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the antinomies of anti-capitalism

LIZA FEATHERSTONE AND UNITED STUDENTS
AGAINST SWEATSHOPS

Students against Sweatshops

Verso, New York, 2002

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CHIN-TAO WU

*Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Intervention
since the 1980s*

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Students against Sweatshops and *Privatising Culture*, two utterly fascinating books, call attention to a problem that all critical discourse must confront if it is to deserve the name ‘political’: that is, the need to produce sharp-edged ontologies. The slide from anti-capitalist to anti-corporate positions, which these books narrate and to a certain extent participate in, is one such area where new crisper ontologies are needed. That these books conspicuously fail to do this should be read as a symptom of the strain the left is under in the face of the apparently intractable. More usefully, though, it should be used to turn things around so as to obtain a historical perspective on the present and develop a better sense of its ideological and political coordinates.

Students against Sweatshops demonstrates that the practical goal of achieving a living wage for garment workers comes at the price of a depoliticisation of class struggle and indeed class difference. The social conscience of the middle class can be asked to fight for a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work, but not to bring an end to the system that provides them with their privileges. While a living wage for all is a fairly modest and uncontroversial goal, achieving it would be earth shattering because it is anything but the norm. It is a modest goal in that it neither demands nor expects an end to class difference and doesn’t necessarily amount to an overthrowing of the capitalist system, although to hear its opponents speak you might be persuaded to think otherwise. The call for a living wage, too, does not respond to high levels of unemployment, which despite what right wing mouthpieces have taught us to believe is not

the key problem besetting Western democracies. The contrary is the case: it is not the lack of jobs as such that is the problem (indeed in certain sectors there are labour shortages), rather it is the lack of well-paid or at least decently paying jobs that is critical. Now that labour has, for the most part, ceased to be organised, and so-called 'enterprise bargaining', or individually negotiated contracts, has replaced collective bargaining, an old problem has re-emerged—underemployment. The supposed economic miracle of the late 1990s in the USA, whereby unemployment figures fell, was to a large extent a product of the widespread proliferation of what Dan Gallin caustically refers to as 'McJobs', that is, jobs that, even if workers work overtime and put in plenty of extra effort, still pay less than is needed to survive.¹

Underemployment is in a sense even more heartbreaking than unemployment, because as the supposed 'cure' for welfare dependency it gives lie to the myth that if you work hard eventually you will be rewarded. As Barbara Ehrenreich put it in her paean to the 'working poor' *Nickel and Dimed*: 'No one ever said that you could work hard—harder even than you ever thought possible—and still find yourself sinking ever deeper into poverty and debt'.² Yet that is increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception and the situation only worsens when we shift our attention from 'Low-wage USA' to the so-called Free Trade Zones scattered throughout the Southern Hemisphere. For instance, in July 1996 a *Los Angeles Times* reporter travelled to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and 'documented the desperate situation of workers in one of the poorest countries in

the world, where unemployment runs to 70 percent. Totalling the cost of carfare to and from work, a breakfast of fruit juice and cornmeal, and rice and beans for lunch, reporter Barry Bearak calculated that a garment worker spent nearly her entire daily earnings of \$2.40 before returning home.'³ Confronted with stories like this, which can, of course, be multiplied a thousand times over, it is difficult to believe that anyone could seriously oppose the need for a global benchmark for wages.

The problem is a complex one indeed and a host of variables need to be factored in to even begin to come to grips with it. In recent years, Robert Brenner's *Economics of Global Turbulence* has called attention to the pernicious effect of depressed commodity prices, which, according to him, has made it all but impossible to raise wages across the board. Meanwhile, Doug Henwood in *Wall Street* and Tom Frank in *One Market under God* have shown that the so-called 'New Economy' is in fact a post-entrepreneurial economy in which the owners of the means of production are no longer the actual producers themselves, but institutional investors who being concerned only with the value of the stock they hold tend to respond affirmatively to wage freezing and job shedding.⁴ Naomi Klein in *No Logo* argues that the transition to the 'New Economy' was facilitated by the realisation of the brand's full potential. Manufacturing companies such as Nike suddenly realised that their business was marketing not manufacturing.⁵ As Nike's CEO Phil Knight put it, 'There is no value in making things any more. The value is added by careful research, by innovation and by marketing.'⁶ In other words, what

the avatars of the New Economy sell is the logo, not the thing, which confirms Guy Debord's thesis that the final form of the commodity is the image.

