

What's the Deal?: Fichte's Closed Commercial State, Trump, and Economic Nationalism

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I. What's the deal?

Among so many other firsts, I suspect that Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States, is not only the first head of state of a world power to have hosted his own reality show but also can claim the distinction of having not one, not two, but at the least three board games consecrated to his name: "Donald Trump: The Game," "I'm back and your fired," and the "Apprentice Board Game." Given that the first of these predates his reality TV show "The Apprentice" by fifteen years, we may suspect a kind of telos inhabiting the peculiar phenomenon that is Donald Trump. It could even seem as though, if the survival-format reality show had not existed, Trump would have had to invent it. The fulfillment of Donald Trump is to become the game master, the dealer—the house. And yet this is perhaps not quite as simple as it might seem: the house is the structure, the system, the law. Those who play the game are submitted to contingency; they must compete with one another, and are exposed to all the moods that go with the ups and downs of fortune. The house—the system, the structure—by contrast, like Hölderlin's heavenly ones, feels nothing, experiences nothing. If it is possible to occupy the position of the house, it is only by becoming inhuman; incapable of human pleasure. Trump, however, seems to want it both ways: he wants to be the house, free of risk but also free of joy, and he wants to be a winner, the

biggest winner. (He wants to be both the dealer and the one who deals consummately with that has been dealt)

But since I'm speaking to scholars, even philologists—every historian of philosophy is a philologist to a degree—I won't leave things standing with this merely speculative proposition. Let's go straight to the horse's mouth, if even a horse (or an ass) can sometimes be permitted a ghostwriter. This double desire runs through Trump's *The Art of The Deal*. From its first pages, Trump claims that his animating desire—the ultimate good orienting all his choices and actions—is neither wealth nor even (as one might suspect, now more than ever, and which is certainly in fact the case) power:

I don't do it for the money. I've got enough, much more than I'll ever need.

I do it to do it. Deals are my art form. Other people paint beautifully on canvas or write wonderful poetry. I like making deals, preferably big deals.

That's how I get my kicks.¹

Deal-making is an end in itself. I do it to do it—which is to say, following Aristotle, "deal-making" belongs among the activities that can coherently be pursued for its own sake; that is not merely a means to an end, but an end in itself. It determines a form of life in the fullest sense. In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of three ways of life that hold a special prominence, gathering together and illuminating man's varied paths: the life of pleasure, the political life (the life of honor or of virtue), and the contemplative life.² Each of these lives is oriented around a "good" that can coherently present itself as the meaningful, and meaning-giving end of human action. By

¹ Donald J. Trump (with Tony Schwartz). New York: Random House, 1987, p. 1.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b.

contrast: "the life of money making is a type of compulsory activity, and it is clear that wealth is not the good being sought, since it is instrumental and for the sake of something else."³ For Trump, it would seem, deal-making is a fourth life.

Before I continue with my argument (which, I promise, will lead to Fichte) I want to take a few moments to consider this claim, to take it seriously; far more seriously than its fatuous source might merit. If deal-making can be subsumed, as species to genus, under one of Aristotle's existing three lives, then Trump's claim that deal-making can be done just for sake of doing it wouldn't amount to much. Yet this is not so straightforward. One might suspect, to begin with, that deal-making is merely part of the active life, the political life; the *agora*, the place of assembly in democratic Athens, was nothing else than a market place. But if deal-making is political activity, and even in the highest sense, then it is, nevertheless, of a peculiar, and peculiarly modern kind—perhaps almost unrecognizable to Aristotle. It must be understood in terms of the modern reconception of politics in terms of a social contrast; and yet a social contrast that is not merely foundational, but constantly being renegotiated, with political life the continual conflict between contracting parties. But there is also another possibility: Aristotle doesn't include the life of the artist among the three prominent lives; he cannot imagine, as can we moderns, creativity and artistic production not only as something done for its own sake, but as a life that can claim a dignity and significance equal, or perhaps greater, than that of the politician or thinker. So we might say, rather, that the life of deal-making is a version of the creative life; made possible, as Hannah Arendt would argue, by the post-Classical ascendance of *homo faber*. Or finally, drawing together these two points, we could even say that deal-making exemplifies the way in which political life is transformed through the rise of *homo faber*. Yet this conclusion doesn't seem quite adequate, either, since as Hannah Arendt of course

³ Ibid., 1096a. Trans. Joe Sachs.

argues, the modern world is characterized by the rise of *homo laborans* and the suppression of both the life of making as well as activity. We cannot discount then, that, deal-making belongs also, or perhaps principally, to the life of pleasure and even the life of contemplation.

