and clarity, it smashes through the timorous liberalism and aggressively obscurantist postmodernism that have so clouded academic social and political thought in recent decades and that have produced an intellectual culture entirely impotent before neoliberalism's economic brutality and cultural debasement. *Twilight of the Self* develops Thompson's previous attacks on the tendency of Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth to turn critical theory away from Marxism and political economy and toward a neo-idealist and pragmatist focus on communication, interaction, and the symbolic politics of recognition. Political theories of communicative-interactional deliberation over values and recognition of identities are incapable of exposing and overcoming the depth at which values and identities in capitalist societies are shaped by functional systems. In modern societies, individuals are immersed in such systems and their conscious thoughts and unconscious desires profoundly shaped by these social institutional systems. Individuals' integration into these systems has eroded autonomy in ways for which liberal and deliberative theories cannot account and which such theories evade.

Thompson develops a conception of social ontology on the basis of which he shows both how domination can inhere in the very structural-functional constitution of social institutions and how, through their automatic adherence to reified norms, individuals reproduce these structures in their action. This conception of social ontology is also developed by Thompson to show that individual autonomy, agency, and flourishing depend on objective social prerequisites. Critical social ontology therefore provides an objective basis for the evaluation of social norms and institutions and a stronger basis for critical theory than communicative interaction.

This objective basis for evaluation should not be confused with positivistic-reformist forms of technocratic-managerial sociological political argumentation according to which certain reform measures can be shown to produce certain optimal outcomes measurable in terms of indices of health or economic growth. Such positivistic sociological arguments, hypostatizing social forces as 'variables,' exemplify the kind of reified consciousness that Thompson seeks to overcome. Empiricist sociology remains trapped within the normative assumptions of capitalist society. Any 'policy' criticisms it can make are fragmentary, piecemeal and tied to the reified outlook of the administrators of the cybernetic society.

Thompson's ontological, rather than empiricist, analysis is critical and dynamic in showing social structures to be constituted by social praxis which has become reified. De-reification is the key to the relationship between critical ontology and critical agency. In this way, Thompson puts forward a sociological political theory that overcomes the reification inherent in positivistic sociology. In Lukácsian terms, Thompson retrieves the character of the human being as a historical being, actively making and transforming their social world. His critique is therefore inherently revolutionary rather than reformist. It is a sociologically informed political theory, which surpasses and overcomes sociology by being truly *political*. In other words, Thompson demonstrates the potential for conscious collective action that does not adapt to, but instead transforms, social structures.

In *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (2016) and *The Specter of Babel: A Reconstruction of Political Judgment*(2020), Thompson showed how the communicative turn created an insipid form of critical theory that won academic respectability at the expense of a reformist accommodation to capitalism and loss of the capacity to expose ideological false consciousness.[1] These previous books by Thompson complement this negative task with the positive reconstruction of an ontological foundation for critique. In these works, Thompson strengthens and adds sophistication to Marxian base-superstructure analysis by combining Marxism with a critical application of structural-functionalist sociology. He also develops a theory of "constitutive domination" by weaving together the arguments on social ontology of the analytical philosopher of language and mind, John Searle, with the insights of Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács into consciousness, ideology, reification, and social being. *Twilight of the Self* builds on Thompson's previous books by developing and applying the theory of constitutive domination to show how domination operates through the cybernetic systems of modern capitalist society.

Thompson demonstrates that modern domination operates specifically through reification. Domination in complex modern rational capitalist society takes the form of a normative order that is reified in the sense of becoming routinized, rationalized, and taken for granted. This reified normative order is theoretically reflected in structural functionalist sociology as classically developed by Talcott Parsons. Structural functionalist sociology is, in that sense, the *true*reflection of the reality of the structural functions of domination of the mass of human beings by complex systems that operate in the interests of an elite minority. Reification is the process through which this domination is embedded in everyday social life while removed from consciousness as people go about their daily life. In that sense, Thompson's structural functionalism is a *critique* of sociology analogous to Marx's critique of political economy. Parsons is to Thompson as Adam Smith and David Ricardo were to Marx. Parsons reveals the reified normative order of the capitalist social system but does so only in reified form.

Sociologists today tend to dismiss functionalism (while often tacitly presupposing it), just as the labor theory of value is regarded as surpassed by neo-classical economics. But just as Marxists see the labor theory of value as truer to the real operations of capitalist accumulation than the later developments in bourgeois economics that mask labor, Thompson regards Parsons' structural functionalism as the true sociological mirror of capitalist society. This implies that

structural functionalism's abandonment by the discipline of sociology by the late 1970s (coincident with the rise of neoliberalism and the abandonment of Keynesianism for monetarism by bourgeois economics) was because structural functionalism revealed too much. The image of a totally functionally integrated society was appealing to liberals during the prosperity and welfarism of the post-war boom. Hence, Ralf Dahrendorf (1958) argued that Parsons' image of functional integration was utopian.[2] But an image of functional normative integration combined with the inequality and social austerity of neoliberalism has a dystopian pall. This dystopia, according to Thompson, exists today. Sociologists recoiled from functionalism as it turned from utopia to dystopia, saying that it 'left no room for agency.' But according to Thompson, functionalism reflects the actual lack of agency of individuals under late capitalism. Thompson insists on the significance and validity of Parsons' account, but as true image of an actual cybernetic dystopia. This means that Parsons and sociology, as the reflection of a dystopian totality, must be suppressed and overcome as part of the process of humanity breaking free from this cybernetic system. Sociology must be realized in the sense that the social essence of humanity must be recognized and achieved in a fully social existence. At the same time, sociology must be suppressed in the sense that the reified social facticity that it represents and the reified consciousness through which it refracts this reified actuality must be overcome.

In opposition to the reified consciousness produced by capitalist cybernetic social relations, Thompson proposes critical ontology and critical agency. Critical ontology reveals the ontological reality of social facts but also the processual nature of these social facts as the congealment of human doing. Critical agency is individual activity in which the individual is conscious of their inherent sociality, of how their actions are shaped by and shape a broader social totality, and therefore of how their actions support value-rational forms of social life or instead feed into pathological forms of social connection that derive from an irrational social totality. In line with the tradition of critical theory, Thompson rejects the neo-Kantian and positivist conception of values as split off from fact. Since it excludes Kant's value-rationalism, positivism leaves values as unsubstantial subjective preferences. Thompson rejects the related postmodern anarchy of value relativism. Against these forms of subjectivism and relativism, and as a profoundly important intervention, taking forward the Frankfurt School search for grounds of critique, Thompson argues for the ontological reality of values.[3] Value propositions do not stand alone but fit into schemes of values, the coherency of which can be assessed, and which have as their corollary and implication real actions that support or undermine real forms of social life. It is therefore possible to assess whether the values one holds support or undermine forms of social life that promote autonomy and the flourishing of human individuals. Values are real in their consequences and these consequences are rational or irrational.

Parsonian Functionalism as Cybernetic Blueprint

Thompson develops a critical functionalism, transforming what critical sociologists from C. Wright Mills to Alvin Gouldner had regarded as the capitalist liberal apologetic theory of Parsons into a resource for a critical theory of the cybernetic society. Rather than being an

idealized account of a self-stabilizing liberal-democratic capitalism as a model of modernity, Thompson treats Parsons as having revealed the structure of a perfected mechanism of smoothly administered control. This mechanism has erased the capacity of the self for autonomy. In the cybernetic society, the functional imperatives of the base have achieved total domination over the superstructural institutions of politics and culture. Through determining the constitutive rules of superstructural institutions, these functional imperatives pattern individuals' desires and consciousness. Thompson writes, "The functionalist account of domination therefore looks for the elements of domination not in the relation between agents (something characteristic of premodern forms of domination) but in the systemic ways that individuals come to accept systems of authority as legitimate and worthy of their obedience." What "defines modern domination… is *routinized* and *rationalized* norms and conventions that come to be embedded in our institutions that forms subjects through socialization" (*Twilight of the Self*, p. 88, emphasis in original. All subsequent page numbers in parentheses are from this book). Thompson describes "the *subsumption of the self*" as arising in "the ways that the inculcation of these system logics and norms colonizes the collective-intentional structures of social cognition, thereby securing institutional patterns" (p. 71, emphasis in original).

Thompson treats Parsons' structural-functional model of society as the map of a social world totally subsumed by and subordinated to the imperatives of capital. The cybernetic society is the pattern of social norms binding human action to, and therefore continuously reproducing, what Lewis Mumford called the "megamachine" (p. 44). Parsons' structural-functional sociology is therefore the model of a society in which the cybernetic methods developed for the control of machine production have come to subsume social relations as a whole and, in this process, to subsume the self through modes of socialization that undermine the capacity for autonomous thought: "Capital's incessant capacity and drive to absorb everything external to it into the realm of the market, to commodify everything possible, has finally penetrated to the level of the personality, to the psychic world within" (p. 5).

Parsons defined quintessentially sociological thought as that which departs from the utilitarian model of the rationally self-interested individual in order to conceptualize social action as motivated compliance. This, for Thompson, renders Parsons the quintessential theorist of modern social control under which the autonomy of the self is eroded as the individual internalizes the pattern of norms that functions to maintain the smooth operation of the social system. What emerges is an image of the discipline of sociology as it took shape in the twentieth century as being the key theorization and legitimation of the dialectical turn of Enlightenment against itself: sociology as the rationalization of counter-Enlightenment.

Thompson stresses that the emergence of the autonomous individual was the most important progressive achievement of the Enlightenment: "Throughout the unfolding of the modern world, the individual's self-consciousness as a rational social agent has been at the center of the projects of modern democratic life, philosophical insights into human value and integrity, no less than the aesthetic insights of modern literature, painting, and music" (p. 2). Thompson follows the central thread of Frankfurt School critical theory, articulated in Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in seeing Enlightenment reason turned

against itself.[4] For Thompson, this takes the form of the elimination of the autonomous self by rationalized systems. Sociology is implicated in this process in the sense that, in the form of structural-functionalism, it provided the model of such systematized control and legitimized these systems.

Sociology was a product of the Enlightenment in its aspiration for a complete science of human relations. But it incorporated strands of conservative counter-Enlightenment thought that treated autonomy as a problem to be overcome in the pursuit of social integration and control. In particular, structural functionalism's account of social order as dependent on socialization processes was an attempt to provide an updated traditionalism for modernity. Individuals would internalize norms, such that individual action would be invisibly directed in conformity with cultural patterns. Sociology's neo-traditionalism provided the template for a social scientific legitimization of a modernity without autonomy. The portrait of modern society that Thompson presents is of a neo-traditionalism, in which the individual becomes *again* "a passive role-occupying part of the whole… follow[ing] the scripts available to it in the given world" (p. 3). But these scripts are not the organic inheritance of tradition formed over long periods of time. Instead, these scripts are the product of engineered systems and commodified environments geared toward efficient commodity production and consumption. This is "a phase of social development marked by social relations that have displaced the organic forms of community and mechanical forms of solidarity that characterized earlier phases of social reality and replaced them with one rooted in efficiency, control, and conformed socialization" (pp. 21-22).

In putting forward the case for symbolic interactionism against the currents both of functionalism and positivistic variable analysis that had come to prevail in American sociology by the mid-twentieth century, Herbert Blumer wrote: "Sociological thought rarely recognizes or treats human societies as composed of individuals who have selves. Instead, they assume human beings to be merely organisms with some kind of organization, responding to forces which play upon them."[5] The symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman sought to uncover the ways in which individuals preserve some semblance of autonomy and dignity through subtle forms of resistance and self-distancing, seemingly hiding an inner life behind their social masks and outward displays of conformity, as exemplified in the secret "underlife" of total institutions.[6] But such micro-interactional forms of resistance were inherently fragile and ephemeral, as the mechanisms of control have grown more sophisticated and burrowed deeper into the self. Dennis Wrong's critique of Parsons' "oversocialized conception of man," Thompson argues, was the reflection of a period in which subjectivity still retained some oppositional power. In the 1960s counterculture, as yet not completely assimilated "reservoirs of psychic need and energy… burst forth" in cultural revolt. But these very energies came to be themselves harnessed to the very real "oversocialization" of the individual in late capitalism, since "desublimation could be captured and contained within a culture of hyperconsumption" (p. 65). The subsumption of subjectivity by the economic base goes along with the marketing of subjectivity as escape from the compulsions inherent in the economic base, a marketing which is in fact the extension of this compulsion beyond the base to the superstructure and deep into subjectivity. Late capitalism sells an illusory image of infinite freedom and enjoyment, while

entrapping the self in networks of control.[7] Daniel Bell's cultural contradictions of capitalism have, Thompson argues, been resolved so that "economy, polity, and culture have *merged* rather than exist in tension with one another" (p. 58, emphasis in original). For example, "The creative energies and power of sexuality are attenuated through their commodification in pornography just as drives for self-expression are captured by the market" (p. 18).

What Marcuse called "repressive desublimation," in programmed commoditized 'fun,' has become central to the culture of late capitalism.[8] Just as cities advertise their nightlife, universities advertise their brand of "college experience." Sociologist Joseph Hermanowicz observes that, as universities market both commodified education and commodified fun, students experience a paradoxical combination of "fun" and "despair." A hedonistic culture of alcohol, drugs, and hookup sex is, Hermanowicz writes, "coincident with another dramatic pattern: burgeoning mental health problems of college students," with high levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide. Hermanowicz argues that escapist risk-taking fun, and despair, are subjective responses to an environment in which "neoliberalism not simply pervades this space but goes so far as to infiltrate the lives of students."[9]

British cultural criminologists Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, and Craig Ancrum find, in deindustrialized cities of the northeast of England, a working class with its solidarity broken, in which young men engage in crime, especially drug dealing, in order to fuel conspicuous competitive consumption. Their criminal motivations are rooted in a basic conformity with the deep values they have imbibed from mass media and the ambient culture of consumerism. They demand recognition as part of the elite of consumerism, looking down on the shabby herd from which they seek to distinguish themselves. Drawing upon the Lacanian theory of Slavoj Žižek, Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum argue that the young men they study are ruled by

> the super-ego injunction to enjoy. Consumerism now has a firm grasp on both the ego and the super-ego, which operate together as a joint psychodynamic force rather than as oppositional forces in tension. Thus infantile narcissism is now part of our way of life, and the conscience is merged with the aggressive quest for recognition in the social mirror, interfering with the fragile Enlightenment project of autonomous, ethical self-governance.[10]

Goffman's search for hidden strategies for preserving the self within the total institution was reflected by the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies who theorized "resistance" to capitalist hegemony in the "rituals" of youth subcultures, based on a theoretical perspective that integrated the symbolic interactionist sociology of deviance with Gramscian Marxism. Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum reject any such suggestion of resistance, arguing instead for the relevance of Robert Merton's functionalist conceptualization of crime as anomie, in which deviant normative strategies for achieving consumerist success combine with conformity to the prevailing capitalist values. They write, "Thus the normative strategies of law-abiding consumers differed from those of criminals and appeared as distinct values and practices, whereas in actuality deep, economically functional values with their accompanying desires and goals remained precisely the same."[11] So functionalism remains valid as a

representation of value-integration, even while these core values disintegrate social solidarity. A consumer society is organized in mass fascination by the spectacular image, while relations between people become increasingly fractured, so that life is rendered 'liquid' in Zygmunt Bauman's terms.[12]Society becomes more individualized, but individuals lose their ability to self-regulate and self-determine.

While culture in the past regulated individuals according to social mores, today individuals' susceptibility to the demands of the dominant culture is highly dysregulating and disorganizing. While, therefore, contemporary society shares something with traditional societies in individuals' passivity and lack of ability to critically self-determine, a key difference is the lack of cohesion, both of society and self, that is paradoxically produced by the shared symbolic order. Thompson draws on Mark Fisher's account of the use of devices and cultural products such as social media and mobile phones to retreat from society into a narcissistic haven of privatized consciousness and "into hedonic (or anhedonic) lassitude: the soft narcosis, the comfort food oblivion of Playstation, all-night TV and marijuana" (Fisher quoted on pp. 221-222). Since the 1960s, consumer capitalism has perfected the selling of "a plethora of avenues of escape" from the alienation and loneliness that it itself produces. So Thompson provides the important insight that "Our society is not, as thinkers such as Foucault believed, a 'disciplinary' society; it is more aptly characterized as populated by persons in possession of regressed egos that find gratification in the flat forms of escape the culture industry provides" (p. 221). In the anti-social society of consumerism, individuals are lost even as they all together stare at their screens and all buy from Amazon.[13] There is a combination of centralization and dissipation. Conformism coexists with, and reinforces, disorder, including the internal disordering of the self.

The consumer society, Thompson argues, produces a "weakened, withered ego" (p. 198). One might see this shift as reflected in the displacement of psychoanalysis by Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The self formed by Oedipal struggle with the authoritarian father, internalized in a powerful super-ego, suffered from what Marcuse called "surplus repression," desire leaking out in neurotic symptoms.[14] Psychoanalytic methods such as free association and dream analysis were oriented to giving play to suppressed psychic life. Today, the techniques of CBT, treating pervasive anxiety, depression, and addiction, utilize a range of mental exercises, conceptualized as 'tools' which the patient learns in order to bolster, or even substitute for, what Thompson calls internal "struts for ego strength" (p. 210). CBT provides an external scaffold to substitute for the lack of an internal architecture of character. The disorganization of the self, Thompson argues, is exacerbated by the stresses placed on family life, which cannot possibly support the psychic demand on its relationships generated by the growing need to retreat into it as a "haven" from an increasingly pathological public world.[15] The anxious "overscheduling" helicopter parenting of today's middle-class family combines with "The proliferation of television shows, portable internet devices, and videos, games, and other distractions that saturate even the youngest child's environment… all this crowds out the autonomy of imagination and free time so essential to childhood" (p. 202).

Followers of Donald Trump seem to have a strong libidinal bond with the authoritarian leader,

in the way that Franz Neumann argued was involved in twentieth-century fascism. But cybernetic society can function instead by creating a generalized retreat from public political involvement. Thompson writes: “Libidinal ties are now not so much focused on the strong leader but on the ego ideals that the culture industry is able to project and that hold the development of the self hostage… The anxiety produced by the alienation of agency… can lead to the need for ego-soothing that undermines the requisite ego-strength needed for critical civic life and consciousness” (pp. 209-210). Democracy then shrivels through placid withdrawal into private subjective worlds which are themselves saturated by the kaleidoscopic electronic hedonism of media spectacle. It is significant in this respect that Trump embodies the merging of the culture industry entertainment world of ‘reality television’ with the charisma of the authoritarian leader.[16]

Participation in creating one’s own personalized spectacular bubble replaces social and political participation. Hence, Thompson writes, “Public life has gradually petered out, replaced by a world where our identities and our former domain of privacy have been subsumed by a new digital face of capital” (p 4). The entrapment of subjectivity in commodification is promoted by the pseudo-rebellion and pseudo-transgressiveness of carnivalized consumerism. This produces what Lauren Langman and Maureen Ryan call the “carnival character” in which, they write, “the dominant mechanism of escape is privatized hedonism.” Langman and Ryan observe:

> This has in turn led to an enfeeblement of the self that is hidden behind a plurality of masks drawn from popular culture. If the “marketing character” sold him/her self as a commodity, the carnival character creates his/her identity through seemingly transgressive consumption in an ever changing plurality of fusions and/or contradictory appearances. While psychoanalytic discourses have moved from the classical pathologies of repression to the contemporary pathologies of the self e.g. “narcissistic character disorders”, false self and borderline personality disorders, such concepts must be understood as manifestations of the new forms of consumer-based selfhood that are increasingly indifferent to the political.[17]

Such indifference to politics is central to Thompson’s analysis of what he describes as the “withering” of self. Thompson writes, “The apraxic individual moves away from political life and activity, does not participate in civic life, and generally remains passive to moral and political problems” (p. 147). The decline of the individual in late capitalism goes along with the decline of the public sphere and of the institutions and forms of subjectivity that made possible citizenship as an accomplishment of modernity.