Indeed, if deal-making is a kind of art, a kind of artistic life, it is characterized by a fastness and looseness, an openness to the moment.

Most people are surprised by the way I work. I play it very loose. I don't carry a briefcase. I try not to schedule too many meetings. I leave my door open. You can't be imaginative or entrepreneurial if you've got too much structure. I prefer to come to work each day and just see what develops... There's rarely a day with fewer than fifty calls, and often it runs to over a hundred. In between, at least a dozen meetings. The majority occur on the spur of the moment, and few of them last longer than fifteen minutes.⁴

Whereas the artist, as conceived by Aristotle, brings forth the form, contemplated beforehand, by working upon the material, the deal-maker, a master improviser, makes it up as he goes along; open to what is given, playing with what is given, making the best of every situation. Art has become play. If Aristotle's *technē*, as Heidegger argues, is a kind of *epistēmē*, involving knowledge of the form that is brought forth into presence in the act of making, then deal-making involves a peculiar knowledge, quite different from knowledge of forms (of the generic, universal, eternal). The deal-maker gains knowledge of the situation. The essence of the situation is the conflict, the *polemos*, that plays out with every decision; that gets played out in every deal. Heraclitus writes:

⁴ *The Art of the Deal*, pp. 1-2.

Πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι, πάντων δὲ βασιλεύς, καὶ
 τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους, τοὺς μὲν δούλους
 ἐποίησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους.

War is the father of all things, of all things the king, and
 shows some to be God, some to be men, makes some slaves
 and some free.

Translating into and talking Trump as best I can: "the deal is be leader of all things; it shows who are the winners and who are the losers." The deal-maker is the one who to the greatest degree possible experiences the deal; who partakes of the pleasure of deal-making, of living as close to the center of the deal as possible. Perhaps, then, if deal-making constitutes an autonomous, self-sufficient, prominent mode of life, it is because it gathers together all the other possibilities of life (politics and activity more generally, artistic creation, knowledge and contemplation, and pleasure) into a single mode of life that is, or at least seems to be, capable of managing, dealing with, the modern condition. The deal-maker claims at once to master the fluidity of modern life and to submit pleasurably to this fluidity, to experience it as pleasure.

If the first chapter of *The Art of the Deal* marches us through a week of vertiginous deal-making, the second chapter, titled "Trump Cards," as if bringing a bit of order to the chaos, will describe the elements of the deal. It isn't clear that deal-making can be taught: "More than anything else, I think deal-making is an ability you're born with. It's in the genes."⁵ Still, deal-making isn't gambling; the deal-maker confronts the contingency of the moment, but he does not submit to chance.

⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

People think I'm a gambler. I've never gambled in my life.

To me, a gambler is someone who plays slot machines. I prefer to own slot machines. It's a very good business being the house.

It's been said that I believe in the power of positive thinking. In fact, I believe in the power of negative thinking. I happen to be very conservative in business. I always go into the deal anticipating the worst. If you plan for the worst—if you can live with the worst—the good will always take care of itself.⁶

The deal-maker at once submits to the deal, experiencing its vertiginous play, and indemnifies himself against all risk. By imagining, and even living with, what, under the given circumstances, would be the worst deal, the deal-maker is able to elevate himself beyond true risk. But of course ultimately the worst deal, the ultimate trump card, is death itself. The only way to indemnify the deal-maker against even this risk is to live only for the sake of the pleasure of the moment. Closing the chapter, Trump writes:

I don't kid myself. Life is very fragile, and success doesn't change that. If anything, success makes it more fragile.

Anything can change, without warning, and that's why I try not to take any of what's happened seriously...The real

⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

excitement is playing the game... If you ask me exactly what the deals I'm about to describe all add up to in the end, I'm not sure I have a very good answer. Except that I've had a very good time making them.⁷

Here the paradoxical nature of deal-making as a form of life, a manner of living, reveals itself most fully. The deal-master tries to experience the deal and master the deal at one time. He tries to master the deal by forethought, anticipation of risk, and yet the greatest degree of forethought brings us before a risk, a fragility to things, that cannot be surmounted. So it would seem the deal-maker must live for the present; the life of the deal is not a life of art, of creativity, but a life of pleasure. The temporal horizon of the deal-maker collapses into a present. And yet it is also not clear if the deal maker can ever actually experience the pleasure of the moment. "It never stops, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I try to learn from the past, but I plan for the future by focusing exclusively on the present. That's where the fun is. And if it can't be fun, what's the point."⁸ One can only live in the moment, but the moment only exists in the future. Ultimately, fun is had only in the past: the life of deal-making lives fully in a present that only ever exists in the future, and only ever knows that it has lived at all by looking back at all the fun its had. Fun, in fact, is not something we feel, something with enjoy, but something that is made, bought, had: the commodity form of pleasure.

II. Deal-making as the pathology of modernity.

By this point, you are probably asking: "what's the deal?" This is, in fact, appropriately, the title of the first section of the talk: but you probably mean something else. Why am I talking about

⁷ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸ Ibid., p. 2.

Trump? Isn't this paper supposed to be on Fichte and economic nationalism. Of course, "economic nationalism," a catchword of Steve Bannon, has suddenly become an everyday concept due to Trump's election. And it is clear that Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* plays an important, if not fully appreciated role in the genealogy of the economic nationalism. But what on earth does Fichte have to do with Trump's ghost-written encomium to deal-making?

In the last pages I have tried to show that Trump's deal-maker, his deal-making as a way of life, exemplifies the paradoxical temporality of life under late capitalism. One might speak, in this way, of a psychopathology of everyday life, though perhaps in a sense that owes as much to Heidegger as to Freud. What is most interesting about this account is that it shows the pathology from the side of the winner, the absolute winner. Usually capitalist pathologies start from the side of the "losers"; failed salesmen, drug addicts, compulsive gamblers, neurotics of all shapes and stripes. (The tendency of the left to paint Trump as a loser rather than a winner, as well as the inevitable imposition of a pop psychoanalysis, not only misses the point but is dangerously naïve; and one might even say that the comic treatment of Trump, like Aristophanes' take-down of Socrates, fails to recognize the sense in which it is the pathologies of success rather than failure that characterize the tragic limits of the age. It took more than two millennia before Nietzsche could put Socrates at the center of a tragedy; namely the decline of tragic drama itself) But it is now possible to see that the pathology of the loser is merely a special case, and limiting case, of the pathology of the winner. But what interests me above all is the way in which the pathology already manifests itself in Fichte's thought—and not simply as a private quirk, an idiosyncrasy, but as the constitutive horizon of German idealism, and even of modern philosophy as such; which continues to play itself out not only in Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, but even in Heidegger... This is not meant as a critique *ad hominem*; it speaks to the greatness of a thinker to bring forth the ruling characteristics of their age,

even if this is itself pathological. (Does this mean that Trump is great, too? As odious and banal as he is, in almost every possible sense, I do not think we should deny that he is a "world-historical individual.")

A more far reaching version of this argument could be sketched out as follows: whereas for Aristotle luck and chance mark the limit to causal explanation and hence to the rational articulation of what is (things can be said to happen by chance, yet chance is not a cause in its own right), modern philosophy (as is clear in empiricism) will begin to regard contingency as a primary and positive source of knowledge. The tension between necessity and contingency, as also between autonomy and heteronomy, comes to the foreground. German idealism regards this tension as generative, productive, and ultimately seeks a systematic reconciliation. Heidegger, in turn, following Schelling and Nietzsche and also Hölderlin, returns to this tension but makes it irreducible, fundamental, starting with his "existential" analysis of thrownness and projection. (I suspect indeed that the recent philosophical encomiums to "radical contingency" must be seen in this light.)