The citizen as active self-creating political agent has given way to the consumer, who considers themselves to be active but is only so in choosing among the one-dimensional pseudo-alternatives of commoditized lifestyles and symbols of distinction.[18] The consumer is fundamentally passive, indifferent, and resigned when it comes to the social totality which confronts them in reified form. Society appears not as a human world in the creating of which they participate, but as an alien world in which they can play a part only by possessing its

commodified products. The individual retreats into the private domain, but this is not truly private, since it is algorithmically programmed and surveilled.[19]

While the mid-twentieth century sociology of Parsons provided the clearest and most explicit analytical model of the cybernetically controlled society, the academic discipline of sociology itself was too traditionalistic and contemplative to actively implement it. Instead, the actual design of these systems for the engineering of passivity and conformity has been carried out by the propagandists of consumerism, the advertisers, and the technologists as emphasized by Jacques Ellul (p. 51). In Philip K. Dick's 1977 science fiction novel *A Scanner Darkly*, the protagonist's self fragments and dissolves under the influence of addiction and ubiquitous surveillance; with a split identity as undercover cop and drug addict, he carries out the absurd task of spying on himself.[20] This is an apt allegory for the world of surveillance capitalism that has come to fruition since Dick wrote.[21] Programmed addiction to commodity consumption and technological devices, keeping us hooked and hooked up to programmed fun, combines with a massive and insidious technological apparatus of corporate and governmental surveillance. The self is today entirely transparent to the agents of addiction and control. In destroying the boundaries of privacy around the self, this surveillance apparatus has undone the conditions for individual autonomy. Hence, as Thompson writes, "Now, more than ever, we are confronted with forces that seek to fit each of us into a grand pattern of being, to manage and engineer not only our institutions but also our inner thoughts and desires, the very essence of our subjectivity" (p. 27).

Critical Social Ontology versus Reification

Alongside this negative critique of contemporary culture and society, Thompson develops an intellectual project that seeks to construct a positive basis for the renewal of autonomy in terms of what he calls in *Twilight of the Self*"autonomy as critical agency" (pp. 229-271). He writes, "Autonomy as critical agency is… a 'cure' for the constrictions of self-consciousness placed on us by the thick forms of socialization and reification inherent in cybernetic society" (p. 232). Critical agency is different from the liberal possessive individualism deriving from Hobbes and Locke. Rather, Thompson follows a tradition of social ontology from Aristotle to Rousseau to Hegel to Marx in which, as he states in *The Specter of Babel* "human freedom, self-determination, and so on have an irreducibly social basis and this sociality has certain basic features that can be seen to be constitutive of our collective and individual lives."[22] Critical agency rejects the liberal doctrine of negative freedom. The individual cannot exist outside the web of social norms. Autonomy is not asocial. Rather, "I am autonomous as a critical agent when I inquire into the ways that the norms, practices, relational structures, and purposes of the social world I inhabit are shaped" (p. 232). Sociality and autonomy are compatible if the individual is a critical agent, capable of questioning the normative order in which they, as a social being, are embedded. In this way, critical agency means a de-reified relationship to norms. The capacity for autonomy requires that "one's self-understanding be tied… to a sense of whether the webs of norms and practices that constitute our social world are *legitimate*—as Rousseau would have maintained, that they serve common ends and purposes… What is rational, on this account is a feature of the ontology of our social world—of

the kinds of norms, practices, relations, processes, and ends that shape it" (p. 243, emphasis in original). Critical agency is the ability to judge social norms and the actions that they mandate, based on self-awareness of being, ontologically, or in one's very constitution as a human being in a human-made world, a social being.

Critical agency is therefore tied to what Thompson calls "critical social ontology," which he has outlined and defended in *The Domestication of Critical Theory* and *The Specter of Babel*.[23] The individual is autonomous when they know that they are ontologically socially determined but they are able to critically evaluate their determinations. The individual as critical agent evaluates what ends are pursued by the institutions in which they are embedded. The critical agent decides whether such institutions warrant their cooperation, obligation, and support, or whether they will resist these institutions.[24] There is an affinity between Thompson's argument regarding autonomy and social determination and Hegel's conception, as discussed by Engels in *Anti-Dühring*, that "freedom is the insight into necessity."[25]Thompson is arguing that autonomy consists in understanding one's social being, and therefore how one is determined by social forces, while also understanding that these forces are nothing but reified collective human agency in which one participates. Hence, Thompson describes critical agency "as a form of self-conscious activity constituted by an awareness of the ways that we sanction and grant legitimacy to forms of social reality" (p. 249). This is different from Habermasian deliberation or Honneth's politics of recognition because the politics that Thompson is proposing have definite content based on social ontology. The ontological grounds of politics that Thompson proposes involve a conception of the common good, arising from recognizing the inherent sociality of the individual. These grounds of politics therefore have affinity with Rousseau's 'general will.'[26] But Thompson's critical ontology represents an advance over Rousseau in providing a more sophisticated account of the social-ontological basis of general will, informed by Marxism and modern social theory.

Thompson's ontological account is deeply informed by his reading of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*and his later *The Ontology of Social Being*.[27] In this latter work, having established the ontological implications of Hegel and Marx's thought, Lukács sets out his own materialist conception of the ontology of the social as created in, and based on, the practical activity of labor.[28] In laboring on the physical world, the human being constitutes themselves as separate from that world and as a subject with their own purposes which they impose on the world around them.[29]Labor introduces purpose into the world, since it involves, in Lukács's words, a "teleological positing."[30] In non-human nature, "there are only actualities."[31] Labor raises consciousness to something more than an epiphenomenal accompaniment of activity (as it is for animals) so that now, in human activity, consciousness makes a difference, and realizes itself, by realizing its purposes in the world. So, in labor, consciousness, as the reflection of being, becomes more than a reflection and is now involved recursively in shaping being. Intentional activity comes to be directed not only at the physical world but at other human beings and the relations between human beings.[32] There arises therefore a complex recursiveness between language and labor, "a continuous influence of labour on speech and conceptual thought, and vice versa."[33]

Lukács shows labor to be the material foundation of the meaningful socially constructed world of culture made in language, through which human beings socially represent reality to themselves and construct a social reality. Lukács writes that

> the reflection of reality, as a precondition for the end and means of labour, gives rise to a separation, a freeing of man from his environment, a distancing, which is clearly revealed in the confrontation of subject and object. In the reflection of reality, the depiction is severed from the reality depicted, and channeled into a 'reality' of its own in consciousness… Ontologically, social being divides into two heterogeneous moments, which not only confront one another as heterogenous from the standpoint of being, but are in fact actual antitheses: being and its reflection in consciousness. This duality is a fundamental fact of social being.[34]

So Lukács addresses what Durkheim called "the dualism of human nature."[35] For Durkheim, this was the duality of the material body that remains individual and the mind which is an instantiation of the *conscience collective*. But Lukács shows how the Cartesian dualism reproduced by Durkheim is overcome in the practical activity of labor which produces social consciousness and realizes this consciousness in the material world as well as in the (seemingly immaterial) relations between human beings.[36] This means that Durkheimian 'social facts,' or the objectivity of social institutions and structures, do indeed have ontological reality, but that this ontological reality is produced by the activity of labor, in a dialectical process of what Anthony Giddens calls structuration.[37] Lukács describes the growth of social complexity as arising from labor in which simple teleological positing in any particular task gives rise to "a whole 'period of consequences'" as choices between alternatives ramify outward in a complex "causal series." In their complexity and expansion across space and time, these consequences take on an objectivity over and above and beyond conscious intention. So, as Marx said, "They do not know it, but they do it."[38]

Lukács provides the starting point for a social ontology founded on labor, which allows for the integrated conceptualization of the ontological reality of the cultural world of socially constructed meanings and the causal properties of social relations congealed in material objects. Human action in accordance with social rules produces and reproduces, in a process of structuration, lasting institutions that have objective reality as social facts. It is on this basis that Thompson has developed the social-ontological reconstruction of critical theory. Thompson further develops beyond Lukács the theorization of the ontological status of social institutions that, while resting ultimately on the material basis of labor as the metabolism of human beings with nature cannot be conceptualized as in themselves material but nevertheless have ontological reality. He does so by showing how the conceptualization of social life in terms of forms of life, language games, and speech acts in philosophy of language from Wittgenstein to John Searle may be integrated with the Marxist materialism of Lukács. In this way, he provides a stronger basis than Weber himself did for combining interpretative understanding with causal explanation and, implicitly, an argument against the view put forward by Wittgensteinian philosopher Peter Winch in *The Idea of a Social Science* that causal explanation does not apply to meaningful social action.[39]

In *The Specter of Babel*, Thompson considers Wittgenstein's well-known illustration of a form of life. He quotes Wittgenstein's thesis from *Philosophical Investigations*:

> The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words "block," "pillar," "slab," "beam." A calls them out;—B brings the stone which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language.[40]

Thompson writes:

> Consider this example from a different perspective. The very existence of the relation between A and B, between builder and assistant and how that relation constitutes a structure, how this structure contains and is constituted by a system of norms and value orientations, and how it interacts with the material world and orders and reorders that world, as well as the purposes and ends of the labors of those actors, and so on. All of this points to a much thicker and richer social ontology within which language games are embedded and which orients and structures those language games and the phenomenological experiences the participants have.[41]

Builder and assistant are status functions that have ontic reality as social facts. And, this social ontology is inherently related to purposes carried out in the material world of blocks, pillars, slabs and beams. The language game inheres in their practical activity which is both social interaction and interaction with the material world. It is their physical, bodily labor, on the material world, that gives them in Lukács' terms (following Engels) "something to say" to one another.[42]

The language game, as the following of a rule, is inherently normative. It is in the nature of a rule that there is a right way and a wrong way of following it. One is following the rule or one is breaking the rule. But rules have interpretative flexibility, according to Wittgenstein. They can be interpreted and applied in different ways, in different contexts. And indeed, if it were not for this flexibility, if the rule was absolutely rigid, it would cease to be useful as a guide to action in the complex and changing concrete contexts in which human beings must act in the world. So what then is the normativity of the rule? What constitutes following the rule, given the flexibility of interpretation? The rule-following in the language game of the builders, such and such passed object corresponding to such and such called-out word, is inseparably connected with the purpose of building a house, and doing so according to a plan, thereby translating the plan and the purpose it entails, into reality, thereby realizing that plan or purpose.

For Lukács, labor is the meeting point of teleology or human purpose with the material causality of nature. It is of fundamental importance that material nature pushes back in relation to human purposes. Lukács writes that "Man in his labour must necessarily seek success for his activity. But he can only obtain this if both in the positing of goals and in the

selection of means towards them, he directs himself undeviatingly to grasping everything connected with his labour in its objective being-in-itself, and behaves appropriately towards both goal and means."[43] Labor is always in struggle to impose human teleology on nature, which resists this imposition and creates its own alternatives to the causal chains that human purpose seeks to select from the myriad possible causal chains inherent in the natural properties of materials. So "However great the transforming effects of the teleological positing of causalities in the labour process, the natural boundary can only retreat, it can never fully disappear; and this refers to the nuclear reactor as much as to the stone axe."[44]

It is this resistance of nature to human purposes, the facticity of nature, Lukács argues, that gives rise to morality, in the form of self-control. Successful labor requires "the victory of correct understanding over mere instinct.… Man must devise his movements expressly for the work in hand, and execute these in constant struggle against mere instinct in himself, against himself."[45] In this way, while labor "alters the environment itself," it also requires the transformation of the human subject. So human "self-creation" takes place necessarily in the realm of necessity, the objective material world of nature, which is always present in human endeavors.[46] Oughtness in human activity therefore involves not only the selection of goals but also the selection of the correct means of achieving those goals faced with the material resistance of nature. This material resistance bears on the selection of goals themselves, which must be realistic or realizable given the way the world is as a matter of fact.

So in labor there is the teleological positing of the goal and there is the "ontological positing of concrete causal series."[47] Lukács writes of "The ontological coexistence of teleology and causality in working (practical) human behaviour" and of the "ontological co-presence of teleology and posited causality."[48] The labor process is guided, "teleologically directed," by the goal, so the behavior involved in labor is "governed by the 'ought' of the goal."[49] It is the pursuit of the goal (and not passive, abstract contemplation) that provides the impetus to knowledge of nature and its causal processes:

> What is involved here is not simply a correct reflection of reality in general, an adequate reaction to it, but rather that each particular correctness or error, i.e. each particular decision between alternatives in the labour process, can only be judged exclusively by the goal and its realization. Here, too, we are referring to an indelible interaction between the 'ought' and the reflection of reality (between teleology and posited causality).[50]

It is the labor process that gives rise to 'ought.' The oughtness or morality intrinsic to human social relations is founded on the purposeful, teleological character of labor. But this teleological character of labor, or teleological positing, is imbricated with the positing of causality, the chain of events which human action sets in motion that leads to the desired outcome, or not.

Lukács writes that "the metabolism between nature and society is so important" since it is "the foundation of both the rise of the 'ought' in general, from the human and social type of need satisfaction, and of its specificity, its special quality and its being-determining limits, which are

called into existence and determined by this 'ought' as the form and expression of real relations."[51] The "being-determining limits" are the objective limits set by the material reality of nature as these are manifested in the success or failure of strategies of realizing teleological positings through causal positings. Ought is constraining because it has its basis ultimately in objective materiality, in and through the human/social metabolism with nature.

If this is correct, then the limitation on interpretative flexibility within a form of life is not merely given by social sanction internalized through socialization and embedded in tradition and convention but rests ultimately (although in a highly socially mediated way) on the firm correct and incorrect, yes and no, given by nature as it pushes back against the particular alternatives that human beings willfully try to impose on it. Causal chains ramify through the human metabolism with nature, and through social relations, providing the ultimate basis for doing things this way rather than that way. Therefore labor is the source of 'ought,' in its teleological and causal positings and in the way in which these positings reach success or failure in their struggle with the objective properties and potentialities of natural objects.

Society only exists in the interactions between biological human beings. It therefore only exists as the organization of the collective metabolism of these biological beings, *Homo sapiens*, with the rest of the natural world. Social ontology is in that way fundamentally material. The reality of social things is built on material nature. However, the ontology of society, as Thompson argues, is not identical with materiality. The reality of social things cannot be reduced to material reality. Hence, Thompson draws on Searle's conception of "constitutive rules" to argue that "A legal code, money, rules and the kind of rule-following that allows for the game of baseball or checkers – all are objective social facts that constitute objects that possess social facticity rather than material (or natural) facticity."[52] This also gives the material objects used in such codes and games an ontology over and above their materialist ontology. For example, a piece of wood shaped into and used as a gavel in a courtroom can only be used as such, can only have its meaning and its coercive force as a gavel, in the context of the courtroom. A baseball bat is really a baseball bat, it has real existence as such, even though materially it is only a piece of wood. Its existence as a baseball bat is a function of the teleological positing of the labor involved in shaping the wood to certain specifications oriented toward the use of the piece of wood within the game that is entirely socially constructed.

Thompson draws on Searle to show the "deontic power" of social facts, in other words how "the norms we accept as constitutive of social facts make demands on us and our commitments, behavior and conscience… the capacity of any social fact to be able to cause us to perform, think or feel in some way." Thompson argues that "Social reality would not be real in any efficacious sense if it were not able to have some causal power."[53] This causal power grows as the chains of purposive action and choices between alternatives become increasingly complex: "as these kinds of activities congeal into more complex social forms, they further develop their ontological sophistication and reality." Hence, "social reality is *systemic* meaning."[54] Thompson turns to functionalism to develop the understanding of the emerging and growing systematicity of meaningful social action and the way in which social causation operates. In doing so, Thompson shows how functionalism can provide a sophisticated defense

of the Marxist base-superstructure model.

In *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, Thompson analyzes the terminology of causation through which Marx stated the determination of consciousness by being. Thompson emphasizes that Marx's notion of determination "does not imply a mechanistic form of causation" but rather "the act of placing limits… controlling the fundamental, rule-governed structure of any process or structure… In this sense, the act of *determining* any thing is the result of the kinds of patterned forms of life and action that any structure (in Marx's case, the economic structure) can impose on agents."[55] Thompson argues that this determination needs to be understood in relation to Searle's notion of "constitution," in the sense in which rules and rule-following action are constitutive of social things. So "structures and institutions are themselves constituted by human beings and their respective beliefs and practices."[56] Social determination therefore takes place through primary, i.e. more dominant, structures and institutions imposing certain definitions on the rules and norms through which secondary, or subordinate, structures and institutions regulate and order action. The more dominant structures may limit the rules or norms of the subordinate structures. Further, Thompson argues, "institutional norms possess a socializing function on agents, thereby granting them a determining character on the personality system of subjects."[57] By imposing certain rules or norms, the dominant structures and institutions shape subordinate institutions. The dominant structures and institutions also shape the selves of the individuals whose action takes place in the setting or context of institutions. Dominant structures and institutions thereby shape the consciousness and action of the individuals through whose agency structures and institutions are reproduced.

In this way, Thompson establishes the basis for a functionalist account of base-superstructure determination. On this model, causation operates in a non-mechanical way such that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between particular economic interests and the particular acts or policies of superstructure institutions. Rather, the rules and norms of superstructure institutions are defined, interpreted, and followed in such a way as to replicate the rules and norms of base institutions. The standards of legitimacy by which rules, norms, and actions in superstructure institutions are judged have a close correspondence with the rules, norms and actions institutionalized in the economic base. This instantiates Lukács' argument that "the development of a mode of being consists in the gradual—contradictory and uneven—acquisition of predominance by its own specific categories."[58] The categories arising within the base become the categories, or define the meaning and application of other categories, in terms of which action within the superstructure is defined and assessed. So there emerges a correspondence, or institutional isomorphism, between the overall functional imperatives (and patterns of organization following from those imperatives) of the base and the normative imperatives institutionalized in the superstructure.[59]

The teleological positings of the base (not as particular individual purposes and actions but as complex chains of purposive action interconnecting systemically) condition the teleological positings of the superstructure, systemically organized through rules and norms. Values or oughtness, rooted in the base, come to be expressed in the constitutive rules, criteria,

judgments of legitimacy, and mental attitudes that pervade the superstructure. So activities, and justifications of those activities, in the cultural, administrative and political organizations are tightly bound to the imperatives of capital. Thompson writes: “Hence, each sphere of society can be adapted to the goals of economic imperatives: schools away from education and toward training for the demands of the business community, artistic expression and taste toward the most profitable forms of entertainment, the ends of scientific research away from genuine needs and toward marketable ends, and so on.”[60] In contrast with mechanistic modes of causal explanation, this functionalist model incorporates the teleology and causality that Lukács argued were combined in labor and therefore in social action that has its basis in labor. In functional dominance of base over superstructure, what is prescribed in social institutions is determined by the demands of the economic base and hence of capital. The causal power of economic necessity (not of nature itself but of nature shaped by the labor process organized in the interests of, and through, the teleological positings of capital) necessitate following the demands of capital and limit the possible interpretations of norms to what ultimately will serve and be rewarded by capital.

Having Nothing to Say to One Another: The End of Work and the End of Mind

The cybernetic society is one in which the functional determination of the superstructure of culture and politics by the economic base has become especially powerful and tightly bound. This has occurred at precisely the same time as political contestation has shifted away from direct engagement with the economic base and has been increasingly directed at subjectivity, consciousness, and culture. This shift is evident in the decline of trade unionism and socialism and the turn of left-wing politics toward questions of identity oriented to gender, sexuality, and race. This shift is also evident in critical theory itself, which as Thompson argued has been “domesticated” through the Habermas-Honneth turn away from Marxism and political economy and toward abstract ethics of communication and recognition.[61] This turn in critical theory is itself a reflection of reification which Thompson defines as false consciousness incapable of grasping the totality. False consciousness arises from the functional dominance of the superstructure by the base, i.e. “*a patterning by the economic system of other spheres of social and cultural life*… [which] results in a deep distortion of the subject’s capacity to gain critical cognition of what we can call the ‘false totality’ of capitalism” (p. 173, emphasis in original). The Habermas-Honneth turn away from political economy itself is a weakening of the theoretical resources for critical cognition so that “such theoretical projects do little more than refract reified consciousness back onto the judging subject” (p. 191). The turn in critical theory toward subjectivity is really nothing but an instantiation of reification and therefore an accessory of the subsumption of subjectivity by capital. This undermining of critical theory from within, as the theoretical reflection of increasing cybernetic domination, takes place at the same time that capital subsumes the self through commodification while presenting new forms of commodified selfhood as escape from domination and alienation.

A new study shows that half of British teenagers feel addicted to social media. According to the study’s director, “Self-perceived social media addiction is not [necessarily] the same as drug addiction. But it’s not a nice feeling to feel you don’t have agency over your own

behaviour."[62] One does not become addicted to enlivening stimuli, according to Erich Fromm, but to simple stimuli, which consumerism tends to provide.[63] In social media, communication is reduced to simple stimuli. John Clark observes that, since the 1960s, capitalism has mastered "the trick of overstimulating and overexciting consumers at the same time that it was depressing and boring them."[64] In post-industrial society we seem to talk without having "something to say." Thompson observes that "the reason that the meaninglessness and loneliness is so profound is due to the extent that elites and the organization of society in general no longer need people—except for consumption" (p. 221). The shift in what Langman calls the "mediation of hegemony," from the active political form of selfhood that was the citizen to the politically passive consumer, goes along with the expulsion of individuals from forms of work that enabled them to experience themselves as active creators of their material environment.[65]

Thompson observes that "the continued degradation of work, deskilling, lowering of wages, and erasure of class consciousness were complemented by a resurgent reengineering of desire toward consumption" (p. 13). Thompson notes that the retreat into hedonistic passivity goes along with the prevalence of forms of work that provide no sense of participation in the active making of the world one inhabits:

> As the economy becomes increasingly technologically complex, we do not need more engineers and educated workers, as theorists of postindustrial society believed, but fewer and fewer of them. And those that are needed require less and less technical virtuosity. The economy now needs service workers, those that can serve the top echelons of the economy, from baristas to Uber drivers to a vast army of delivery personnel. The systematic disinvestment that society has placed in its youth, as evinced by the collapse of the nonelite university system and forms of education at all levels, has resulted in the unconscious introjection of valuelessness (p. 221).

As more and more skill and decision-making is taken over by computer systems and artificial intelligence, subjectivity is simply cut out of the circuits of production and power. Lukács argued that the human species gave birth to itself when, through its labor it made consciousness active in making the world and making itself, so that in humanity consciousness ceased to be an epiphenomenon. Cybernetic capitalism has now made human consciousness an epiphenomenon.[66]

Domesticated critical theory has sought to move political attention away from the economic base and toward a supposedly autonomous realm of deliberation and intersubjective recognition. Occupy Wall Street activists naively thought that open-ended deliberation would be 'prefigurative' of post-capitalist utopia. Much political attention is taken up in online argument which so often degenerates into vituperation. Communication proliferates, but is wearyingly impotent, without causal power. It is as if a new philosophical idealism has become actualized, in which argumentation over ought is detached from factual causal powers of and over the material world. Lacking substance and causal efficacy, this argumentation is experienced as meaningless chatter, prompting withdrawal. There is a great deal of talk,

without anything feeling worth saying. Whereas the emergence of citizenship out of subjection occurred with the emergence of the actively built world of industrial capitalism, the degeneration of citizenship and the twilight of the self is occurring with the rise of the hyper-reified world of de-industrialized cybernetic consumer capitalism.

Conclusion

This raises the problem of how autonomy as critical agency can, in this hyper-alienated post-industrial context, be more than distance, withdrawal, or individual forms of refusal and disobedience. Thompson notes that "Cultural modernism registered the shock" of the emergence of mass society "as the individual searched inward, deeper into the self and its own psychology, for the energy to compensate what was being lost in the vast machinery of modernity" (pp. 3-4). Part III of *Twilight of the Self*, which contains Chapter 8 on "Autonomy as Critical Agency" is intriguingly titled "To the Lighthouse." Does the lighthouse signify the inwardness of Virginia Woolf's cultural modernism or alternatively does it represent the necessity of a goal or teleological positing? Thompson points the way forward for the individual who seeks to cultivate in themselves a critical perspective on the prevailing social norms. One cannot escape the social but one can gain critical distance from its determinations. And one can express one's critical agency in principled disobedience, as did Thoreau, quoted in *The Specter of Babel*.[67] Social change requires individuals to be critical agents, with the willingness and resolve to disobey. But it also requires more than individual acts. Thompson writes, "The individual's consciousness of his or her interdependence with others marks a metaphysical shift not only of the self but of a new kind of sociality as well. Social solidarity becomes genuinely possible when individuals seek to relate and act in concert according to common needs and purposes" (p. 270). Nevertheless, while *Twilight of the Self* points the way toward adequate forms of critical judgment, it does not clarify how to act in concert on the basis of this judgment.

Here, perhaps, the materialism of Lukács' critical social ontology is key. Social life and individual human life are ultimately material and rest on the metabolism with nature. The disordering of this metabolism by capitalism threatens the future existence of human life itself. The perpetuation of war also threatens human survival. Imperialism, unless its dynamic is halted by mass action, appears set on a path toward another world war, which would be the last.[68] Can these material conditions of our common survival provide a basis for the galvanizing of critical agency into solidarity? Can growing material hardship make the level of inequality today, as society's resources are hoarded by a narrow elite, come to be experienced as simply intolerable? Is participation of students and young people in Palestine solidarity demonstrations across the US and around the world indicative of new solidarities forming and new forms of consciousness breaking out of institutions that are so clearly not only hollow but venal? Is there dialectical potential in the internet, social media, and communication technologies to galvanize and coordinate protest rather than be merely a distraction machine?[69] Or are these new energetic outbursts of youth destined to dissipate as a result of repression, contemptuous mockery and vilification by the entire apparatus of corporate media, and cooptation by pseudo-left, pseudo-radical politicians like Bernie Sanders and Alexandra

Ocasio-Cortez, so that, as Thompson writes, “Social protest becomes a spectacle rather than a manifestation of political power and will” (p. 224). Has protest itself been domesticated as an intense experience or as a form of symbolic communication without causal power?[70] Is protest just, to use Goffman’s words, “Another standard method of cooling the mark out… to allow the mark to explode, to break down, to cause a scene, to give full vent to his reactions and feelings, to ‘blow his top.’”[71] Does the re-emergence of large-scale strikes, such as by US auto-workers in 2023, suggest a rekindling of class struggle, after being suppressed for so many years?[72] Or does the tamping down of these strikes by the corporate-bureaucratic unions show the continued efficacy of cybernetic control? Are these manifestations just afterimages of a politics that no longer exists? Are they “post-emotional” scripted enactments of a memory of what people *would* have done, in the past?[73] The logical next step in Thompson’s political theoretical project would seem to be to address the question of whether, and how, critical agency can become critical solidarity.

Notes

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[2] Ralf Dahrendorf, “Out of Utopia: Toward a Reorientation of Sociological Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology* (1958) 64: 115-127.

[3] On the question of grounds for critique, see Raymond Geuss, *The idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[4] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

[5] Herbert Blumer, “Society as Symbolic Interaction,” in Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader on Social Psychology* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), 139-148, on 143.

[6] Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961).

[7] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); David Hancock, *The Countercultural Logic of Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *Nation of Rebels: Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2004); Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2005).

[8] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial*

Society (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

[9] Joseph C. Hermanowicz, "A Theory of Despair Among US College Students", *Planetary Sociology, Current Perspectives in Social Theory* Vol. 40 (2023), 227-249, on 236, 244.

[10] Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum, *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion and the New Culture of Narcissism* (Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing, 2008), 17.

[11] Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, *Criminal Identities*, 128.

[12] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, [2000] 2012).

[13] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

[14] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1955] 1966).

[15] Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[16] In his novel, *Kingdom Come* (New York: Liveright, 2013), first published in 2006, J. G. Ballard presented a fictional depiction of the merger of consumerism and fascism.

[17] Lauren Langman and Maureen Ryan, "Capitalism and the Carnival Character: The Escape from Reality," *Critical Sociology* 35 (4) (2009): 471-492, on 472.

[18] Lauren Langman, "From Subject to Citizen to Consumer: Embodiment and the Mediation of Hegemony," in Richard Harvey Brown ed., *The Politics of Selfhood; Bodies and Identities in Global Capitalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 167-188.

[19] John Cheney-Lippold, *We are Data: Algorithms and the Making of our Digital Selves* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

[20] Philip K. Dick, *A Scanner Darkly* (New York: Pantheon Books, [1977] 2006).

[21] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*(New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

[22] Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 26.

[23] Thompson, *Domestication of Critical Theory*, 179-204; Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 159-307.

[24] Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 296.

[25] Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring,* in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 1-309, on 105. See also Christopher Caudwell, *The Concept of Freedom* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1965).

[26] Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 182-191, 317-318

[27] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990); Georg Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being 3. Labour*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Merlin Press, 1980).

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[29] Reha Kadakal, "Lukács and the Problem of Knowledge: Critical Ontology as Social Theory," in Thompson ed., *Georg Lukács*, 392-418, on 408.

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[31] Lukács, *Ontology*, 20. See also Filippo Menozzi, "Reading Hegel after Marx: Lukács and the Question of Teleology," *International Critical Thought* 12(1) (2022): 98-115, on 103.

[32] Lukács, *Ontology*, 21, 38, 47.

[33] Lukács, *Ontology*, 50.

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[36] *Pace* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 29, 290-294.

[37] Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

[38] Lukács, *Ontology*, 18, 33, 56. See also George V. Plekhanov, *Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 66-70.

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[40] Wittgenstein, quoted in Thompson, *The Specter of Babe*l, 226

[41] Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 226.

[42] Engels, quoted in Lukács, *Ontology*, 100.

[43] Lukács, *Ontology*, 41.

[44] Lukács, *Ontology*, 34.

[45] Lukács, *Ontology*, 43.

[46] Lukács, Ontology, 44.

[47] Lukács, *Ontology*, 55.

[48] Lukács, *Ontology*, 55, 65.

[49] Lukács, *Ontology*, 66.

[50] Lukács, *Ontology*, 67.

[51] Lukács, *Ontology*, 74.

[52] Michael Thompson, "Marx, Lukács and the Groundwork of Critical Social Ontology," in idem ed., *Georg Lukács*, 419-455, on 433.

[53] Thompson, "Marx, Lukács and the Groundwork," 434.

[54] Thompson, "Marx, Lukács and the Groundwork," 435. Emphasis in original.

[55] Thompson, *Domestication*, 97-98. Emphasis in original.

[56] Thompson, *Domestication*, 98.

[57] Thompson, *Domestication*, 99-100.

[58] Lukács, *Ontology*, 67.

[59] Thompson, *Domestication*, 111-112. See Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48 (2) (April 1983): 147-160, esp. 150, 157.

[60] Thompson, *Domestication*, 103.

[61] Thompson, *Domestication*, esp. 63-82.

[62] Hannah Devlin, "Revealed: almost half of British teens feel addicted to social media, study says," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2024/jan/02/social-media-addiction-teenagers-study-phones. The insertion "[necessarily]" is in the newspaper article.

[63] Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 240-241.

[64] John Clark, "The Spectacle Looks Back into You: The Situationists and the Aporias of the Left," in Gregory Smulewicz-Zucker and Michael J. Thompson eds, *Radical Intellectuals and the Subversion of Progressive Politics: The Betrayal of Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 210-236, on 219.

[65] Langman, "From Subject to Citizen to Consumer."

[66] Franklin Foer, *World Without Mind: The Existential Threat of Big Tech* (London: Penguin, 2017).

[67] Thompson, *Specter of Babel*, 333.

[68] Emanuele Saccarelli and Latha Varadarajan, *Imperialism Past and Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[69] Cf. Lauren Langman, "After Marcuse: Subjectivity – From Repression to Consumption, and Beyond," *Radical Philosophy Review* 20 (1) (2017): 75-105; Ruth Milkman, "A New Political Generation: Millennials and the Post-2008 Wave of Protest," *American Sociological Review* 82 (1) (2017): 1-31; John Della Volpe, *Fight: How Gen Z is Channeling their Fear and Passion to Save America* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2021); June Edmunds and Bryan S. Turner, "Global Generations: Social Change in the Twentieth Century," *The British Journal of Sociology* 56 (4) (2005): 559-577; Cecile van der Velde, "'What Have You Done to Our World?': The Rise of a Global Generational Voice," *International Sociology* 38 (4) (June 2023): 1-27.

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[72] Brennan Doherty, “How ‘Strike Culture’ Took Hold in the US in 2023,” *BBC*, September 28, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20230927-how-strike-culture-took-hold-in-the-us-in-2023

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A Reply to My Critics

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3

I

I first want to thank the contributors to this symposium on my book, *Twilight of the Self: The Decline of the Individual in Late Capitalism* organized by Prof. Lauren Langman for taking the time to read my work and engage it with such depth and critical scrutiny. There is no higher honor in scholarly work to have such a chance to dive deeply into one's ideas with others.

But before dealing with each of the critics in this symposium individually I would like to offer a brief *précis* of my book in order to highlight what I see to me its most salient ideas but also to clarify what I see to be its most important normative message. My basic hypothesis is that the historicity of modern forms of instrumental and technical reason have intermingled with the development of capitalism as a form of life to create a qualitatively new and distinct phase or model of society. The move from a proprietary form of capitalism that dominated much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries gave way to corporate capitalism in the twentieth century. But the integration of the state, more elaborate forms of systematic technological developments in the natural sciences but also new management techniques stemming from the social sciences (economics, psychology and psychoanalysis, and other disciplines) began to give rise, after WWII to a new form of capitalism as a form of life. My term for this is "cybernetic society" by which I mean that norms practices and social processes that are necessary for large scale forms of socio-economic coordination have been internalized at deeper levels of consciousness and earlier levels of psychic development than in prior manifestations of capitalism.

Cybernetic society is distinct in the sense that it not only compels individuals to coordinate their own desires and activities in accordance with the normative regimes of society as a whole but it also has been able to engineer a deeper form of legitimacy and desire based on independent and individual forms of satisfaction which has left human beings bereft of the thicker forms of relatedness that nourished prior political and cultural forms of civic life. It is the new phase of capitalist society that has emerged from the wreckage on the social-democratic social model wrought by neoliberalism signaling a shift from a society of surplus, an "affluent society," to an age of oligarchic wealth, democratic decline, false scarcity and austerity.

The effects of these changes on the psychic dynamics and structure of the modern self have been severe. Neoliberalism was, at its base, a project for re-ordering society as a response to slow growth rates and stalled accumulation. The reassertion of capital's power over social and cultural life has resulted in a new form of reification of consciousness as the logics of economic imperatives invade and transform society, culture and polity, organizing them in accordance

with the norms of consumption and economic hierarchy. The ego, under these new circumstances, withers and loses its core capacities for both psychic and moral autonomy. As a result, what Karl Polanyi referred to as a "double movement" where society engenders a reaction formation to the tendencies of market logics that seek to undermine and pulverize it, has been neutered. A central reason for this is that our culture undermines the character structure requisite for such movements to emerge and to be sustained in any viable, efficacious sense.

This is what I refer to with the title "twilight of the self": a degradation of the self-structure, the forms of consciousness, evaluative capacities, and organized desire for solidarism requisite for a democratic form of civic life that can counter the tendencies of oligarchic wealth-defense and extractive logics of capital. What we need is to assert a new understanding of human social ontology as well as a deeper more robust assertion of the value of human autonomy as substrates for a new form of critical theory but also one that can nourish new forms of dissent and articulate more democratic and enlightened forms of society and social institutions.

Cybernetic society differs from the kind of uniform culture that was feared in the 1940s and 1950s as the result of managerialism. Both left and right had this deep fear – expressed by Orwell and Burnham, respectively – that a new managerial elite was imposing a uniform code of conduct, interests, behavior and norms on an otherwise free people via the mechanisms of large-scale institutions rooted in public authority. What cybernetic society actually is differs from this account in that it more correctly, in my view, sees that modern forms of uniformity are to be seen in the patterns of normative values and implicit legitimacy of the capitalist market society and culture that prevails after the neoliberal revolt against the social-democratic welfare state. Whereas the latter allowed for a cleavage between state/public authority on the one hand and civil society on the other, cybernetic society is defined by the elimination of these barriers and the absorption of their institutional and normative logics by economic imperatives mediated by technical forms of control, efficiency and management techniques. It is not public authority and an elitist cadre of experts that is the source of cybernetic society, but the controllers of capital and the institutional infrastructure around it.

Of course, this does not mean a uniform consciousness, a collectivity of drones operating in some kind of perverse Platonic techno-Republic. Rather, cybernetic society degrades authentic, critical forms of individuality and instead places emphasis on uniform conformity as well as subjective particularism. What results is a postmodern culture that allows for the venting of the cultural and psychic contradictions and forces that hold the accumulation process together as well as the persistence of traditional forms of value systems and belief that can serve to offset the psychic tensions that result from the nihilism of the system's imperatives. Neoliberalism's project was the undermining of social relations for the purpose of extending market logics and commodification to the fullest extent possible. Time, space, work, leisure, psyche and world have been the central domains colonized by the renewed forces of capital unleashed from the democratic layers of redistribution and regulatory frameworks that defined the post-WWII period of capitalist development. The alienation that cybernetic society fosters is of such a magnitude because these civic and social forms of relatedness have thinned out and, in many

instances, disappeared entirely.

The particular self is left with the burden of creating meaning and finding some sense of security. But my thesis is that the kind of self created by such a socio-cultural situation is one that lacks the capacity for autonomous critical agency. It undermines the possibility for democratic rationality and instead the self seeks out group forms of identity and belonging that result in anti-democratic attitudes and values. On the right, this finds familiar form in religious identity and a new vigor in racialized, hierarchical identities and beliefs. Sado-masochism makes a return to public life in the new wave of authoritarian populism and neo-fascist politics. On the left, the need to compensate for the withering of the ego is provided for by incorporation into group forms of identity that serve to protect the self. Identity now becomes a psychic and political pole of organization for the ego as it finds a form of rootedness in group belonging. In both instances, right and left forms of group narcissism, rational, democratic forms of agency are weakened and the possibility for a more robust form of democratic civic agency is compromised.

II

It seems to me that in different ways each respondent in this symposium has grappled with different aspects of this argument from very different positions. But I believe a core line of criticism that unites the different respondents is that of praxis: how can we turn the critical exploration IN provide of the new character structure created by cybernetic society into something with political promise or transformational potential? Prof. Thorpe comments that my theory of autonomy as critical agency: “raises the problem of how autonomy as critical agency can, in this hyper-alienated post-industrial context, be more than distance, withdrawal, or individual forms of refusal and disobedience.” He continues: “The disordering of this metabolism by capitalism threatens the future existence of human life itself. The perpetuation of war also threatens human survival. Imperialism, unless its dynamic is halted by mass action, appears set on a path toward another world war, which would be the last. Can these material conditions of our common survival provide a basis for the galvanizing of critical agency into solidarity? Can growing material hardship make the level of inequality today, as society’s resources are hoarded by a narrow elite, come to be experienced as simply intolerable? Is participation of students and young people in Palestine solidarity demonstrations across the US and around the world indicative of new solidarities forming and new forms of consciousness breaking out of institutions that are so clearly not only hollow but venal? Is there dialectical potential in the internet, social media, and communication technologies to galvanize and coordinate protest rather than be merely a distraction machine?”

First, I think it would be prudent to clarify what I mean by reconstructing the concept of autonomy as “critical agency.” As I see it, cybernetic society does not nullify the desire for protest or reaction to the system, but it does disable the rationalistic and solidaristic character of social movements. All too often, autonomy is seen as a pole opposite to that of group relations. But this is only when we look at the pathological forms of group-belonging and needs for relatedness that are rooted in the withered ego’s need for surplus recognition or its need to

fill more primitive needs for belonging and identity. But if we recast autonomy in a relational sense, that is, if we see autonomy as the capacity to see oneself as a member of cooperative forms of life and that those forms of life are implicitly authorized by my participation in them, critique places me in the position where I must interrogate the norms, the character of the relations of that form of life as well as the purposes toward which it is organized. Autonomy now emphasizes the need for the subject's power of critique: to *self-authorize* the forms of life – the norms, relations, purposes – that generate the social world. Solidarity, in this sense, is a distinct kind of relatedness: it occurs between autonomously self-authorizing members of a group. What binds them together is the commitment to principle, and this commitment is one that is the result of bringing desire and emotion into dialectical contact with principle and interest. It is this that creates the basis for a rational-democratic group dynamic.