Today, however, I'm going to restrict myself to talking about one piece of this puzzle, though, I think, a very important piece. For it is my contention that Fichte recognized, with greater clarity than most if not all of his contemporaries, that the experience of life as a "game of chance" is the constitutive horizon of the present age, but he also rejected either the Hegelian conviction (which even certain forms of Marxism would continue to hold on to) that this game is stacked in the direction of progress, or Scheller's belief that a purely ideological mastery of the game would suffice. For Fichte, by contrast, the gaming quality of modern life demanded one last gamble that could only play itself out on the world historical stage; an extraordinarily risky "play" that will bring the game to an end. The only way to master the game is to bring the game to an end.

III. Fichte's *Closed Commercial State*.

In the eighth and final sections of the third and final book of the *Closed Commercial State*, Fichte, having presented what he regards as an absolutely compelling case for a proposal that, if carried through, would bring the ills of the world to an end, turns in anticipation to the question that must necessarily come to preoccupy all those whose philanthropic measures are rejected and mocked by the very ones they most wish to help: why won't they just do what I say?

In the course of this investigation I have tried to remove whatever objections one could raise against individual parts of our theory. Yet with a great part of mankind, it is fruitless to go into the reasons of things with them, since their entire way of thinking has not arisen in accordance with reasons but through blind chance. With every passing moment they will once again lose hold of the thread offered to them, forgetting what they just knew and had insight into, and from which a conclusion is now being drawn, and thus are ever again torn back to their customary manner of thinking. Even if such people can offer nothing against any of the parts of which the whole consists, they will nevertheless remain averse to the whole itself.

It is often more useful to search for the reason, itself hidden from them, for their way of thinking, and then place it before their eyes. Even if this will not improve men who are already formed, one can nevertheless hope that those who are still developing, and the generations of the future, will avoid the mistakes and errors of their predecessors.

Thus, I regard the following as the true reason why the ideas set forth here are most profoundly displeasing to so many, who cannot bear to think of the state of things at which they aim. It is a characteristic feature of our age, standing in sharp relief to the seriousness and sobriety of our ancestors, to wish to play and madly swarm to and from with its fantasy, and since there are few other means available to satisfy this play-urge, it has a strong inclination to turn life into a game. Some contemporaries, having also noticed this tendency, and not themselves of a poetic or philosophical nature, have blamed poetry and philosophy for this phenomenon, whereas in fact the former diverts that urge toward something else than life, and the latter challenges it to the extent that it concerns itself with life. We believe that it is a necessary step, induced through nature alone, on the path that leads our species forward.

As a consequence of this tendency, one never wishes to obtain anything by following a rule, but instead to have everything through cunning ruses and luck. Acquisition and all human commerce should resemble a game of chance. One could allow these men to have, keeping to the straight and narrow, the very things they hope to gain through intrigues, cheating, and chance, save on the condition that they now be content with it for the rest of their lives. They would then not want it. It delights them more to strive for things cunningly than to possess them securely. It is these people who incessantly call out for freedom— freedom of trade and acquisition, freedom from supervision and policing, freedom from all order and morality.

Whatever aims at strict regularity and at things taking a firmly ordered, thoroughly uniform course will appear to them as an infringement on their natural freedom. Such people must be repelled at the very thought of an arrangement of public commerce in which swindling speculation, accidental profits, and sudden wealth would no longer occur.

This tendency alone gives rise to that frivolity which is more concerned with the enjoyment of the passing moment than with the security of the future, and whose chief maxims are: things will take care of themselves, who knows what will happen in the meantime, and what kind of stroke of fortune will occur. Its life wisdom for individuals, and its politics for states, consists only in the art of getting out of the present jam, with no care given to the future difficulties that one is thrust into through the remedy that was taken. For such frivolity the security of the future, which one promises to it and which it never itself desires, is no valid substitute for the unbridled freedom of the moment that alone entices it.⁹

The *Closed Commercial State* itself consists in the proposal for a society in which the economic existence of every individual is completely regulated by the state, which grants to each individual not only the right to pursue a certain defined economic activity (extracting produce from this piece of land, pursuing this specific trade) but guarantees that, in return for their labor, they will be able to

⁹ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Closed Commercial State*. Trans. Anthony Curtis Adler. Albany: SUNY Press, 2013, pp. 197-8.

provide themselves with the necessities of life. Citizens will be forbidden from freely engaging in economic activity with foreign entities, and indeed travel abroad will only be permitted to scholars and artists. Even though this vision of the state might seem perversely anti-modern, Fichte indeed regards it as the culmination of the historical process of modernity: the emergence of the sovereign nation state reveals a tendency toward closure, and yet the merely juridical closure of the Westphalian state is not enough, and must be supplemented by complete economic closure. In a powerful and prescient analysis of the global order of colonial relations, Fichte argues that these are not only fundamentally exploitative, but that they must ultimately lead to the complete destitution of weak nations, which, as a result of trade imbalances, will ultimately be compelled to sell their own sovereignty to the highest bidder.