This is what I mean to develop in the last chapter of the book. It is not only a theory of autonomy, it is a theory of what a democratic self would look like, what kinds of psychic and intellectual powers it would be capable of manifesting. Central here is the capacity to articulate democratic relations and ends, to scrutinize the norms that cybernetic society cloaks in popular culture, in managerial logics, and the institutions that we passively accept as part of our world. The democratic self is a relational self and, *ex hypothesi*, it is also a theory of a new form of group affiliation that can serve as the foundation for truly democratic forms of solidarity and group formation. By outlining a new theory of the autonomous, relational individual, we are also able to grasp the basis for the kind of democratic character that is requisite for radical political change. This model of autonomy is not some ideal, some kind of product of philosophy. As I see it, it is a product of immanent critique, of a push toward critical reflection of everyday life. We are confronted every day with contradictions and irrationalities of our social system. The theory of critical agency I endorse is a means to push this toward a new form of consciousness and, with hope, praxis as well.

One reason for this is that, as I see it, the concept of autonomy needs to be understood in *ontological* terms, not in transcendental terms as in Kantian models of rational autonomy. What this means is that we grasp ourselves as relational and practical beings; that is, as beings that have intrinsic needs for relatedness to others as well as the capacity to express what is internal to us in the realm of ideas or affects into the world through objectifying them, whether through language, labor or other means of manipulating the objective and material world to realize some end or purpose. This I see as an extension of the later ideas of Lukács and his ontology of social being, as Prof. Thorpe aptly points out. But I think what this further means is that the relations, practices, norms, ends and purposes that ensconce me – my social ontology, in other words – must be seen as a collective product. As a result, the object of radical politics should be the transformation of this social ontology via a critical engagement with the norms, practices, relations and ends that I am a part of constituting. Idealism and materialism merge here to become a critical social ontology – and it is the very manifold of the social and political itself.

The problem is that alienation, reification and false consciousness – all effects of cybernetic society – isolate our affects from our capacities for rational reflection. The withered ego's need for identity and group-belonging is meant to satisfy primitive emotional needs that take

precedence over the reflective, rational aspects of the mind. Social movements therefore can still exist, but they are increasingly incoherent in terms of their demands; they become more and more defined by emotional outrage and less by principled demands for change. We can see this in the Occupy Wall Street protests. These were defined more by a carnival atmosphere, an attempt to generate a different aesthetic of sociality, and a place for venting and the narcissistic exploration of self, it had no concrete demands for political change, no program for organizing and coordinating power, and no clear cut statement of principles. This is no less true for Black Lives Matter or other recent protest movements. It is not that they are not responding to real forms of power and injustice, it is that the reaction is experienced by a character structure that has been disabled from fomenting real, lasting political and social change.

Of course, this is celebrated in our postmodern times as what social movements should be – and we can see the ineffectuality of this position prevail all around us. Today, neo-fascism is growing, authoritarianism continues to transform social and political life, and an oligarchy is more deeply entrenched now than in any time in the post-WWII era. Prof. Thorpe inquires: "Has protest itself been domesticated as an intense experience or as a form of symbolic communication without causal power?" The answer is, "yes." Until critical theory can hold these movements to critical account, until left intellectuals can foster a more mature, more rational foundation for political critique, until a rational form of autonomy is restored to our theories of political reflection and moral consciousness – until these things are put back at the center of what postmodern theorists and their critique of the Enlightenment, of reason, of humanism tore asunder, until then these reactions will remain emotionally charged but politically ineffectual.

III

On a similar note, Prof. Halley asks: "it is difficult to understand and conceptualize how capitalist society can be resisted in the face of the damaged subjectivity that Thompson describes." It is perhaps important to quote his criticism in full:

> We can posit that no particular individual can bring about societal change when society is conceived of as a totality that determines and does not merely receive or take its particularities. In addressing the problem of change posed by the cybersociety being conceived as such a totality, Thompson seems to assume that, even if every person, or self, is potentially critical, what is at issue for a theory of change from one totality to another is not the effort of an aggregate of selves but the counter-mobilization of a population already mobilized as determined by the existing totality. It will not do, as Thompson does, to assume that it is sufficient to explain societal change by conditions that primarily motivate dominated persons whose aggregated anger somehow envisions a future society and its possible attainment.

The problem of the *particular*, of *particularity* (*Besonderheit*) is here important, specifically in terms of its relation to the totality. My argument is that autonomy needs to be understood in a

dialectical, Hegelian sense. That is, as the mediation of universality, particularity, and individuality. Hegel's logical idea is that individuality is a dialectical sublation of particularity and universality. When taken too far, either of these poles leads to abstraction. Particularity no longer has universality in view and can no longer have rational grasp of the concept, and universality crushes the singularity of any existent thing. The totality, in both cases, becomes not a rational whole, but either a thing from which my particularity is alienated, thereby undermining my capacity for achieving rational self-consciousness, or universality becomes abstract and there is no place for the self to feel at home in the world. Both are expressions of irrationality in that they no longer meet the standard of the concept which has as its apex internal relations of reciprocity. My point here is that this is at play in my understanding of autonomy as a relational and ontological category. Only when we see ourselves as individuals that can create and sustain relations that express equality, reciprocity and interdependence, only then am I acting in a truly social, solidaristic way.

Prof. Halley notes, in comparing my argument to that of Sartre: "Thompson's focus is on individuals prior to the social movement from association to organization. While this may be adequate to a theory of the type of character that is immanently open to change, it is necessary to show how the line between the irrational and rational society can be, as a practical matter, crossed." But I see this differently. For Hegel, essence is to be understood as a phase of the concept. Autonomous beings, in my sense, possess ontological self-consciousness by which I mean they possess the capacity to understand themselves as relational beings and that *rational*, or freedom-enhancing relations – i.e., those that satisfy Rousseau's test of being both individual and common at once – are those that achieve the character of reciprocity to accomplish or realize common or universal ends or purposes. Freedom, in this sense, is achieved only socially; only when we can articulate social relations, institutions and processes that realize reciprocity and teleology. That is, only when we as individuals interact with one another in a cooperative, social way in accordance with norms and practices that we can see as rationally valid and which we choose to follow as expressions of our will. But it is my thesis that that defects in modern society lead us toward a kind of character structure that seeks out irrational and pathological forms of relatedness. We have lost autonomy as a critical value and cultural ideal.

Prof. Halley then goes on to argue that avant-garde art is one way of de-familiarizing the world, of breaking up the reified realm of experience and disrupting the centripetal forces of uniformity of consciousness. I think this is true – but only to a certain extent. Again, the importance here of Hegel's dialectic of the concept – that of the three aspects of particularity, universality, and individuality – enters into the discussion. When taken to its extreme, avant-garde art crosses over into the hyper-valorization of the particular at the expense of the individual and universal. Just as in postmodern theory, the experience of the particular is definitive and not instructive. Indeed, the avant-garde is an essential component of the critical enterprise in that it has the capacity to shatter rigidified experience and open us up to what has been repressed within us, the spontaneity and radical subjectivity that is requisite to accent our existence within the totality. But it also lacks the capacity to grant us ethical coherence, to establish values that need to be used for building an alternative form of ethical

life that can displace the nihilism and cultural bankruptcy of late modernity. The avant-garde and "weirdness" cannot, in my view, provide us with this. Rather, it is in forms of engaged critical realism that we find values raised to prominence and to the level of critical scrutiny. It is not that we should choose Thomas Mann over that of Samuel Beckett – both are needed, and this is because we need to bring together the particular and the universal to be able to revivify individuality. Refuge to the particular will simply not do.

In short, what I think is important to emphasize here is that the concept of autonomy I seek to develop in this book to serve as the antidote to the deleterious effects of cybernetic society by laying the foundations for a democratic theory of the self. The totality is more imbued by the logics of efficiency, organizational order and the reification of all forms of life and their reduction to the status of quantified value. But I am adamant that what is needed is for critical theory to move toward a new theory of the self, of the individual. De-reifying consciousness is a matter of changing our relation to self and world from one that is *ontic*, seen as immutable, immune to alteration, to that which is *ontological*, that is, to what is alterable, changeable, and subject to a wider scope of freedom and common life.

IV

Prof. Langman's comments also seem to resonate with the worries of Profs. Thorpe and Halley. In particular, he insists that there is a flowering of movements. Young people are on the move, and there is change in the air. As he puts it:

> Thus, for example, many of the environmentalist movements, Greenpeace, 350.org, Earth Justice, or Sierra Club have a strong grassroots orientation and many of the activists tend to be young people. Think only of Greta Thunburg who is now just a little bit over 21. Much the same he said about many of the feminist organizations such as NOW #Me too pr Slut Walk. Similarly, newer civil rights movements, especially BLM, consist of younger activists. Following the general shift toward the authoritarian right, young people have flocked to a variety of political organizations and causes.

It hardly needs mentioning that these movements, if they can be called such, are largely reactionary, without political programs, and largely speak to particularist concerns and do not possess the more universal message of the best of the socialistic and labor movements of the early-twentieth century or the depth of the civil rights movement of the 1960s in the US in particular. Prof. Langman falls prey to a common fallacy among those on the left in the wake of neoliberalism. Their experiences were largely based on the anti-war movement and civil rights movement of the 1960s.

But as I have been trying to show, there is a very different culture, economy and character structure at work here. Cybernetic society has withered the ego, it has thinned out the self, it has left us with a relativistic sense of value even as it has organized our inner subjectivity via a uniform culture industry that has shaped the desires and aspirations of young people. They no longer are in search for a transvaluation of values and are increasingly unable to develop a

committed form of action and principle. Instead, affective response to political and economic pathologies becomes more prevalent and solidarism gives way to forms of group-belonging, further weakening the political efficacy of "movements." Indeed, we should refer to what occurs on the left less as a movement, which conveys the idea of a coherent set of principles and goals coordinated by many different strata of society over a long period of time for social and political change, and more as political theater that grants participants a release valve for moral catharsis.

Undeterred, Prof. Langman continues: "in many ways it becomes clear the generational status has a major influence in the general trend, as shown that younger cohorts tend to be more progressive. It is not so much that people change, but older people, born in different economic, cultural, and political moments tend to consider that time as 'normal.'" But why should we assume this to be the case? If anything, younger people are more susceptible to the manipulation by new forms of media such as podcasts and video games. Younger men and boys are regressing, embracing more toxic-masculine self-objects (think Tate brothers, Jordan Peterson and others). Feminism has been effectively metabolized by its incorporation into the mainstream of society by changing its focus for how women can be included in capitalistic and commodifying society. No longer interested in the transformation of social relations into less hierarchical, less sado-masochistic form, the new feminism seeks to include women as CEO's, as entrepreneurs, empowered by turning themselves into sex objects, and so on, merely re-producing the system of power that already exists, domesticating a movement that once sought its transformation.

In fact what is perhaps most problematic now is the utter depth of ignorance about public affairs and public life that young people generally display. The more that cybernetic society increases its hold on the social totality, the more that non- and anti-capitalist institutions, norms, and values shrivel and die off. The system tolerates only what does not threaten its capacities for efficiency, wealth-defense, and accumulation. The cultural epiphenomena of gender, sexuality, race and other dimensions of identity that are at the core of contemporary political consciousness matter little if at all to these imperatives. All the while, the culture of cybernetic society looks like a playground for the withered ego. Education has been dissolving, aesthetic production and reception has been regressing and increasingly commodified, and ethical value is no longer a concern as group belonging takes hold of the deeper needs of the withered ego.

We should not fool ourselves on this essential point: that our civic life is petering out, that spaces for democratic experience, civic learning and democratic consciousness-building are vanishing. They are being replaced with non- and anti-democratic spaces where either hierarchy, atomism or the incestuousness of filial ties dominate. We are left with frustration and ressentiment – things that can be fed by anti-democratic attitudes and movements far more easily than by the supposed progressive renaissance to which Prof. Langman alludes. Indeed, I would suggest that this is just what we are witnessing. And if we do not recover the importance of autonomy, of reason of the Enlightenment, of ethical value and solidarism, all values and concepts that postmodern critics and traditional conservatives alike have sought to destroy,

then we will witness the twilight of the democratic self, and democratic society as a whole.

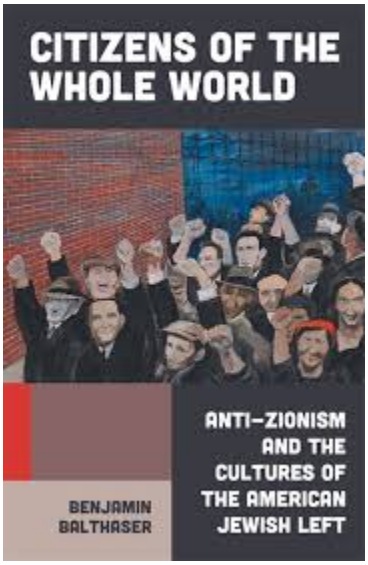
V

It has been my intention to respond to what I see to be important criticisms of my book. The three respondents have raised crucial points about my book. But I must affirm that what looks like my diagnosis of a totally administered society with no space for resistance or transformation is the opposite of what I wish to stress. Rather, I believe we need to look for, to construct a political theory that will be able to meet the higher needs of human social life. A political vision that emphasizes common goods and purposes, reciprocal relations of cooperative life, a sense of personal purpose and meaning as well as authentic self-expression – in short, a life that, both at the individual and social level, can be grasped as a self-authorized world rather than one that overpowers the individual, where power and domination underwrite the norms and life courses of others.

Such a political theory will need to take seriously these higher needs and goods, one that places emphasis on the de-alienation of our will and powers of reflection in order to be able to shape a truly self-determining world. My book shows us the inverse of this course; it shows how modern forms of power and the the model of institutional reality and collective life that has taken form since the neoliberal counter-revolt are gradually eroding the individual, which is the central font for such a new kind of politics. Perhaps we will be able to cultivate a new form of critical agency, a renewal of autonomy and critical judgment that will be able to pierce through the veil of reification. Until this happens, critical theory and aspirations for truly democratic ethical life will remain out of reach.

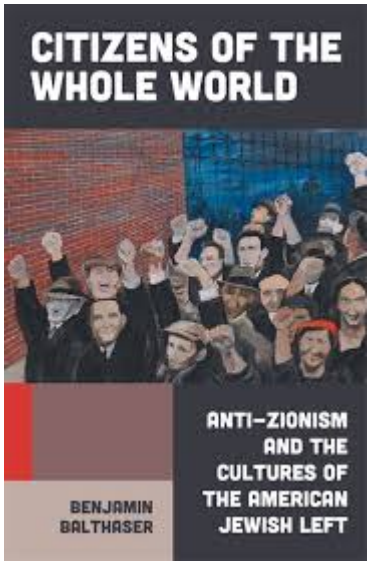
Benjamin Balthaser’s Citizens of the Whole World

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3



This volume, by a cultural scholar teaching at Indiana University, South Bend, could not have appeared at a more auspicious moment. Some Facebook participants describe it as ”the most talked-about book,” and with good reason. It speaks about the long and (for the most part) quietly held non-zionist sentiments of many Jewish Americans.

At a moment when the Summer 2025 issue of *Jewish Currents* warns that dissenters feel themselves cast out of Jewish institutions and relationships, *Citizens of the Whole World* gives hope. Their anti-zionist views have historical ballast, even as the Jewish Community Centers, Hillels and assorted Judaic congregations rally to defend Israeli actions and as progressives working in Jewish/Judaic Studies programs in colleges and universities face an assortment of threats for the least dissenting expression.



Balthaser has done his homework. His intellectual history of anti-zionism is also informative precisely because so much effort has been made to bury this history. As he explains, the story holds a precious irony. The Jewish middle and upper classes in particular, from the 1850s onward until the Holocaust, viewed America as *the* safe and promising place, English as the language of choice, and alternatives as…distractions both impractical and unwanted.

German-American Jews, some of them arriving after the failure of the 1848 revolutions, set the tone for vast accomplishments just ahead. Certainly, modern US culture, high or low, could not have emerged without them. From Tin Pan Alley to the New York Philharmonic and the Ethical Culture Society (*i.e.,* the sensible substitute for religion), a considerable class of Jews prospered and exerted their influence. Thriving garment businesses employing (and also exploiting) Eastern European cousins arriving from the 1890s onward reinforced the genteel Jewish identification with the new homeland. The Jewish working class Left, socialists and anarchists, had their own reasons to refuse zionist alternatives to class struggle.

The First World War, bringing new crises to European Jewry, along with the US immigration restrictions that followed, reshaped the controversies that Balthaser discusses with vigor. A keen intellectual historian, he lacks access to the story of the Yiddish world of politics and controversy, but he examines the wrangling of the Jewish Left at large with vividly close attention.

The Left had a lot to say. For such novelist/critics as Mike Gold—at once brilliant, articulate and viciously polemical—Jews are victims of a "de-territorialized diasporism," signifying the "broken [Jewish] nation" that nevertheless goes on searching for answers and "reveres its writers and thinkers." (p.29) The first Jew encountered in Gold's famed novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) is mistaken for an African-American, no insult for the likes of Gold. Far from it. The Jewish bad guy of the novel is an upwardly mobile shnook trying to persuade urban Jews to move to the then all-white, outer Brooklyn. Thus an historic Marxist interpretation easier to maintain before 1950: Jews are the natural allies of those punished and discriminated against in the US.

Left-wing Jewish intellectuals in the US and Europe continued to ruminate and wrangle over these points even as history shifted the players. Without a doubt, the terrain became more difficult with the easing of anti-Jewish discrimination and the upward mobility made accessible by the GI Bill. Some of the most wonderfully new material in the book examines closely the arguments among Communist intellectuals during the 1940s. Expecting a return to Depression economic conditions, but also expecting (just as inaccurately) the triumph of the multi-racial Left organizations and popular culture that peaked during wartime, they struggled mightily with what Jewishness in particular meant to them. Their discussions, including the ruminations of young playwright Arthur Miller discussed at length in Alan Wald's studies of American leftwing writers, remain vivid and insightful even now.

Balthaser is more interested, however, in a generation closer to his own. Within the 1960s-70s movements, ongoing assimilation impulses compete with leftwing passions going the other direction. For a cohort of New Left Jews, the

leftwing Jewish Chicago group or "collective" Chutzpah thus set themselves apart from the framework of liberalism often described (by Irving Howe's widely read *World of Our Fathers*, for instance) as the "natural" framework of Jewish Americans. The cultural and political radicalism of Abbie Hoffman and his Yippies, not to mention Jane Alpert or for that matter, even Bob Dylan would do as well.

The problem for Chutzpah and other groups, along with tens of thousands of similar-minded activists of civil rights, peace, feminism and assorted other liberation movements, was that rightwing responses epitomized in Ronald Reagan won out. McCarthyism, the repression of the Jewish Left but also disillusion with the USSR, prepared the rise of a new, intense and heavily Jewish nationalism inflamed by Israeli military triumphs. Jewish idealist hopes had been turned inside out.

How did we get there? Balthaser has not one answer but many possible answers. The merger of American Jewish liberals and conservatives—so often at each others throats over taxes, unions and the New Deal at large—took shape with Six Day War because the various pieces of a puzzle fell into place at once. Before 1967, Jewish institutions, even those sympathetically interested in the Jewish State, had largely devoted themselves to Jewish refugees and the survivors of the Holocaust in particular. Suddenly, donor interests, political priorities and even Hollywood glitz (think of "Exodus," a staggeringly biased film mainly remembered for handsome Paul Newman) led in. new direction. A "war of liberation" against the Arab states, so very unlike the unpopular Vietnam War, seemed proof of a refreshed Jewishness, even of Judaism reborn.

Balthaser is at his best dissecting the complications. Neoconservative luminary Nathan Glazer among others explained that American Jews, even when discriminated against, had been "prefiguratively white" and modern, unlike (for instance) African-Americans, who were obviously held back by an inferior culture. Jewish new leftists and their successors naturally saw the same picture from the other side: Jews had a special need to cast off such privileges

and join the oppressed (leaning rightward from the Left, Marshall Berman predictably described this as the “romance of marginality,” p.133).

Jews had, of course, played a central role in the US Left in so many ways from the 1910s onward, from unions and community organizing (like the rent strikes in poor neighborhoods and the call, “Johnny, go get a Red!”) to the Popular Front world of entertainment, music and film, with some of the biggest stars and highest-paid writers/performers aboard. Some of them had even adopted the new and hopeful Israel as a place to perform, “Red Haifa” in particular. But all this was pretty much in the rear view mirror by 1980. What now?

The rejection of “suburbanism” that appeared to Glazer as both assimilation (escape from any Jewishness) and simultaneously a form of self-hatred, would be seen by many as a recuperation of radical grandparents’ dreams of a society based on something better than consumerism and nationalism of any variety. That is: the birth or, properly, the rebirth of something called the Jewish Left.

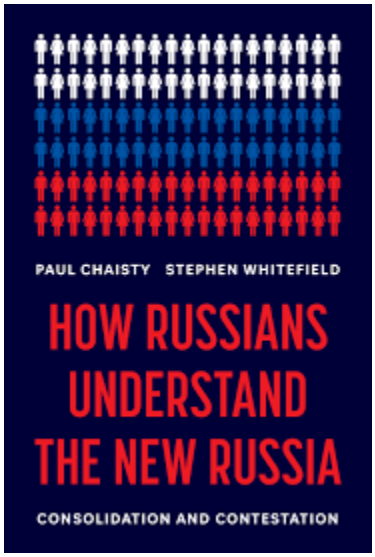
Thus, as Balthaser draws upon the past, the (Jewish) Bund, with a following of hundreds of thousands across the pre-1940 Pale, the “revolutionary identity politics before identity politics” (p.178) might be a guide to the present—as recuperated by a reborn Bund movement. Are there still grounds for a “working class, socialist subjectivity” (p.193) in a world of omnipresent downward mobility? If not mainly in the workplace, then perhaps in “community spaces” of assorted kinds?

Here, I think, is the most hopeful part of *Citizens of the Whole World*. The editor of *Jewish Currents*, Ariellle Angel, has recently been exploring the need of Jewish progressives for new communal zones, in no small part because peacenik Jews now feel excluded from hawkish synagogues, JCCs and such.

Better than or, more accurately, before anyone else, way back in the 1980s-90s, Melanie Kaye/Kantorwitz dissected the rightward drift and the urgent need to create a community of a new kind within Jewish America. New Jewish Agenda, founded on the aftermath of the massacre of civilians in Lebanon in 1982, served as a preliminary expression of Kaye/Kantorwitz’s vision until it was pretty much destroyed by institutional opposition. The spirit carried on in a variety of groups, especially the New York-based Jews for Racial and Economic Justice. And is reborn once again, as demonstrated in the enthusiasms of campus energies—whatever the repression at hand—and finally the Mamdani Campaign.

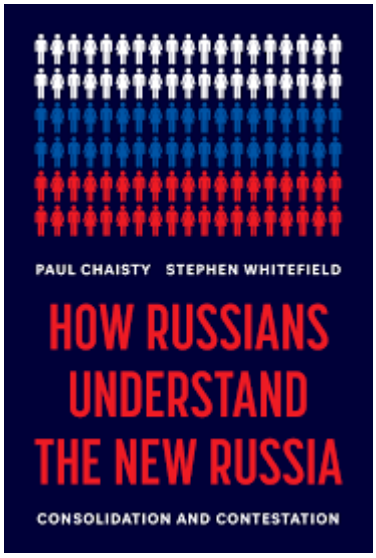
Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield's How Russians Understand the New Russia

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 3



Chaisty and Whitefield offer a compelling and meticulously researched investigation into how Russian citizens have come to understand, and sometimes resist, the hybrid political economy that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Drawing on nearly three decades of longitudinal survey data, the authors trace the evolution of public attitudes toward a system that presents itself as democratic and market-oriented in form, but is, in practice, marked by authoritarian rule and patrimonial capitalism.

This book is a major contribution to the fields of comparative politics, post-Soviet studies, and authoritarianism research. Rather than focusing solely on elite strategies or institutional developments, Chaisty and Whitefield place ordinary Russians at the center of their analysis, asking whether citizens have truly internalized the norms of this hybrid regime or whether the system remains fundamentally contested. They develop a framework that distinguishes between normative and practice-based acceptance of democracy and the market, identifying different types of regime supporters and opponents, including market democrats and statist authoritarians. At a moment when Russia's political trajectory appears increasingly repressive and expansionist, this study provides a rare, empirical window into the attitudinal foundations that have enabled, sustained, and potentially now undermined the country's post-Soviet political order.



Situated at the intersection of comparative authoritarianism, post-Soviet political economy, and public opinion studies, this book joins a growing body of scholarship that examines how hybrid regimes endure by manufacturing consent without fully extinguishing dissent. In contrast to studies that treat Russian citizens as passive recipients of state ideology or as wholly constrained by media control, Chaisty and Whitefield take seriously the complexity and heterogeneity of public opinion in an authoritarian context. Their work builds on and extends earlier debates about Russia's failed democratic transition, engaging with key concepts like *electoral authoritarianism*, *patrimonial capitalism*, and *sistema*. By integrating normative frameworks of democratic consolidation with rigorous empirical analysis of survey data, the authors contribute to a nuanced understanding of how hybrid regimes operate not only through repression or elite manipulation, but also through contingent patterns of attitudinal alignment and disaffection among the governed.

The authors argue that Russia's post-Soviet political system has undergone a unique form of **hybrid consolidation**, wherein formal democratic and market-based norms coexist with deeply authoritarian and patrimonial practices. Using the concepts of *consolidation* and *contestation*, Chaisty and Whitefield trace how, over time, many Russian citizens came to accept, not just tolerate, a fused system of electoral authoritarianism and partial market capitalism. This system, they contend, enjoyed a period of genuine attitudinal consolidation between 2000 and 2014, during which public support stabilized around both the normative ideals and lived practices of this hybrid order. However, the authors identify a turning point with the 2011–2012 protest wave and the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which marked a shift toward **authoritarian nationalism** and the reactivation of Soviet identity. This turn fractured prior consensus, polarizing Russian citizens between statist authoritarians and market democrats. The result was a renewal of **system-level contestation**, particularly around the normative foundations of governance, identity, and territorial legitimacy. In essence, the book charts the rise and unraveling of a fragile consensus, destabilized by the regime's increasing reliance on expansionist, anti-Western, and traditionalist narratives that alienated those previously reconciled to hybrid governance.

Chaisty and Whitefield employ a robust longitudinal methodology, grounded in twelve nationally representative surveys conducted between 1993 and 2021, capturing the shifting political, economic, and identity landscapes of post-Soviet Russia. Their data come from face-to-face interviews with over 21,000 respondents across critical junctures, including the 1993 constitutional crisis, the 1998 financial crash, the 2011–12 protest wave, and the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Rather than focusing narrowly on leader approval or short-term sentiment, the authors develop original indicators to measure normative and experiential attitudes toward Russia's hybrid political economy. Their key innovation lies in mapping three attitudinal archetypes: *system consolidators*, *anti-system market democrats*, and *anti-system statist authoritarians*. These are then analyzed in relation to policy preferences, voting behavior, and views on national identity. The authors carefully control for potential biases in authoritarian contexts, such as fear-based self-censorship, finding little evidence that rising repression suppressed respondent candor. Methodologically, the book stands out for combining political science survey rigor with sensitivity to contextual nuance, incorporating evaluative, normative, and identity-based variables to explain both support and contestation. This empirical architecture allows them to test whether political consolidation occurred, and what fractures emerged as the regime shifted toward expansionist authoritarianism. The findings unfold in the following themes.

Support for Authoritarian Stability

Across the survey waves, Chaisty and Whitefield find that support for the Russian hybrid regime, defined by electoral authoritarianism and a partially reformed market economy, consolidated steadily from the early 2000s through 2014. During this period, system consolidators (those who endorsed both democratic/market norms and their Russian practice) grew in proportion. Russian elections, though constrained, were effective in mobilizing support for regime-affiliated candidates, notably Vladimir Putin and United Russia, across ideological lines. Even non-voters often expressed general support for the system, suggesting that abstention was less a rejection of stability and more an accommodation to the system's terms.

Attitudes Toward Democracy and Pluralism

Despite this apparent consolidation, many Russians retained ambivalent or critical views of the regime's democratic credentials. Chapter 3 shows that anti-system market democrats, those who supported democratic and market ideals but rejected their Russian practice, constituted a stable and sizable minority. Chapter 6 reveals that this group was especially likely to abstain from elections out of principled disillusionment, and to favor protest as an alternative mode of political expression. Support for pluralism was further evident in preferences for civil rights and political freedoms, though increasingly muted among system supporters after 2014. Crucially, the chapter finds that **non-voters who abstain for political reasons are more supportive of peaceful protest** than either voters or non-political abstainers. By 2018, 72% of market democrat non-voters who opted out for political reasons expressed willingness to protest, suggesting that abstention may be a form of resistance rather than disengagement. The authors argue that the **exit of system opponents from the electoral arena** helps

explain why Russian elections show little contestation: electoral politics has been depoliticized not only by repression and manipulation but also by the withdrawal of those most critical of the regime. In effect, **electoral consolidation has been achieved by subtracting dissent**, not resolving it, redirecting opposition energy from ballots to protest. This chapter thus reframes abstention as a politically meaningful act, especially as post-2014 divisions around national identity and governance deepen.

The Role of Identity, Nationalism, and External Threat Perception

Chapter 7 introduces a pivotal shift in public opinion: the reactivation of Soviet identity as a consequence of the Kremlin's post-2014 expansionism. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine catalyzed a broad return to Soviet identification, particularly among older citizens and statist authoritarians. This identity revival reshaped support for authoritarianism and statist economics, while undermining the hybrid regime's ability to appeal to civic nationalists and liberal reformers. Identity divides increasingly mapped onto system-level cleavages, contributing to renewed contestation after a period of seeming consolidation.

Media Narratives and Institutional Trust

Though not foregrounded in a single chapter, the findings suggest that media narratives and elite discourse played a central role in shaping identity politics and regime legitimacy. The state's appropriation of Soviet symbolism helped recast expansionist foreign policy as a continuation of historical greatness, thus securing consent among older generations. However, trust in institutions such as elections and parties remained limited, particularly among politically aware non-voters, suggesting that regime stability rests more on emotional resonance and symbolic continuity than on institutional credibility.

Critical Assessment

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its **methodological rigor and empirical depth**. Drawing on nearly thirty years of nationally representative survey data, Chaisty and Whitefield offer a rare longitudinal analysis of public opinion in an authoritarian regime, an accomplishment few studies in post-Soviet political science can match. Their use of the New Russia Barometer and other face-to-face surveys provides an unusually rich dataset, allowing for fine-grained distinctions among regime supporters and opponents. The clarity with which they theorize "system consolidators," "market democrats," and "statist authoritarians" lends conceptual precision to what are often nebulous categories in studies of hybrid regimes. Importantly, they also test for and address concerns about respondent self-censorship in authoritarian settings, enhancing the credibility of their findings. The authors integrate theory and data with impressive coherence, weaving identity politics, regime legitimation strategies, and attitudinal cleavages into a single analytical frame. Moreover, the **timeliness** of the study, culminating just before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, renders its insights not only empirically grounded but also politically urgent. By focusing on citizens rather than elites, the book humanizes the macro-political shifts of the past three decades and offers an indispensable

foundation for understanding Russia's authoritarian consolidation and its fragilities.

The book's originality lies in its insistence that **authoritarian consolidation is not just imposed from above**, but is also shaped, unevenly and contingently, by the **belief systems of ordinary citizens**. In contrast to the dominant focus on elite behavior, media control, or institutional engineering in studies of Russian authoritarianism, Chaisty and Whitefield recenter the analysis on **mass attitudes**, treating the public not as passive recipients of propaganda but as active interpreters of their political and economic environment. Their typology of system attitudes, especially the distinction between normative and experiential support for democracy and the market, offers a conceptual refinement that challenges binary notions of regime support vs. resistance. Additionally, the integration of **state identity formation** into the analysis of political attitudes, particularly the resurgence of Soviet identity after 2014, breaks new ground in the study of how memory and nationalism intersect with regime legitimation. In doing so, the authors complicate the assumption that hybrid regimes endure solely by depoliticizing the electorate; instead, they show that **identity-driven repoliticization**can fracture what once appeared consolidated, revealing hidden lines of contestation within the authoritarian consensus.

Though firmly grounded in the Russian case, *How Russians Understand the New Russia* offers valuable insights for scholars of **hybrid regimes**, **competitive authoritarianism**, and **democratic backsliding** more broadly. Its typological framework and attitudinal analysis could be fruitfully applied to other contexts where democratic institutions persist in form but are hollowed out in practice, such as Hungary, Turkey, or Serbia. In particular, the authors' distinction between **system-level consolidation** and **"normal" policy contestation** provides a diagnostic tool for evaluating whether pluralism within hybrid regimes reflects genuine democratic engagement or simply controlled dissent. Moreover, the emphasis on **identity politics as a destabilizing force** within authoritarian consolidation speaks to comparative cases in which nationalist or civilizational rhetoric has been used to legitimize illiberal shifts, often with unintended consequences. By demonstrating how elite-led appeals to memory and belonging can reconfigure public alignment in unpredictable ways, the book offers a cautionary tale about the fragility of authoritarian consensus. Its relevance extends to democratic regimes, too, where polarization around identity and legitimacy can erode institutional trust even in the absence of overt repression.

At the same time, while the authors acknowledge identity as a factor in the re-politicization of public opinion, especially in their final chapter on the return of Soviet identification, the book overall treats **affect, ideology, and discourse as secondary to material interests and institutional performance**. This empiricist orientation, while methodologically disciplined, overlooks the rich symbolic terrain in which Russian political consciousness is embedded. In a country where narratives of humiliation, civilizational exceptionalism, and metaphors of "fatherland" and "decay" saturate public discourse, the emotional and symbolic registers of political life deserve fuller attention. The resurgence of Soviet identity after 2014, for example, is treated primarily as a quantifiable shift rather than a **discursive project of belonging** actively curated by state media, war mythology, and memory politics. A more thorough

engagement with theories of affect or ideology, perhaps drawing on poststructuralist or psychoanalytic traditions, would have helped explain why citizens internalize political identities that often run counter to their material interests or democratic aspirations. For the Russian case especially, where the public-private divide is historically blurred and political legitimacy is often rooted in mythic time and familial metaphors, exploring these **non-material logics of attachment** is not merely supplementary but essential. Without them, the full force of how authoritarianism sustains itself in everyday life remains only partially illuminated.

Although the book includes some demographic controls, such as age, education, gender, and ethnicity, in its statistical models, these categories are largely treated as variables of correlation rather than **sites of structural meaning**. This limits the analysis, especially in the Russian context, where **gender, generation, and ethnic identity** have played profound roles in shaping political experience and regime alignment. Gender, for instance, is addressed statistically (with men shown more likely to protest), but there is no reflection on the **gendered dimensions of state paternalism**, military mobilization, or political socialization under both Soviet and post-Soviet regimes. Likewise, age is noted but not theorized, missing an opportunity to explore intergenerational divides in memory, media exposure, or civic trust. Most conspicuously, while the authors acknowledge the discursive tension between *russkii* and *rossiiskii* identity, they do not substantively engage with **ethnic heterogeneity**, nor consider the **postcolonial condition** of Russia's internal peripheries or Indigenous peoples. The book treats Russians as a largely homogeneous national unit, sidestepping how imperial hierarchies, settler-colonial dynamics, and center-periphery relations might shape regime support and contestation. In a multiethnic federation with a colonial past and present, omitting these questions risks reifying the very state-centered view the book seeks to examine. A more reflexive incorporation of **ethnic, regional, and post-imperial positionalities**would have added critical texture to an otherwise rigorous empirical project.

A notable limitation of the book is its exclusive focus on **within-Russia opinion**, with little attention to the perspectives of emigrants or members of the Russian diaspora. This omission narrows the analytic frame at a time when the **post-2022 wave of politically motivated emigration** is reshaping the boundaries of Russian political subjectivity. While the authors convincingly show how domestic identity shifts, such as the reactivation of Soviet belonging, affect regime legitimacy, they do not ask how those who **opted out of the system entirely through emigration** might complicate these patterns. Nor do they consider the possibility that diaspora publics could act as **agents of contestation**, generating alternative narratives of statehood, civic identity, and memory. Given the historical role of Russian émigré communities as both critics and carriers of national ideology, integrating this perspective could have extended the book's relevance and challenged its state-territorial assumptions. In a globalized, post-imperial context, studying attitudes solely within national borders risks flattening the plurality of Russian political consciousness.

While the book excels in tracing attitudinal patterns and classifying public orientations toward Russia's hybrid system, it is more reserved when it comes to articulating the **normative implications of authoritarian consolidation**. The analysis is largely descriptive and

empirical, offering valuable insights into what Russians believe and how those beliefs change over time, but stops short of asking what these patterns mean for democratic values, human rights, or the long-term political trajectory of the country. This restraint may be a deliberate attempt to maintain analytical neutrality, but it comes at the cost of **under-theorizing the stakes** of the phenomena under study. For instance, the normalization of depoliticized elections, the decline in protest rights support, and the rise of identity-based illiberalism are treated as trends rather than as warnings. Given the book's findings, especially the post-2014 re-politicization of national identity and the erosion of pluralism, a more explicit engagement with the **ethical and civic consequences** of authoritarian stabilization would have been warranted. In times of systemic violence and imperial aggression, scholarship must not only describe what is but also reckon with what is being lost.

Finally, as rigorous and illuminating as the book's empirical apparatus is, its **heavy reliance on survey data** also constitutes a methodological limitation. Public opinion surveys, particularly in authoritarian contexts, are constrained in their ability to capture the **ambiguities, silences, and symbolic registers** that animate political life. Even expertly crafted closed-ended questions reduce layered subjectivities to fixed categories, leaving little room for affect, irony, or contradiction. The authors acknowledge these challenges, particularly around response bias, yet their broader framework leans toward a **rational-choice interpretation**, wherein citizens are assumed to form stable preferences based on regime performance, economic standing, or political efficacy. What remains less explored is how **symbolic belief systems**, historical trauma, imperial nostalgia, moral codes, or the mythology of Russia's civilizational mission, structure political attachment in ways that exceed instrumental logic.

Now, I fully recognize that this critique reflects a different **epistemological orientation**, and that asking survey data to unpack emotional allegiances may be a bit like asking a spreadsheet to write poetry. But as a feminist postcolonial scholar, I find it important, perhaps even a professional obligation, to point out what slips through the empirical net. If there's ever a safe space for ontological mischief, surely it is the "critical reflections" section of a book review.

How Russians Understand the New Russia is a landmark contribution to the study of authoritarianism, political hybridity, and public opinion in post-Soviet Russia. Its analytical precision, empirical breadth, and longitudinal scope provide an invaluable resource for scholars seeking to understand how ordinary Russians interpret the political system they inhabit, whether with consent, resignation, or resistance. For those working in comparative politics or regime studies, the book offers a rare empirical anchor to debates often driven by elite narratives or normative speculation.

Beyond the academy, the book holds relevance for **practitioners, journalists, and diaspora activists** seeking to make sense of the contradictions within Russian society. It offers tools for discerning when consensus is real and when it masks disaffection; when political quiet is stability and when it is a silence before rupture. In the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, mass emigration, and the growing moral polarization between state loyalists and

exiled dissenters, this book provides a window into the deep ambivalence, perhaps even psychic fragmentation, of a society that has lived for decades under a hybrid, increasingly authoritarian order. As Russia enters a new phase of geopolitical isolation and internal repression, understanding the emotional, ideological, and institutional terrain mapped in this book is not only a scholarly exercise, it is a necessary one.