The *Closed Commercial State* consists in three books: the first offers a rational deduction of the ideal arrangement of economic relations. This culminates in a theory of property as the exclusive right to a certain kind of activity. The second, in turn, concerns the "history of the present," arguing, in effect, that Europe originally constituted a single vast system of trade, and yet was in the process of dividing itself off into nation states. Here he claims that mercantilism itself represented a series of half-measures undertaken in pursuit of economic closure. If one were to consider the passage cited above only with a view only to the argument pursued in the first two books, Fichte's argument would seem peculiar if not altogether bizarre. On the one hand: there would seem little or no point in offering a proposal that is so contrary to the spirit of the age and its tendencies. On the other hand: if the tendency of the present age is toward closure, then this would not only suggest that the present age is more serious than might first seem to be the case, but that indeed the relation of the playful and the serious, as modes of existence, is more complex than Fichte's closing words suggests. Or perhaps indeed, if playfulness is itself a necessary step driving the species forward, then this

would suggest that the playful wheeling and dealing man of the present is in fact the agent of world history's very serious intentions, whereas Fichte's economic philosophy, in all its ponderous heavy Teutonic seriousness, is a non-starter. Such considerations, it would seem, much lead us to the path taken by Hegel who, moreover, saw with great clarity the totalitarian tendencies of Fichte's seemingly consequent liberalism.

The third book of the *Closed Commercial State*, however, moves in an altogether different direction. Here Fichte proposes nothing less than a kind of trick for catalyzing a chain of commercial closures. This trick, introduced under the title of "politics," goes as follows: one of the dominant economic powers in world will suddenly carry out a "money operation" that involves replacing all the Gold currency used within its borders with a national currency, made of a material that is at once cheap and yet impossible for private parties to counterfeit, whose value is fixed, and whose validity is guaranteed, by the state. The first state that does this will reap tremendous benefits, instantly nearly doubling its wealth, since its gold will be freed up from its function as a domestic means of exchange. It will be able to acquire tremendous military power, which it can and must use for the sole purpose of claiming the natural boundaries needed for a self-sufficient economic existence. Other states, seeing this, will follow, though they will benefit less than the first. Eventually all states will be compelled to close themselves off economically just to survive.

It can hardly escape us that Fichte's "money operation" consists in an enormous (and seemingly mad) geo-politico-economic wager. If the first country to close itself off can reap the greatest benefits, it is only because it has exposed itself to the greatest risk. I don't think it could have escaped Fichte that the "money operation" might have instantly led to an immediate and disastrous political crisis. Fichte doesn't spend much time on these risks, but I don't think this is because he doesn't take them seriously, but rather because he is concerned above all with "selling"

his proposal to those who are in a position of power. He, we might say, is convinced that the danger that the present world faces is so great that only this sort of gamble could lead us back from the abyss. What he fears most of all is that very economic conditions which allow for a noble, free, truly human existence will be destroyed. In the best tradition of the philosophers, he is afraid for philosophy, for the dignity of contemplative human reason. And yet, to quote Heidegger quoting Hölderlin's *Patmos*: "Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst. Das Rettende auch." "Where the danger is, there too grows the saving power." It is precisely the characteristic of the present age, its love of risk and gambles and tricks and cunning, that makes Fichte's world-historical wager possible. Only a world that loves to gamble could find a statesman crazy enough to gamble everything. But what is the payoff: peace on earth—among states and within each state's own territory. An abrupt end to the dynamism of history; the substitution of the madness of history with gentle, stable progress based on the peaceful, but very limited interactions of nation states, each with its own well defined, rich national character.