David Golumbia’s Cyberlibertarianism

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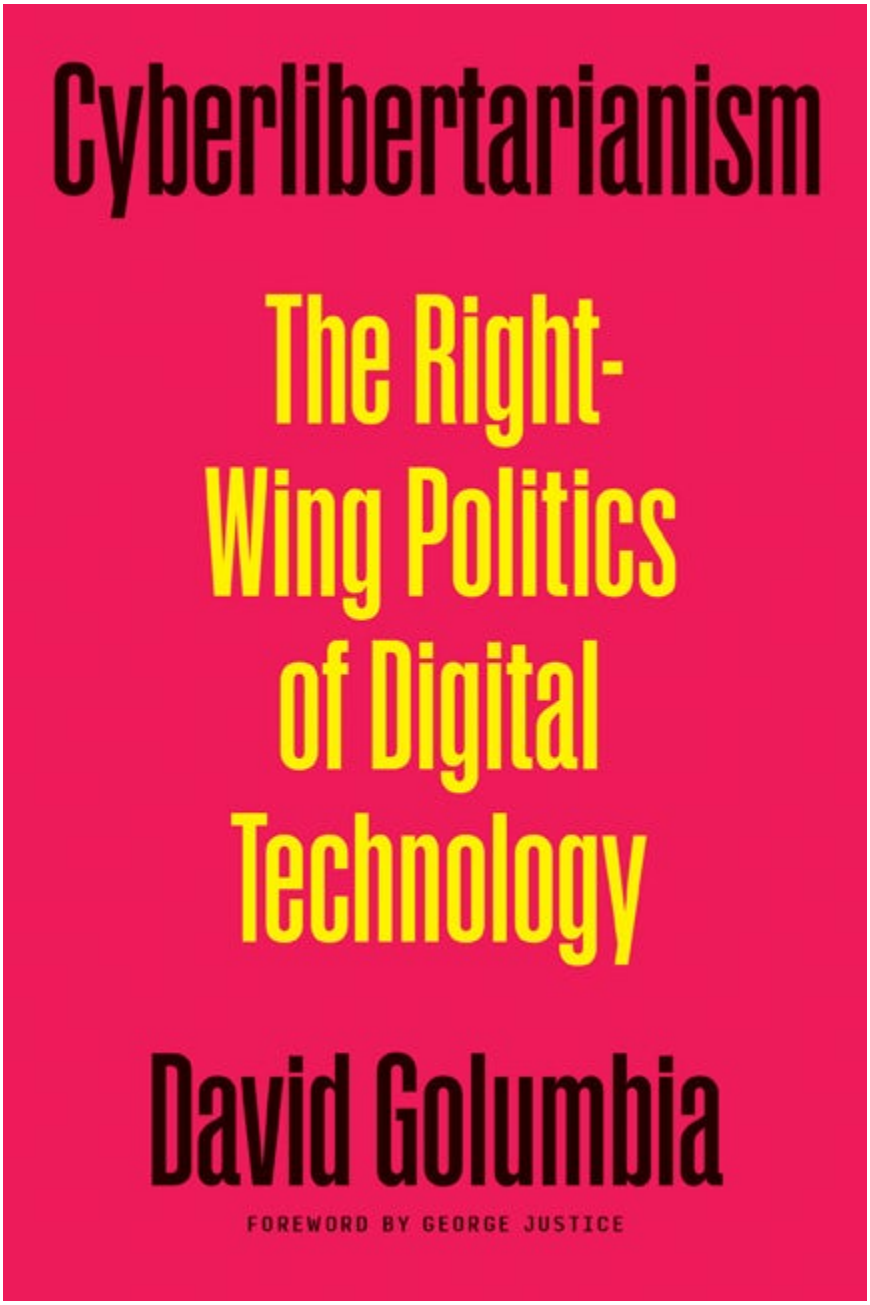

In *Cyberlibertarianism: The Right-Wing Politics of Digital Technology*, David Golumbia takes it upon himself to defend democracy from what he called “cyberlibertarianism,” a nebulous right-wing ideology that pervades the entire discourse surrounding digital technologies, even in self-defined left-wing spaces. The danger of cyberlibertarianism, he says, is that it undermines democracy by undermining governmental power. “One of cyberlibertarianism’s chief effects is to minimize or eliminate the power of democratic governments to choose which technologies fit

their vision of a healthy society," Golumbia warns, so" the future of democracy depends on the ability of citizens to reclaim that power from the companies and technologists that have so effectively undermined it" (xxiii). Following other scholars who have called for democratic intervention into the world of digital technologies, Golumbia argues that licensure, regulation, or even outright abolition are warranted and desirable methods for reversing the status quo and again subjecting technology to democracy (xxiii).

Notwithstanding the *prima facie* reasonableness of Golumbia's main argument, *Cyberlibertarianism* over-promises and under-delivers. It promises to expose a pervasive, insidious, conspiratorial trend in which racist, sexist, free market fundamentalists have developed and promoted digital technologies saturated with their right-wing values and ideologies. It promises to show how even self-described liberals, progressives, and leftists have been suckered into adopting these inherently right-wing technologies, thereby unintentionally propagating ideas and systems they claim to oppose. And it promises to convince readers that we must put a stop to (almost all) digital technologies.

Golumbia's promises, however, never materialize because his argument succumbs—in its unnecessary 400 pages of meandering asides—to all manner of obfuscations, contradictions, informal fallacies, double-standards, erroneous claims, and sometimes outright fabrications.

Cyberlibertarianism is plagued by three key failures. First, Golumbia's analysis is plagued with ill-defined concepts. Golumbia's entire analysis is framed by a conflict between "democracy," which is never defined, and "cyberlibertarianism," which is primarily defined as neoliberalism-gone-technological. Throughout the argument, it is simply assumed and implied that the United States is a "democracy," but even those of us who do not find this assumption absolutely dubious would have no idea what they are agreeing with. Similarly, throughout the book, Golumbia's primary normative heuristic is grounded in a vague distinction between "left-wing" and "right-wing," which is not an analytical distinction but an affective distinction that inevitably reduces to "good" and "bad." Second, there is Golumbia's problematic failure to study the relevant primary sources for the topics and figures he discusses. As an English scholar, Golumbia ought to know that primary sources analysis is a basic requirement of Humanities research. Golumbia dedicates major portions of the book to criticizing figures like Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, and Glenn Greenwald, but he fails to examine the many books and articles written by them. His sources overwhelmingly consist of secondhand accounts and cherrypicked quotes excavated from online rumor mills. Third, Golumbia also fails to properly engage the relevant secondary sources in the peer-reviewed scholarship. When such sources are cited, they are engaged in an *ad hoc* and deceptive manner. Academic readers looking for indications of how Golumbia's research fits into the scholarship will remain disappointed and confused, even once they've reached the Epilogue. In the end, the promised scholarly analysis and incisive critique give way to unnecessary insults and unsubstantiated

claims, resulting in a shallow book that seems more firmly grounded in Twitter feeds than academic rigor.

In the spirt of empathy and humanism, readers ought to know that Golumbia succumbed to an aggressive form of cancer while finishing the book in 2023, and because it had already passed peer review, University of Minnesota Press decided to move forward with the work, publishing it in November 2024. On the one hand, the impassioned tone and confused structure of the work may have resulted from the fact that the author was suffering a serious illness while writing the book. On the other hand, the manuscript apparently passed peer review and was subsequently published by a university press, which means we must assess its contents as we would any work of scholarship.[i]

Cyberlibertarianism appears to be motivated by some compelling questions about the nature of digital technologies, but Golumbia's unwillingness to engage in meaningful debate—he ignores scholarship, mischaracterizes sources, and resorts to ad hominem attacks—completely discredits both his conclusions and his authority as an author. Though this book is saturated with an admirable passion and informed by truly humanistic concerns, Golumbia's careless prose and inept organization only exacerbate his indifference to the basic practices of academic argument. *Cyberlibertarianism* would have benefited from some editorial guidance, for should have been half as long and twice as scholarly. It is not that *Cyberlibertarianism* is merely flawed. *Cyberlibertarianism* should not be taken seriously, for it actually harms the discourses and the politics that Golumbia wanted to help. If we truly want a prognosis for our current political problems, we are better off disregarding Golumbia's diagnosis.

The Unsound Methodology of *Cyberlibertarianism*

Cyberlibertarianism consists of seven chapters distributed across three parts. In Part I, "Cyberlibertarianism in Theory and Practice," Golumbia attempts to explain what cyberlibertarianism is by situating it within the history of neoliberalism and introducing the cast of cyberlibertarian characters. He also provides an account of cyberlibertarianism's "denialist" politics and provides examples of their anti-democratic disposition by citing the apparent cyberlibertarian opposition to the Stop Online Piracy Act and to the reform or repeal of Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act. In Part II, "Myths of Cyberlibertarianism," Golumbia attempts to demystify what he sees as a host of cyberlibertarian truisms, from their ahistorical tendency to analogize digital technologies with the printing press to their rhetorical dependence on seemingly vague notions like "open," "free," "democratization," "decentralization," and "privacy." In Part III, "Cyberfascism," Golumbia attempts to trace an ideological line from anarcho-capitalism through social media and WikiLeaks up to contemporary far-right movements including the Alt-Right and Neoreactionism.

One of the major issues with Golumbia's attack on cyberlibertarianism is that he fails to differentiate big versus small, corporate versus activist, in the context of digital technologies. This distinction is commonplace in the scholarship. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, for instance, Shoshana Zuboff criticizes giant surveillance capitalist corporations and digital activists who emphasize technological solutions over political ones. For Zuboff, corporations that employ techniques of surveillance capitalism are the real threat, and the technologically-minded activists simply offer what she views as an inadequate response to the threat. She does not lump the activists in with the surveillance capitalists and claim they are all part of the same phenomenon.[ii] We know Golumbia is aware of this meaningful distinction because it appears in his previous book, *The Cultural Logic of Computation,* where he differentiates three groups: those who succumb to an unabashed form of technological optimism, those who see digital technologies as the terrain upon which modern political struggles will be contested, and those who—like Golumbia—advocate for political struggles beyond the domain of digital technologies. Even though Golumbia finds serious limitations in the other positions, he nevertheless understands their differences.[iii]

Such nuance is completely absent in *Cyberlibertarianism*. Here, Golumbia lumps all of the following under the banner of cyberlibertarianism: cypherpunks, Electronic Frontier Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union, Facebook, Google, Julian Assange, WikiLeaks, Internet Archive, Tim Berners-Lee, Ron Paul, Mozilla Foundation, Edward Snowden, Glenn Greenwald, MIT Media Lab, Data & Society, danah boyd, Charles Koch Foundation, Lord William Rees-Mogg, Cory Doctorow, Esther Dyson, Uber, Lyft, George Gilder, George Keyworth, Alvin Toffler, Al Franken, Tim Wu, Reddit, David Friedman, Peter Thiel, Tor, Eric Schmidt, Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land, Lawrence Lessig, Tim May, Yochai Benkler, Steven Levy, Mike Masnick, Wikipedia, Richard Stallman, Cody Wilson, Steve Wozniak, and anyone who takes an interest in or supports open access, open source, cryptocurrencies, net neutrality, encryption, or peer-to-peer networks. And if you oppose the repeal of Section 230, Golumbia finds a special place cyberhell for you. Of course, Golumbia need not trifle with the wide variety of differences—and even conflicts—between the individuals and institutions caught up in his dragnet, for anyone who ever thought that any single digital technology did anything good for anyone is either an adherent of or a useful idiot for what he calls "cyberfascism."

To understand how all manner of people and organizations become implicated in Golumbia's attack on cyberlibertarianism, we must understand his conception of the term. According to Golumbia, cyberlibertarianism is neither an explicit ideology nor an organized movement; rather, it is an amorphous "right-wing" mood that spreads through contagion even into "left-wing" spaces. At its core, we find neoliberalism. "The neoliberal agenda is no secret," Golumbia asserts. "Cyberlibertarianism functions as a less explicit outer shell of neoliberalism" (30). Of course, not everyone who finds themselves advancing cyberlibertarian ideas supports neoliberalism. While Golumbia fails to state this point clearly, he argues that cyberlibertarianism relies on sexy resistance motifs and pseudo-radical rhetoric to draw even neoliberalism's opponents into the neoliberal fold, often without them realizing it. "Many

followers of cyberlibertarian dogma are unaware of the ways such precepts serve right-wing political power," Golumbia warns (68).

Cyberlibertarianism is so effective, Golumbia insists, because it "syncretic" and "inchoate." Cyberlibertarianism is syncretic because it is a style of fascist politics that seeks to go "beyond left and right." Through syncretism, fascists aim to recruit from the left or at least disseminate their fascist ideology into otherwise impenetrable circles. Golumbia chastises supposed cyberlibertarian compatriot Glenn Greenwald for feeding the fascist syncretist wave in the United States. He quotes Greenwald as advocating an alliance beyond the Democratic Party versus Republican Party divide as the best means for defending civil liberties and as praising Dennis Kucinich for seeking an alliance with Ron Paul to oppose an extension of the Patriot Act (70-72). Golumbia's claim is more than a stretch. Greenwald was not advocating the transcendence of ideology into a universal militant nationalism; he was advocating a specific political coalition to prevent the renewal of specific legislation that, in his estimation, undermines civil liberties protected by the Constitution. What's more, Golumbia embraces a double standard when it it comes to bridging political divides. In the process of defending the Stop Online Piracy Act, he praises bipartisanship, which he calls "the real form of cooperation in democracies" (36). It apparently never occurred to Golumbia that bipartisan cooperation is not inherently good, for some of the worst policies in U.S. history resulted from bipartisanism: the Chinese-Exclusion Act, the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, the Patriot Act, the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq, the FISA Amendments Act—the list goes on. Golumbia is fine with Democrats and Republicans working together to pass the Patriot Act, but Democrats and Republicans working together to prevent its renewal is "syncretic." According to Golumbia, then, when ostensible political opponents work together on issues he supports, its democracy; when ostensible political opponents work together on issues he opposes, its fascism.

Golumbia's penchant for double standards has only just begun, for his charge that cyberlibertarianism is "inchoate" gives him license to say anything he wants—even if it isn't true. "Inchoate refers to the fact that the preeminent cyberlibertarians frequently refuse to wear their narrow politics on their sleeves," Golumbia says (68). Even though the term "inchoate" is repeated throughout the book, this is the single explanation readers are given of this core concept. But Golumbia's move here has deep implications for the entire book: if cyberlibertarianism is always nebulous, always conceals itself, if cyberlibertarians are always elusive about their beliefs, always inchoate, then there is no reason to seriously study their arguments and respond with adequate counter-arguments. Because the cyberlibertarian's expressed views are always suspect, Golumbia need not engage them—*and he doesn't*. In fact, those sections of the book dedicated to examining the three people Golumbia seems to hate the most—Glenn Greenwald, Edward Snowden, and Julian Assange—Golumbia seems to go out of his way to avoid engaging with the relevant primary and secondary sources.[iv]

Wherefore Art Thou, Primary Sources?

Golumbia's commentary on Snowden provides an excellent case study in anti-intellectual ranting. Though Snowden is discussed over the course of approximately forty pages, Golumbia fails to cite a single primary source authored by Snowden. He also fails to cite a single scholarly source on Snowden or the NSA documents he provided to journalists. Instead, Golumbia cites over a dozen videos, popular press articles (many of which are authored by people who hate Snowden), and other random material from the internet. Of course, Golumbia does not need primary sources to opine about Snowden's politics, for he can simply intuit them as if he is a medium of all conspiratorial fascism. "Snowden's politics are often misunderstood by progressives and others who sympathize with his hostility toward the United States," Golumbia prognosticates (122). Between Greenwald, Assange, and Snowden, "Snowden is the least overtly partisan of the three," he adds, "although that may be more appearance than fact" (117). Here, Golumbia insists that Snowden's ideas "appear" one way and are in "fact" something else. In one incredible passage where he divines "the explicit and implicit political analyses Snowden offers," Golumbia provides no citations *at all* (117). How can Golumbia know Snowden's politics without citing any primary sources? How can Golumbia know Snowden's politics without citing any secondarysources that have studied the primary sources?

If only Snowden had written something, like a memoir, in which he explained his principles, then Golumbia could read it, engage it, and cite it. (Snowden did write a memoir.)[v] Likewise, if only scholars had already published academic studies of Snowden in which his principles were examined, or complied a reader containing relevant and useful primary and secondary sources, then Golumbia could have built upon the existing research. (Scholars have published these things.)[vi]Golumbia feels entitled to avoid primary sources and ignore experts because everything surrounding so-called cyberlibertarians is "inchoate." If someone's expressed views are always a cover for their real beliefs, as Golumbia claims regarding cyberlibertarians, then there is no need to actually read their work. Simply call them a "cyberlibertarian" and you can say about them whatever you like. When it comes to Snowden, Golumbia's only point, which is neither original nor convincing, is that Snowden hates America, hates the government, and hates democracy, despite the fact that these accusations contradict Snowden's explicitly expressed views.

Golumbia's commentary on Assange is even worse than his commentary on Snowden, for he slips past political argument and moves straight into ad hominem. Similar to his treatment of Snowden, Golumbia dedicates almost twenty pages to discussing Assange, but he examines only one primary source over two paragraphs, a meagre effort when studying someone who has dozens of books and articles to his name.[vii] Unlike his treatment of Snowden, Golumbia does not even pretend to examine Assange's ideas by cherrypicking quotes from random interviews. Instead, he goes straight to insults and accusations. "This is not an exaggeration," he proclaims: "Assange is a proto-Nazi political provocateur whose overt anti-Semitism, anti-Black racism, climate change denial, misogyny, hatred for democracy, and support for authoritarian political regimes…routinely fail to penetrate the minds of observers who see as dispositive his use of digital tools and antiestablishment affect" (116). To paraphrase, because Assange uses

computers, no one but Columbia sees Assange for the racist, sexist, fascist that he truly is—an amazing research finding if there ever was one. Ironically, Columbia repeatedly accuses cyberlibertarians of resorting to ad hominem attacks as a way to avoid engaging their opponents (82, 112, 131-134, 203). Again, Columbia fittingly avoids engaging the relevant primary and secondary sources on Assange and WikiLeaks. After all, the scholarship likely examines Assange's expressed views, and because he in an "inchoate" cyberlibertarian, Columbia implies that there is no really need to do so.[viii]

I take serious issue with Columbia's failure to study Snowden and Assange because his work is an extreme example of the neglect of primary sources in the study of whistleblowing and cypherpunk activism. For over a decade now, academics have studied whistleblowers, digital activists, and other similar individuals and groups without actually accounting for what these parties say about their principles, values, and decisions.[ix] But Columbia's approach goes farther. Whereas other scholars have simply found the primary texts to be unimportant, Columbia claims that his subjects of study are "inchoate," which given him license to ignore their stated positions and make whatever accusations he likes. If Columbia wants to make a claim about what someone like Snowden and Assange believes, he would have to actually read their work and critique it. If Columbia wants to claim that there is a disparity between what Snowden and Assange*say* and what Snowden and Assange *do*, then he would still have to actually read their work to make this kind of argument. But Columbia does none of this. Instead, he claims that there is a disparity between what Snowden and Assange *say* and what Snowden and Assange *believe* without examining what they say and without explaining the oracular powers he uses to divine their beliefs.[x]

When Columbia calls cyberlibertarianism "syncretic" and "inchoate," he is not describing properties that inhere in his object of study; he is establishing an argumentative path that circumvents the need for scholarship. While he wants to convince his reader that incoherence lies in the nature of cyberlibertarian politics, the incoherence actually lies in his conceptualization of cyberlibertarianism. Golumbia's net is cast so wide that he catches too many disparate individuals and institutions in it; instead of rethinking his net, he blames his catch. Once he has ascribed elusiveness to his object of study, he is freed from the burden of studying it at face value. To be sure, critical readings always require us to start at the surface level of a text and then move into deeper levels of analysis, but Golumbia never even touches the surface of the text because he doesn't even cite any sources. When it comes to Greenwald, Snowden, and Assange, Golumbia simply identifies people he hates and cites those who hate the same people. Like a perverse game of telephone, *Cyberlibertarianism* increasingly loses its meaning the longer is drags on.[xi]

Sources of Distortion in the Distortion of Sources

Unfortunately, Golumbia's obfuscations, contradictions, and fallacies and only the tip of the ice

berg, for when we subject his citations to direct examination, we find a number of erroneous claims and outright fabrications. In some instances, Golumbia cites sources that contradict the claims supposedly supported by the sources. “Assange directly intervened in a U.S. election through cooperation with Roger Stone, who himself used Jones and other conspiracy theorists for just that purpose,” Golumbia claims (116), citing a 2020 *New York Times* article that says, “The records shed no new light on whether Mr. Stone, 67, directly communicated with Mr. Assange before the election.”[xii] The *New York Times* article does not support Golumbia’s claim; in fact, it contradicts Golumbia’s claim. Unfortunately, such curious citational infelicities pervade the entire book.

When Golumbia attempts to prove that Snowden’s whistleblowing never prevented any harm and never stopped any illegal activity, he botches an examination of case law. *Hepting v. AT&T* was a 2006 class action lawsuit filed by Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) on behalf of AT&T customers who claimed that surveillance cooperation between the telecommunication giant and the NSA harmed customers who were entitled to damages. Golumbia argues that “the Ninth Circuit’s ruling” in *Hepting v. AT&T* proves that the courts found the NSA’s bulk collection of telephony metadata constitutional (124). Those who are familiar with *Hepting* immediately realize that something is wrong with Golumbia’s description, for the Ninth Circuit never ruled on *Hepting*. The case was dismissed in 2009 because Congress had granted retroactive immunity to telecoms in the 2008 FISA Amendments Act. When one checks Golumbia’s lone citation, they find that the article discusses not *Hepting v. AT&T* but *Jewel v. National Security Agency*, a similar EFF class action lawsuit filed in 2011.[xiii] In other words, Golumbia’s research is so careless that he confused two different court cases, a mistake that he could have easily avoided if he had only clicked on the very first link in the article he cites, which provides direct access to a PDF of the court’s memorandum.

Not only did Golumbia fail to read the court’s decision, he also failed to read the article he cited. Golumbia claims that the plaintiffs in *Jewel* “were unable to show how the [NSA] program in question had harmed them” (124). This is true, but it is not true because the evidence was evaluated in court. It is because the government was permitted to conceal the evidence by claiming that the relevant information was too sensitive and could not be released for national security purposes. The NSA was the only party with the potential evidence, and they were permitted to conceal that potential evidence. The accused agency was permitted to hide potential evidence of its criminality and then claim there was no criminality, and Golumbia thinks this is a good thing.

The *Hepting* and *Jewel* cases are not the only cases that Golumbis mischaracterizes, for his conclusions about *United States v. Moalin* also contradict the facts of the case and the content of the source he cites. In 2013, Basaaly Moalin and three other Somali individuals were convicted of illegally fund-raising for Al-Shabaab, a Somali terrorist organization. In *United States v. Moalin*, the four defendants appealed their convictions partly on the grounds that

some of the evidence used against them was collected under the NSA's bulk collection programs. In 2020, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld all four convictions. For Golumbia, the *Moalin* case proves that no harm came from the NSA mass surveillance programs exposed by Snowden. "Yet even in a case where the defendants were convicted of just the sort of crime intelligence agencies are supposed to be looking for," he proclaims, "the Court did eventually rule that their communications were not used this way. Had they been procured illegally, the resulting intelligence would have been inadmissible" (123).

Once again, Golumbia didn't read the court's decision; once again he didn't even read his own source. As the article he cites reads:" the court held that the NSA's former telephony metadata collection program violated FISA. Thus, not only was the collection of Moalin's phone records unauthorized under the statute, but so was the collection of millions of Americans 'phone records that were swept up in the program."[xiv] In other words, the metadata collected in the Moalin case was *illegal*. Golumbia apparently didn't even bother to read the title of the piece, "Metadata Collection Violated FISA, Ninth Circuit Rules," when he added it to his works cited list. The court did not uphold the convictions because the NSA's surveillance was legal; the court upheld the convictions because the judges determined that Moalin's telephony metadata was not used as the basis for probable cause. This is not difficult to understand, yet Golumbia refuses to read his sources and therefore obfuscates the truth to make the point he has already in advance determined is true. This is not critical empirical analysis—it's unabashed dogmatic fabrication.

Golumbia's citational infelicities are not restricted to his penchant for making things up and contradicting the sources he cites, for he often doesn't cite any sources for his wild claims. Golumbia repeatedly complains about the anti-intellectualism of his cyberlibertarian enemies, arguing that they ignore the relevant scholarship on the topics about which they opine. But once again Golumbia is guilty of his own accusations. Take, for example, his comments on government mass surveillance. "It is true," Golumbia axiomatically asserts, "that every government *must* have the power to surveil all telecommunications (and to some extent, even physical, non-electronic communications) in which its citizens engage" (123). Golumbia provides no source for this, ignoring the mountain of scholarship on this very issue. Similarly, Golumbia cites no sources for his claim that encryption prevents the FBI from prosecuting cases; in fact, it is more common to find the FBI lying about encryption than it is to find that encryption prevented successful prosecution.[xv] Golumbia also chastises Snowden for criticizing the government rather than "powerful defense contractor[s]" (117), but in *Permanent Record*, Snowden dedicates an entire chapter titled "*Homo contractus*" to criticizing national security contracting. Finally, he claims that the 2015 U.S.A. Freedom Act ended NSA bulk collection, but this is only partly true; telecom corporations still record all telephony metadata and government agencies can and do access such data without warrants thanks to the Supreme Court's third-party doctrine.

Columbia's track record of claiming a cited source supports a claim when it explicitly states the opposite is a real concern for the academic integrity of the entire work. Readers would be fully justified in wonder whether he even read most of the sources he cites, for—as evidenced by his botched study of case law—much that he claims about his sources is demonstrably false. While the examples above have primarily centered around Snowden and Assange, these problems pervade Columbia's book. I tracked down dozens of sources across every chapter, and in almost every case I found the same problems: quotes taken only from introductions and conclusions; quotes taken out of context, and claims about cited sources that contradict the content of those cited courses. It's not just that Columbia is sloppy in his treatment of Snowden and Assange; he is sloppy with his treatment of nearly every topic and subject discussed in the book. And because he almost never situates his argument within the existing academic debates, the reader never knows how Columbia's position fits within the existing scholarship. Columbia seems to be banking on the hope that readers will simply trust him. Given the pervasive citational infelicities in *Cyberlibertarianism*, such trust is unwarranted.

"Magnum Opus" or "Magnum Dedecus"?

In his Foreword to *Cyberlibertarianism*, George Justice—English scholar, Provost at University of Tulsa, and Columbia's friend and colleague—proclaims that the book is Columbia's "magnum opus" (xvii) and "the culmination of his life's work" (xi). Those who are familiar with Columbia's work will readily agree that there is a noticeable trajectory running through his three books. But the trajectory of Columbia's work indicates not an ascension but a declension, with*Cyberlibertarianism* sitting at the bottom of the slope.

In his 2009 book, *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, Columbia examines a mode of thought he calls "computationalism," which refers to a set of beliefs that reduce all aspects of human experience—society, politics, even human nature itself—to computational processes. Computationalism is promoted not only by a set of rhetorics, which frame computers as *always* good for us, but also by the computers themselves. While he acknowledges some of the empowering features of computers, Columbia cautions us not to overlook the disempowering features of computers. "If an unassailable slogan of the computing age is that 'computers empower users,'" he writes, "the question I want to raise is not what happens when individuals are empowered in this fashion…but instead what happens when powerful institutions—corporations, governments, schools—embrace computationalism as a working philosophy."[xvi] Because the United States social structure displays "strong tendencies toward authoritarianism and perhaps even corporate fascism," Columbia seeks "to raise the question whether the shape, function, and ubiquity of the computing network is something that should be brought under democratic control in a way that it is not today."[xvii] Against the digital conception of the human imposed by computationalism, Columbia argues that we ought to instead adopt an *analog* conception of the human and society to help defend against the instrumentalist excesses fostered by computationalism.

The provocative-yet-compelling, forceful-yet-nuanced contours of *The Cultural Logic of Computation* begin to recede in Golumbia's follow-up 2016 book, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism*. The book is largely a genealogy of anti-government right-wing ideology from the John Birch Society to contemporary anarcho-capitalists, with an emphasis on central banking conspiracy theories.[xviii] Golumbia frames his account though the lens of cyberlibertarianism. "At its most expansive," Golumbia explains, "cyberlibertarianism can be thought of as something like a belief according to which *freedom will emerge inherently from the increasing development of digital technology*, and therefore entails that efforts to interfere with or regulate that development must be antithetical to freedom."[xix] *The Politics of Bitcoin* indicates that Golumbia's thinking is shifting away from his measured analysis of computationalismand toward a political-ideological analysis of cyberlibertarianism. Political critique certainly has a place in scholarship, but Golumbia fails to avoid the epistemic hazards of motivated reasoning.

Golumbia's critique of Bitcoin is derailed, for example, when he blatantly fabricates details about the use of Bitcoin to support WikiLeaks. "Widespread interest in Bitcoin first emerged from its utility as a means to bypass the 'WikiLeaks blockade,'" Golumbia writes in reference to the banking industry's attempts to cut off funds to WikiLeaks following its publication of the U.S. State Department Cables in late 2010.[xx] When all major banks coordinated to cut off WikiLeaks' funding sources, supporters began donating in Bitcoin, thereby circumventing the blockade. "Bitcoin made it possible for individuals to donate to WikiLeaks despite it being a violation of U.S. law to do so," Golumbia falsely claims. For Wikileaks supporters, he says, "there is simply no consideration of the idea that it might be appropriate for financial providers to cooperate with the government against efforts that directly and purposely contravene perfectly valid law."[xxi]

Golumbia's analysis betrays his ignorance about the WikiLeaks blockade. It was never contrary to U.S. law to donate to WikiLeaks; rather, the U.S. government relied on cooperation from the private sector precisely because there was little or no legal basis for the government to act. After WikiLeaks began publishing the State Department cables—along with the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, and *El Páıs* who, we must remember, were not targeted by the U.S. government and who are not subjected to Golumbia's ire—the Obama administration sent a letter to WikiLeaks stating that it illegally received the documents (not that they illegally published the documents). A few days later, PayPal cited that letter and claimed that WikiLeaks had violated PayPal's terms of service. Their decision was subsequently imitated by MasterCard, Visa, Bank of America, and others. Golumbia, of course, cites no sources for his claim; he simply wants it to be true. But there was no "perfectly valid law" at play, and WikiLeaks was never charged for any crimes by the Obama administration. Instead, the Obama administration relied on the banks to do what the government could not.[xxii] "If we were to consider what judicial process would be required for the government to exert this kind of force directly," legal scholar Yochai Benkler notes, "the barriers in law would have been practically insurmountable."[xxiii]

Of course, one might be willing to overlook Golumbia's error as incidental to his larger project, but this error is not incidental. For Golumbia, the story of Bitcoin and the WikiLeaks blockade is supposed to demonstrate the lawlessness of cyberlibertarianism and the anti-democratic nature of digital technologies, which are among the major themes of *Cyberlibertarianism*. The WikiLeaks blockade story demonstrates the opposite: the government's willingness to bypass legal channels by encouraging private companies to carry out its aims. The obfuscations and errors in Golumbia's discussion of the WikiLeaks blockade stand as a microcosm of the obfuscations and errors that pervade *Cyberlibertarianism.*

There are, of course, many problems with *Cyberlibertarianism*, but the book has at least a few moments in which Golumbia actually attempts scholarship. In chapter 3, "Deregulation and Multistakeholderism: A Case Study of Section 230," there are about six pages (thirteen, if we want to be generous) in which Golumbia examines the history of how Section 230 came to be and how it was subsequently interpreted by courts. But he does not argue his position on the law, he merely declares himself correct. How? By tagging those who disagree with him as "right wing" (that is, *bad*) and by tagging those who agree with him as "left wing" (that is, *good*). Instead of a sustained analysis of statues, case law, and scholarship, Golumbia reverts to a rhetorical heuristic in which his conclusion is proven before he begins. Similarly, in chapter 4, "Digital Technology and the Printing Press"—which is perhaps the only decent chapter in the book—Golumbia offers a critique of how digital activists draw an analogy between the printing press and digital technologies. He concludes that this common and powerful rhetorical maneuver amounts to one big weak analogy because it misconstrues that effects of both the printing press and digital technologies. But readers will likely struggle to engage this argument because it follows over 190 pages of terrible political theory, ad hominem attacks, and and meandering discussions.

Yet even the strongest chapter in *Cyberlibertarianism* is laced with hypocrisy because Golumbia accuses his opponents of purposefully dismissing experts when Golumbia himself is guilty of doing so. To demonstrate the point, it is helpful to quote Golumbia at length:

"As in so much cyberlibertarian discourse, scholarly research is repurposed and reanalyzed so that the scholars who did the research become disqualified as experts in their own areas of specialization…Cyberlibertarian discourse claims to engage with scholarship about important historical developments, but it shows its ideological nature by not understanding what that scholarship actually says…they reduce a complex and highly contentious series of historical changes into clear and settled truths, always pointing in the direction that happens to serve their worldview." (195, 225, 226)

According to Golumbia, then, cyberlibertarians obfuscate expertise when it become a convenient way for them to discredit their adversaries. Yet Golumbia does exactly this in his treatment of the scholarship on the cypherpunks. "The ideas of the cypherpunks have become

more prominent," he insists, "leading to a burgeoning industry of commentators who reinterpret the story of its origins and purpose" (112). Who constitutes this "burgeoning industry of commentators"? *Scholars*! Golumbia cites only two academic articles on the cypherpunks and mischaracterizes both, claiming they say exactly the opposite of what they actually say. I know this because I wrote one of these articles.[xxiv] But researchers like myself and others who publish scholarship on the cypherpunks are dismissed as an "industry of commentators" who distort reality to serve our own worldview, something I'm sure Golumbia has too much integrity to ever do. So much for his respect for expertise.[xxv]

Cyberlibertarianism: The Right-Wing Politics of Digital Technology is laudable for its attempt to defend democracy and human rights from the threat of fascism, but Golumbia's poor execution of the project impedes any good he sought to achieve. George Justice's claim that *Cyberlibertarianism* is Golumbia's "magnum opus" ought to be firmly rejected, for *The Cultural Logic of Computation* is far more interesting, compelling, and rigorous. Golumbia once quoted from Louis Althusser's *Philosophy of the Encounter* to clarify that he offers "not a 'demonstrative discourse' or 'discourse of legitimation,' but a 'position on the philosophical battlefield: for or against such-and-such an existing position.'"[xxvi] In *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, he takes a stance against computationalism, and he offers a fascinating analysis that demonstrates the existence of this mode of thought and highlights its features. Readers are likely to walk away from that book convinced that we should temper our enthusiasm for digital technologies. In *Cyberlibertarianism*, Golumbia seems to continue his Althusserian battle stance, this time taking on cyberlibertarianism. In this latter attempt at philosophical struggle, however, Golumbia audaciously rushes into battle unequipped for the fight. Because he takes aim at too much, he hits nothing. Having constructed his cyberlibertarian opponents as unrelenting anti-government activists, he models himself as their mirror image, defending almost everything government does without a hint of skepticism. If, according to Golumbia, cyberlibertarians demonstrate too much incredulity about government power, then Golumbia demonstrates too much credulity about government power.

In the end, cyberlibertarianism may be a real political phenomenon, but the cyberlibertarianism described by Golumbia is pure fiction. In *Cyberlibertarianism*, Golumbia charged into philosophical battle only to end up boxing with the shadows of his own imagination.

Notes

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[i] Based on Golumbia's past comments, we can assume that he would have welcomed criticism of his work even after his death, for Golumbia was willing to criticize Aaron Swartz after his tragic suicide in 2013. Swartz had used MIT's open wireless network to downloaded millions of

articles from Jstor. After he was caught, he returned the files to Jstor, who declined to press charges, but the Obama administration charged Swartz with thirteen felonies. According to all of his closest friends and relatives, his likely conviction drove him to suicide. But Golumbia disregards the judgment of those close to Swartz, arguing that his suicide had nothing to do with the Jstor episode and the subsequent charges. "It is a tragedy when anyone commits suicide," Golumbia wrote in 2016, "but it is neither psychologically nor biographically sound to posit direct causal linkages between Swartz's suicide and his [open access] advocacy, or even the overzealous prosecution he apparently faced for his actions at MIT, despite these linkages being a frequent refrain in discussions of Swartz's story" (96). In other words, Golumbia knows better than Swartz's loved ones what really drove him to suicide. See David Golumbia, "Marxism and Open Access in the Humanities: Turning Academic Labor against Itself," *Workplace* 28 (2016), 74-114.

[ii] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Public Affairs, 2019).

[iii] David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Harvard University Press, 2009), 24-26.

[iv] For a comprehensive analysis of the problems with Golumbia's discussion of Assange, Snowden, and the broader cypherpunk movement, see Patrick D. Anderson, "Surveillance, Encryption, and Cypherpunks in David Golumbia's *Cyberlibertarianism*," *WikiLeaks Bibliography Blog*, April 2, 2025: https://wikileaksbibliography.org/blog/surveillance-encryption-and-cypherpunks-in-david-golumbias-cyberlibertarianism/

[v] Edward Snowden, *Permanent Record* (Metropolitan Books, 2019). See also Edward Snowden, "Elected by Circumstance," in *The Assassination Complex: Inside the Government's Secret Drone Warfare Program*, ed. Jeremy Scahill and The Staff of the Intercept (Simon & Schuster, 2016), xi–xviii.

[vi] See David P. Fidler (Ed.). *The Snowden Reader* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Patrick D. Anderson, "Review of Edward Snowden's Permanent Record," *Ethics and Information Technology* 22, no. 2 (2020): 129-132; and Patrick D. Anderson, "On Moderate and Radical Government Whistleblowing: Edward Snowden and Julian Assange as Theorists of Whistleblowing Ethics," *Journal of Media Ethics* 37, no. 1 (2022): 38-52.

[vii] For a comprehensive list of primary texts, see "Works by Julian Assange," *WikiLeaks Bibliography*: https://wikileaksbibliography.org/works-by-julian-assange/

[viii] To my knowledge, I am one of the only scholars to ground research on WikiLeaks, Assange, and cypherpunks in the primary sources. See Patrick D. Anderson, '"It's not easy to do a WikiLeaks': A Cypherpunk Approach to Global Media Ethics," *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2022): 4-18; Patrick D. Anderson, "Of Cypherpunks and Sousveillance," *Surveillance & Society,*vol. 20, no. 1 (2022): 1-17; Patrick D. Anderson, "Privacy for the Weak, Transparency for the Powerful: The Cypherpunk Ethics of Julian Assange," *Ethics and Information Technology*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2021): 295-308; and Patrick D. Anderson, *Cypherpunk Ethics: Radical Ethics for the Digital Age* (Routledge, 2022).

[ix] The supposedly academic writings on WikiLeaks have always been replete with distortions and have always ignored primary sources. See Patrick D. Anderson, "Review of Philip Di Salvo's *Digital Whistleblowing Platforms in Journalism: Encrypting Leaks*," *New Media & Society*, vol. 23, no. 6 (2021): 1731-1734; Patrick D. Anderson, "Review: Christian Cotton and Robert Arp (eds.), *WikiLeaking: The Ethics of Secrecy and Exposure*," *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2020): https://logosjournal.com/article/cotton-arp-wikileaks-review/; and Patrick D. Anderson, "How Not to Conduct Academic Research on WikiLeaks: A Case Study," *WikiLeaks Bibliography Blog*, January 6, 2022: https://wikileaksbibliography.org/blog/how-not-to-conduct-academic-research-on-wikileaks-a-case-study/

[x] To be sure, I have criticized Snowden, but I did so on the basis of what he wrote, not based on vague conceptions of what I believe he believes. See Patrick D. Anderson, "Edward Snowden's Julian Assange is an Unfamiliar Julian Assange," *Mint Press News*, 27 September 2019: https://archive.md/i6mrK

[xi] Even Golumbia's friends and colleagues suggested that he more rigorously engage with the explicitly expressed views of his interlocutors, but he apparently ignored that solid advice. See the interview with Chris Gilliard on "The Problem With Cyberlibertarianism," *Tech Won't Save Us* (podcast), January 30, 2025, comments at 10:00: https://www.thenation.com/podcast/archive/twsu-013025/

[xii] Sharon LaFraniere, "Roger Stone Was in Contact With Julian Assange in 2017, Documents Show," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2017: https://archive.md/n1CSv

[xiii] Matthew Renda, "Ninth Circuit Deals 3rd Blow to NSA Spying Case," *Courthouse News*, August 17, 2021: https://archive.md/vRAab

[xiv] Rachael Hanna, "Metadata Collection Violated FISA, Ninth Circuit Rules," *Lawfare Blog*,

September 14, 2020: https://archive.ph/eQvrD

[xv] See Patrick D. Anderson, "Review of *Crypto Wars—The Fight for Privacy in the Digital Age: A Political History of Digital Encryption*,"*Cryptologia* 47, no. 3 (2023), 291; see also Craig Jarvis, *Crypto Wars—The Fight for Privacy in the Digital Age: A Political History of Digital Encryption* (CRC Press, 2021), 377–378.