Once this system has become universal and eternal peace is established among the different peoples, there is not a single state on the face of the earth that will have the slightest interest in keeping its discoveries from any other, since each will only use these for its own needs inside its boundaries, and not to oppress other states and provide itself with superiority over them. Nothing, it follows, will prevent the scholars and artists of all nations from entering into the freest commerce with one another. The public papers will no longer contain stories of wars and battles, peace treaties or alliances, for all these things will have vanished from the world. They will only contain news of the advances of science, of new discoveries, of progress in legislation

and the police, and each state will hasten to make itself home to the inventions of other.¹⁰

Almost two centuries before Francis Fukayama, and more than a hundred years before Kojève, Fichte images the end of history. And yet the end of history will not brought forth more or less of its own accord through the ruse of history, driving forward through suffering and contradiction toward the absolute, but through the ruse of Fichte. Perhaps, had Fichte not existed, another great thinker would have figured out the "money operation"—yet whoever discovers it, and however long this takes, it will always involve an event that intervenes in the existing order of things, catalyzing a chain reaction of occurrences that will leave the world utterly transformed. This event is not destined or necessitated in any way; it is an intervention and an invention: a fundamentally new kind of currency, imposed from the top down, introducing a new kind of numismatic regime, a new sovereignty beyond all sovereignty. (Fichte's most interesting insight consists in the claim that the very existence of money as a means of exchange, so long as its value is established by a kind of global opinion, compromises the very possibility of the integral and self-sufficient nation state. The sovereign power of gold undermines the pretense of national sovereignty. The implications of this for understanding the present world are, I think, immense. The numismatic decision, for Fichte, is beyond any sovereign decision).

For Fichte, true property must issue in free activity. For Fichte the fundamental error of all existing theories of property consists in the fact that "one posits the first, original property in the exclusive possession of a thing." Against this, his theory maintains that "the first and original

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 99.

property, the basis of all others, [consists] in *an exclusive right to a determinate free activity*."¹¹ But if we take this Idealistic theory of property, already developed with great consequence, seriously, then we might ask: how is it that the human race appropriates its own history, such that it can become most fully the property of itself in its historical existence— or such that, indeed, its historical existence could be the very event of self-appropriation. This is a vital question, a necessary question, since without the historical self-appropriation human freedom would amount to nothing. The thought of the early "humanistic" Marx still operates within the horizon of this question, and it is perhaps still even at work in Heidegger's *Ereignis*— the propriative event. Here, however, the difference between Fichte and Hegel comes into striking view. For Hegel: history is the ongoing process by which absolute spirit appropriates itself, passing from *dunamis* to *energeia*. (It is in just this sense, I think, that Hegel could have never actually entertained an "end to history" in any simple sense.) For Fichte, by contrast: the *highest appropriative event* is the wager of the philosopher-statesman; the wager to end all wagers, and hence end a history that has been characterized by chance. (There is thus a kind of Platonism at work in Fichte: the philosopher is the one who, owing nothing to the world in which he was born, precipitates an event of conversion; the first in the chain liberating actions.) Human beings can only take ownership of their historical existence, hence of their humanity, by acting in a decisive way against the riskiness in which their existence is enmeshed. And yet such a decision, which need in fact only happen once and can originate with one visionary, is itself risky to the highest degree. It is only possible as the highest wager.

Yet this must give us pause: Fichte offers a powerful and prescience critique of the form of life that comes to prevail under the conditions of capitalism--- now more than ever. But he also succumbs to the conceit that it would be possible to play the game and master the game at the same

¹¹ Ibid., p. 130.

time, to expose oneself to risk while indemnifying oneself against risk. One might claim that risk-taking has no essential value for Fichte: I don't think this is so, however. Speculative thought is risk-taking thought; the speculative desire of the philosopher is of a piece with the characteristic of the age. Indeed Fichte recognizes as much when, claiming that many wrongly blame poetry and philosophy for the frivolousness of the age, he remarks, tellingly, that philosophy "challenges it to the extent that it concerns itself with life." This can only mean that, in its proper domain, beyond the sphere of ordinary life, philosophy remains playful.