[xvi] Golumbia, *Cultural Logic of Computation*, 3-4.

[xvii] Golumbia, *Cultural Logic of Computation*, 27, 25.

[xviii] In a review of *The Politics of Bitcoin*, William Luther criticizes Golumbia's political analysis for conflating too many disparate positions and for misunderstanding basic ideas in economic theory. "The aforementioned errors are compounded when Golumbia turns to bitcoin," Luther notes. These same kinds of errors creep into *Cyberlibertarianism*. See William Luther, "David Golumbia, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism*," *The Review of Austrian Economics* 32 (2019): 85-88. Available here: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/Delivery.cfm?abstractid=2973059

[xix] David Golumbia, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3-4.

[xx] Golumbia, *Politics of Bitcoin*, 35.

[xxi] Golumbia, *Politics of Bitcoin*, 35.

[xxii] See Yochai Benkler, "A Free Irresponsible Press: Wikileaks and the Battle Over the Soul of the Networked Fourth Estate," *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 46 (2011), 311-397.

[xxiii] Benkler, "A Free Irresponsible Press," 342.

[xxiv] The article Golumbia cites is Patrick D. Anderson, "Privacy for the Weak, Transparency for the Powerful: The Cypherpunk Ethics of Julian Assange," *Ethics and Information Technology* 23, no. 3 (2021): 295–308. For my response, see Patrick D. Anderson, "How I Was Accused of Fascism for Writing About WikiLeaks," *WikiLeaks Bibliography Blog*, March 12, 2025:

https://wikileaksbibliography.org/blog/how-i-was-accused-of-fascism-for-writing-about-wikileaks/

[xxv] Golumbia also ignores the sole academic book on the cypherpunk movement, Anderson, *Cypherpunk Ethics: Radical Ethics for the Digital Age*.

[xxvi] Golumbia, *Cultural Logic of Computation*, 7.

Harold Schechter and Eric Powell's Dr. Werthless

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The collapse in recent years of a major comic distributor, leaving hundreds of thousands of comics of all kinds unsold, marks yet one more phase in the genre's long boom-and-bust history. Frederic Wertham, long known as the *bete noir* of comics at the close of their historic heyday, has often seen as the witness for the prosecution in the death sentence. This heavily-researched graphic novel brings it all back.

In fact, the Manhattan court room that housed the notorious 1953 Congressional "investigation" of comic book wrongdoing happened to be the very court room where curiously similar Congressional investigations of the Communist Party activities had taken place a few years earlier. A close observer to both—had anyone noticed—would have noted that in both cases. the charges strongly hinted that "Jews" had been found threatening the morals of America's young.

Dr. Wertham, himself a Jewish immigrant, is rightly remembered as a chilling voice in the ever-evolving age of mass culture. Although he has been portrayed satirically dozens of times in comic art, *Doctor Werthless* offers the graphic novel delivering the industry's own scholarship-based judgment. It is also, intriguingly, an aesthetic judgment, very dark indeed.

Friedrich Ignatz Wertheimer, a German national going to medical school in Britain during wartime, found himself sent to work in an asylum on the Isle of Man. There, in the most insular circumstances imaginable, he eagerly read books about psychoanalysis. Traveling to Vienna to meet Freud himself in 1920, he unsuccessfully requested an essay on psychoanalysis for *The New Republic*, but perhaps gained the interest of a lifetime. Back in Germany in 1921, he became an intern at the Munich Institute, with a mentor regarded as the first not only to diagnose but also to treat schizophrenia.

By the time Werthimer talked his way into a position at the Phipps Psychiatric clinic at Johns Hopkins, in the US, he had Americanized his name and found a real mentor in Adolf Meyer, who sought to apply psychiatry to social issues. Meeting legendary defense attorney Clarence Darrow, Wertheimer added a social interest: understanding and helping African Americans.

By this time, readers will want to ask themselves why the artist Eric Powell, and co-writers Powell and Harold Schechter, have placed a particularly vicious murderer, back in Massachusetts of the 1870s, alongside the main narrative. Jesse Pomeroy, a "boy fiend" with

half a dozen victims, turned out to be an avid reader of pulp novels, the “Yellow Backs” of earlier decades now become “dime novels” for obvious reasons. Anthony Comstock, famous again for laws used even now in against abortion, had begun by the early 1880s to curse popular literature’s influence on the young. The creators of “*Dr Werthless”* want us to track the morbid judgment of the future essays with real life, especially grotesque murders in the US and Europe. Does this pairing work?

The publisher offers a precedent that is more than a precedent. The creators’ earlier book. *Did You Hear What Eddie Gein Done?*, reiterated in comic form the murder and mutilation, small town Wisconsin saga of “The Plainfield Ghoul” that has fascinated a grim or perverse public for generations, inspiring films and music. By coincidence, this reviewer met and chatted with Gein’s own former male nurse at the Mendota, Wisconsin, mental hospital. Gein, an avid Republican, made no excuses for his activity but saved his exasperation for the radicals of nearby Madison: surely a revealing detail.

The most intense art of *“Dr. Werthless*,” in assorted shades of grey, matches the portrait pages touched with a version of Cubism, as if character is split in many ways. Less intense, the gray wash seems intended on most other pages as an uncolored version of the horror comics that Wertheim denounced.

But the story is far more nuanced, and we learn to view Wertheim as an exceedingly complex and in some situations, admirable figure. He is also an avid believer in himself, almost exhibitionistic in his pursuit of public status.

Through his position at the Phipps (and Johns Hopkins), Wertham soon gained US citizenship and an American wife, an artistic collaborator on his *Significance of the physical Constitution in Mental Illness* (1926). He also proved quarrelsome at his job, so much so that his reputation preceded him as he sought better positions. He returned to Germany in 1930 for a one year fellowship, finally receiving the offer for the position that changed his life: the psychiatric ward at Bellevue Hospital, Manhattan.

There, Wertham found himself treating the perpetrators of grotesque murders, testifying in court to a variety of his own theories including “our failure as a society to protect our own children” (p.65). He wrote a series of books with real public appeal, including *Dark Legend* (1950), adapted to a play reviewed unfavorably but raising his profile, already established with *The Show of Violence* (1949), an anthology of crime cases with his psychiatric participation. Astonishingly, the famed Black novelist Richard Wright had sought him out a few years earlier, the beginning of a sustained relationship around understanding the causes of crime.

The Lafargue Institute (named for Paul Lafargue, Marx’s essayist son-in-law) opened in Harlem in 1946, a remarkable launching point for a wide range of public activities including anti-racist courtroom testimony on the ill effects of school segregation on Black children. Leaping at the job opportunity, Wertham found more public status. Thus Wertham in court: “The child interprets segregation as punishment. And they do not know what they are being punished

for," (p.127), dramatic testimony undercut, somewhat, by his waving a comic book on the stand. Never mind: if the effects of school segregation in Baltimore disproved the earlier Supreme Court ruling that schools could be racially separate but equal, the ground had been set for Brown vs. the Board of Education and the formal end of public school segregation. Characteristically, Wertham would always be convinced that his own key role in the historic shift had been diminished for public consumption.

Some years earlier, with his background in the close study of violent crime and criminals, Wertham had already come upon the evidence that would make him famous and notorious: black youngsters who loved violent comic books. In the era when wartime action-comics were being replaced with the best-selling series Crime Does Not Pay, his dramatic 1948 public symposium, "The Psychopathology of Comic Books," sought to make scientific claims further dramatized through a feature by a popular journalist in *Colliers magazine*, "Horror in the Nursery."

Seduction of the Innocent (1949), a literary bombshell, gave the enemies of comics the argument they were looking for, and the distinguished figure who could lead the crusade supported otherwise by religious conservatives. Here, a dozen pages of *"Dr. Werthless"* painstakingly demonstrate that Wertham never bothered to prove the dangers of comics to children and did not need to: in the McCarthy Era, accusations would prove sufficient. The public hearings in Manhattan on the "Comic Book Menace" offered yellow journalists what they needed.

On the witness stand, Bill Gaines—the publisher of EC, that is, of horror comic but also progressive comics on social themes, realistic war comics and Mad Comics—did his best at counter-arguments. Juvenile delinquincy, fostered by the real environment, could not be created by a comic. "What are we afraid of?" (p.161). And then stumbled. He could not really explain away the most gory features.

A "Comics Code" was on its way, effectively banning non-participating publishers from newsstand sales. EC comics, foredoomed, had at least consolation: *Mad Magazine,* not a "comic" and therefore beyond punishment. The "Golden Age" of comic books, already threatened by the spread of television, had received an aesthetic as well as a financial blow that comic art would take generations to recover from. And yet Wertham, the great disapprover and public opinion-maker, himself escape any easy characterization. He struggled to assist Etehel Rosenberg, on trial with her husband for her life, to be moved into a prison they could share. According to the testimony of their son Michael (a personal friend of the reviewer), Wertham also gave psychiatric assistance to her children, assuring authorities that their adoption by the Meeropol family was suitable.

With the easing of McCarthyism, Wertham's star began fading. Drifting out of the spotlight, Wertham turned to attack television's Westerns and detective shows. He criticized Alfred Hitchcock in *Redbook* magazine, and Christopher Reeves as Superman! *World of Fanzines* (1973), with his praise for independent cultural creativity beyond the power of the market, met

with indifference of readers who might logically conclude that he was seeking to absolve himself of the harm done to comic art. Too little and too late.

The creators of *"Dr. Werthless"* wish to credit Werthman with both good intentions and destructive results. Of the results, at least within popular culture, we have more documentation. The implications of his erroneous insistence that psychiatric-based measures could eliminate criminal violence and even criminal beliefs placed guilt upon some of the best of the comic artists. A large handful of EC artists in particular felt targeted and shamed. The depression-ridden genius Wally Wood put a bullet into his head. Wood had extracted a little revenge in advance with a *Mad Magazin*e cartoon, labeling Wertham "Dr.Worthless."

According to this reviewer, the book would have been better without the artistic vignettes of mass murderers, especially those with no direct bearing upon Wertham. This, and a visual text too consistently gray, amount to small criticisms for a comic of major significance.

Roger Frie’s Edge of Catastrophe: Erich Fromm, Fascism, and the Holocaust

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Roger Frie’s new book on an underexplored aspect of Fromm’s life, namely, his experiences with Nazism and the Holocaust is a significant—indeed, groundbreaking—contribution to Fromm scholarship as well as to Holocaust research. In addition to offering a thoughtful and meticulous analysis of parts of Fromm’s life hitherto generally hidden from view, the book explores a range of topics that are germane to Holocaust research, including racial hatred and bigotry, oppressive socioeconomic structures, ethics, and questions of personal and collective responsibility in the face of oppression and genocide. On a personal note, I must confess that as I started reading this book, my engagement with it was coloured by a bias of sorts. I was initially convinced that the subject matter of the book would likely have been approached with more nuance, care, and sensitivity by a Jewish author, one who is also familiar with Fromm’s work or is a scholar of Fromm. It seemed obvious to me that the task this non-Jewish author set himself in tackling this important topic was too great of a challenge and that the text would likely miss important nuances with respect to Jews’ collective traumas and fall short in important respects. I was delighted to be proven wrong.

The book has many strengths, and one such strength is that the author manages to balance historical, psychological, and philosophical perspectives in his illuminating considerations rather skilfully and with considerable clarity. For example, Frie weaves commentary on Fromm’s early life with insights about the nature of trauma, loss, and pain as he constructs a compelling narrative of the formative influences in Fromm’s life and intellectual development and convincingly demonstrates that Fromm would later turn to writing and activism as a way of coping with the horrors associated with the Holocaust. One of the book’s other strengths is that the author does not shy away from offering criticisms of Fromm’s views on various issues, including his views on and embrace of matriarchy (69-70) and his (undoubtedly naïve) willingness to accept Albert Speer’s questionable account of his own involvement in carrying out the Holocaust (134-139).

In chapter 1, Frie presents the very personal and emotionally charged correspondence between Erich Fromm and his close relatives who remained in Germany as Nazism was gaining momentum and the Holocaust loomed on the horizon with acuity, tact, and sensitivity. The letters in question were exchanged over the course of the months leading up to the extermination of Europe’s Jews in the Holocaust and as deportations to concentration and death camps were beginning to take place. Among other things, they document the growing anxiety and feelings of powerlessness among German Jews who remained behind, not able to

make it out of Germany in time. Those who were fortunate enough to leave Germany early on, like Fromm, had to live with the knowledge that many of their relatives who remained behind were facing an uncertain future. As what the Nazis were planning came into sharper focus, the anxiety and guilt accompanying this knowledge naturally mushroomed. Fromm did everything in his power to secure his relatives' freedom and facilitate their escape, including aiding them in obtaining exit visas and travel documents. Some of the relatives he was closest to perished in the Holocaust despite these admirable efforts. The author analyzes these correspondences attentively, bringing into focus their personal dimension, which is coloured by uncertainty, sadness, anxiety, and grief (chapters 1 and 2). We are also given a glimpse in chapter 1 of the vibrancy of German Jewish communities in Germany prior to the emergence of Nazism, with the founding of the popular Jewish Free Learning Center in the years before the war being a notable case in point (21).

Frie perspicaciously observes that for those Jewish individuals who managed to make it out of Germany in time, knowledge of the catastrophe and the loss of friends and loved ones would beget trauma, guilt, and sadness that would accompany them for the rest of their lives (111-114). A case in point is the tragic fate of Fromm's second wife, Henny Gurland. It is likely the case that during her marriage to Fromm her psychological well-being was undermined by her tragic personal experiences with Nazism and the Holocaust. Noteworthy in this regard is that she appears to have taken her own life (113). It is also worth mentioning in this connection that she accompanied Walter Benjamin on his ill-fated journey of escape from Europe as the Holocaust was unfolding and was with him during the last hours of his life after he swallowed a lethal amount of morphine pills (106-110). On the other hand, Frie also presents a case study in human resilience as he explores the extensive troubles faced by Fromm and his relative, Heinz Brandt, during the Nazi period and beyond. Brandt was forced into confinement for many years yet, with help from Fromm and others, managed to survive and apparently even thrive. Both he and Fromm clearly chose a life affirming path despite the numerous hurdles and tragedies they had to endure throughout their lives, and as Frie points out, their shared interest in writing and activism was one conspicuous manifestation of this biophilic orientation (122-125). True, Fromm's work as a public intellectual and prolific output were undeniably shaped and informed by the myriad traumas and losses he endured as a result of Nazism and the Holocaust (124-128, 145-147). It is important to recognize, however, that Fromm's decision to become a public intellectual was driven not only by trauma and a sense of responsibility but also by the affirmation of life and its possibilities, including that of a healthy society. Perhaps this crucial point could have been made more explicit by the author.

In chapter 2, Frie provides an overview of factors and events in Fromm's early life, including his Orthodox Jewish upbringing and World War I, that would play a pivotal role in shaping his outlook later in life and his response to Nazism and the Holocaust (59-61). Fromm's terrifying and life-altering experiences with German nationalism ensured that Fromm's mature outlook would be staunchly anti-nationalistic and, as Frie notes in a subsequent chapter, this position informed Fromm's hostility toward Zionism (145-147). Frie also engages in an interesting discussion, throughout chapter 2 and with a focus on the work of the German artist Käthe Kollwitz, of the power of art as commentary on social issues and potentially even as a form of

resistance to various forms of oppression. He also notes here that Fromm understood early on in his career as a writer that patriarchy lends itself to and reinforces authoritarianism and saw challenging it an ethical imperative (69-72).

Admirable and bold is the author's willingness to confront his own family's Nazi past (95-98). He discusses his grandfather's association with the Nazi party in some detail, and contextualizes his family's extended silence on the issue as he was growing up in terms of the broader problem of Germany's reluctance, in the decades following the war, to acknowledge and reckon with its Nazi past and the complicity of many of its citizens (116-122). It is clear that Fromm's inclination to speak up and take principled positions on a host of social issues in the wake of the Holocaust, including anti-Black racism in the United States (126-127), has to be understood, as least in part, in terms of his awareness of the terrible things people can facilitate and become complicit in when silence, indifference, and denial are normalized.

Equally commendable is the author's nuanced and thoughtful discussion of Antisemitism in the American context and its likely effect on what Fromm and his Frankfurt School colleagues felt they could and could not express in their writings in their new home country (100-102). As the author notes, "Antisemitism was also strongly ascendant in the United States, the very country where the Institute and its members and associates had found a new home" (100). The fact that Fromm and his colleagues were left-wing Jewish intellectuals would have made them targets of anti-Jewish bigotry (100-101). This is a very important point, one easily overlooked against the backdrop of the catastrophic consequences of antisemitism in Nazi Germany. As the author notes, it is certainly possible that American antisemitism played a role in Fromm's reluctance to directly address antisemitism in *Escape from Freedom*, which was published in 1941, but he concludes (rightly, in my opinion) that given Fromm's courage and "willingness to speak out and challenge the status quo throughout his career" it is probably the case that Fromm's choice not to address antisemitism directly in that book has more to do with the trauma and pain he was experiencing as he was working to save his family members who remained in Germany (101).

Frie also explores Fromm's tense relationship with the Institute for Social Research and eventual departure from the Institute as he embraced a novel framework for analyzing social psychological phenomena that was anathema to the other leading members of the Institute, including Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse (88, 103). In chapters 4 and 5, Frie accomplishes a number of things, including offering an engaging discussion of ethics and social responsibility as well as the constructive and transformative power of love, hope, and human solidarity. But perhaps most notable among these accomplishments is bringing Fromm into dialogue with a number of prominent Jewish intellectuals who were Fromm's contemporaries, including Hannah Arendt, Primo Levi, and Martin Buber.

I would now like to offer several, very minor criticisms of the book. First, the comparison of the affinities of Fromm's ideas with those of Buber is fruitful and promising, and should have been pursued further (154-155). Both Fromm and Buber are prominent philosophers of dialogue and Fromm scholarship can greatly benefit from a more thorough exploration of convergences and divergences in their positions and views. Second, it would have made sense to devote an

additional chapter to reflecting on the implications of the letters and correspondences presented and discussed in chapter 1. The book being structured the way it is, Frie's consideration of them in this chapter is eclipsed by the following chapters and the reader is likely to lose sight of their centrality to the evolution of Fromm's unique outlook and insights. Additionally, it would have also made sense to devote more space to a discussion of the uniqueness and contemporary relevance and implications of Fromm's social psychological insights. There is, after all, much to say on the subject with Trumpism and other authoritarian populisms lurking in the background. The author himself acknowledges as much with respect to *Escape from Freedom* in particular: "*Escape From Freedom* is relevant in other ways too. Fromm's account of authoritarianism, especially in times of uncertainty, helps to explain the attraction of right-wing populism" (104). Indeed, the themes of evil, racial narcissism, human destructiveness, and willing submission to powerful and manipulative leaders, introduced by the author in the penultimate chapter, have an eerie contemporary resonance that he could have engaged further and explored in more detail. It would have been helpful to have clearly formulated insights about how Fromm's emphasis on the socioeconomic conditions that give rise to authoritarian politics (132), and perhaps texts like *Escape from Freedom* and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (with its unique and helpful typology of aggression) in particular, can inform analyses of the resurgence and appeal of authoritarianism across the globe today. The author notes: "Fromm thus reminds us that the potential for evil is directly related to the conditions and contexts in which it emerges. In order to guard against malignant aggression, we must work together toward ensuring a healthy and functioning society" (132). I suspect most scholars of Fromm and the Frankfurt School would agree with this conclusion. Yet it begets the obvious question, what exactly does a healthy and mature society look like and how do we get there? Fromm was adamant that socialism is the answer, as Frie notes more than once in the book, but it is unclear whether the author himself shares this view. It would have made sense to devote at least a few pages to a discussion of this pressing question.