Precisely this is the bad faith—the pathology—of capitalism as a form of life, which, moreover, assumes ever more complex and concrete forms with the emergence of new and ever more intricate ways of monetizing risk. Capitalism fetishizes risk, and yet, the more that precariousness becomes the general condition, the more that the capitalist is able to profit from a risk in which he no longer has to partake. The paradox of this pathology, however, is as follows: the more relentlessly the "losers" at the game of life find themselves exposed to this precariousness, the more they struggle to find a perspective for their own lives according to which they can become masters of the risk to which they are exposed. Contemporary forms of life are characterized by this dualism, which itself functions as ideology regardless the particular forms it assumes.

Let us consider, once more, Donald Trump's reality show, "The Apprentice." This genre of reality show should be thought of as perverted Brechtian drama. Brecht's plays sought to present the human condition, with its relentless struggle for survival, in such a way that we could realize that this is not a fateful tragic condition to which we are condemned, but a historical reality that we have created for ourselves. The reality show turns this on its head: the struggle for survival appears, on the hand, as purely the effect of the artificial contrivances of the show, which has forced people together into a confined space to compete in contrived challenges, and yet at the same time elevates this very

artifice to a law of fate. It says, in effect: we must struggle against each other because the celebrity game-master tells us we must do so. We must submit to the celebrity game-master because everyone who is not a celebrity, everybody who is a nobody on the way to becoming somebody, must want to be a celebrity. Yet watching the reality show grants a pleasure which is denied to the participants; they are perhaps on the way to becoming celebrities, they have even been granted a little piece of celebrity, but they cannot identify with the game-master. We however who are watching, we who are not even participants in the game, we who are bigger losers than the biggest loser, can nevertheless identify completely with the celebrity game-master as he passes judgment on the winners and losers. "You're fired"—I knew it, we think to ourselves; that apprentice did such a bad job. He deserved to lose. Now they'll now who's the boss!!

IV. Economic nationalism.

If there is a uniquely American style of fascism, now in the offing, it consists at heart in this logic of identification. It is a fascism, in other words, that no longer depends on the suppression of the individual in the name of communitarian or collective values, which, however cynical their deployment by the propagandists of the ruling elite, nevertheless retain a strong and persuasive rhetorical force among the multitude. Donald Trump, at once master of the game and master-player, offers the perfect point for new mode of identification, in which we identify ourselves not with the state, the collective, by sacrificing our claim to individual autonomy and rights, but rather identify ourselves, in our atomized individuality, with the system that governs our lives, dispenses with our lives, without either demanding sacrifice or offering the hope of rediscovering our individuality in the universal. We take pleasure in the system, live vicariously through the system, even though this

itself inevitably condemns, however much fun we find along the way, to lose.¹² (This is possible, of course, only through various exclusions: of the racial and ethnic and sexual, of foreigners, of "liberals," of women who refuse objectification. But I'm not sure that these exclusions, conceptually speaking, are the most important thing; at least it no longer quite seems to be a matter of consolidating national enemy through scapegoating the outsider)

It is in this sense, moreover, that we can understand Trump's economic nationalism. On the one hand, it is the very opposite of Fichte's; it has nothing to do with securing economic rights and economic justice through even a limited recognition of the responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with the possibility of livelihood sufficient to allow for a dignified, fully human life. It has nothing to do, even, as some in the alt-right might have it, with the "cultural" integrity of the nation state. Rather: Trump's economic nationalism follows from the elevation of the president to the "deal-maker-in-chief"; economic relations between nations, this is to say, are mere occasions for the leader to show off his deal-making prowess, and this, in turn, serves to allow for popular identification with the one who is able to play the game, enjoy the game, and master it at the same time; who can keep on playing the game and yet can never lose.

¹² The "system" in this sense is not a *universal* in which the *individual* can recognize itself, finding itself affirmed and repeated at a higher, if only through sacrifice. Rather, the *system* leaves the individual entirely to itself; like the gambler at the slot machine, the individual is left to pursue its own pleasures. Yet nevertheless all the individual pursuits constituting individual life can only happen in and through the system, which constitutes the horizon of meaningfulness and action without offering the prospect of an *experience* of a meaning that is either common to all or *transcendental*. The system thus becomes identifiable only by achieving a *double existence*: house and player at once.