The 'New Economy' born in the wake of this 'revelation' (the logo not the thing) is defined by its divestiture. In a step that goes beyond the infamous 'outsourcing' arrangements we've heard so much about, corporations such as Nike, Levi's and Benetton have sold off their factories. Now they buy their shoes, jeans or whatever wholesale from independent (generally off-shore) manufacturers and resell them at a considerable mark-up in domestic markets primed by saturation-level advertising (in 1991, for instance, Nike spent US\$250 million on advertising).⁷ To keep profit margins high, these corporations foster competition between their suppliers to drive prices down. In this sense the 'New Economy' actively promotes sweatshopping by creating the commercial conditions in which it flourishes. The gross disproportion of the situation was brought into focus when it was made public that in 1992 Mike Jordan was paid more to endorse Nike shoes than the 30,000 Indonesian labourers who produced them.⁸ Despite this gloomy picture, Klein's thesis is the most optimistic, as the dependence on the brand comes a new kind of vulnerability: if the brand is everything, then tarnishing it can hurt the company. (SAS, 30)

The collegiate apparel industry in the USA is vulnerable to the tune of US\$2.5 billion a year. The problem is how, in such a fractured society, can this vulnerability be exploited systematically enough to create a lever that can induce genuine change not 'spin'? One of the first

groups to demonstrate how this could be done was the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS). Although by no means alone in its campaign against sweated labour—it followed in the footsteps of the National Labour Committee (whose leader Charlie Kernaghan became famous as the man who made Kathie Lee Gifford cry) and was in a certain sense the product of a United Needle and Textile Workers Union initiative—USAS nevertheless deserves to be singled out for the way it ignited a long dormant student activism. In doing so, it paved the way for student involvement in the larger campaigns of the anti-World Trade Organization mobilisation and World Bank protests. (SAS, 29) By demanding their own institutions back the fledgling Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), which investigated actual work practices, and abandon the window-dressing Fair Labour Association (FLC), which as an industry led 'self-monitoring' body did little more than assist in public relations, students instigated real change. When major universities such as Duke University suddenly started demanding full disclosure of factory locations and working conditions from suppliers, the corporate world soon took notice.

USAS also exposed the intense degree to which the university sector itself had become corporatised. Students scrutinised the wages of the janitorial and dining-hall staff and found them wanting; they also put tuition fees under the spotlight. (SAS, 31–3) But to my mind, the real interest of this story, which Liza Featherstone deftly and tactfully draws to our attention, is neither the victories won nor the means of winning them, but rather the students'

motives. For students were not necessarily motivated by a principled position against capitalism, and although many would claim to be anti-corporate, the two positions should not be confused. (SAS, 34–7) As outraged as some of the students were about the mistreatment of workers in Honduras, for instance, they were in some cases more outraged by the way corporations manipulated them by playing on their desire to be cool or hip. (SAS, 10) When the students' reason for being at university in the first place—namely, to further themselves within the corporate system—is taken into consideration, the ambiguity, indeed the ambivalence, of their position becomes even starker. It is, in a sense, their position of real privilege, viewed through a global lens, that motivates them. (SAS, 93)

This takes nothing away from what they achieved, but it does say something about radical politics in our time: it is becoming increasingly depoliticised. The very notion of a 'living wage' is depoliticised: it is a moral rather than political argument that appeals to a sense of natural justice rather than radical politics. While it is no less urgent for being so, we should pause to consider its implications. If activists are spurred into action by moral arguments, there is a limit to how far they are prepared to go. But doesn't it also entail a kind of backhanded endorsement of the system? The underlying argument is always that capitalism can afford to pay people better and indeed this often turns out to be true.⁹ Featherstone argues that by connecting students to a larger activist network, USAS politicises their humanitarian impulses. (SAS, 95) It is, she says, a stepping

stone to a greater awareness of the exploitation that is rife in virtually every sector of first- and third-world societies alike. But while it is encouraging to note that students have developed strong and active links with a number of different labour alliances, inasmuch as their objective remains 'natural justice' and not radical change, it is premature to describe this as politicisation.

This is not hair-splitting—the more we dilute the meaning of the political itself, the less we expect of those who would assume it as their mantle. If this type of activism, inspired by a call for fairness, rather than radical social transformation, is the new face of the political then, however reluctant we are to admit it, this amounts to nothing less than its enfeeblement.

The want of ontology can be seen starkly in the last chapters of *Privatising Culture*, which begin to examine the implications of corporate sponsorship for art. As searching as her investigation is, Chin-tao Wu stops short of asking 'is this art?'—yet her research makes it clear that this question has never been more timely because art itself (or, at least, art as we thought we knew it) seems to be on the brink of disappearing. In the pursuit of high cultural cache rich corporations have poured 'serious money' into the sponsorship of art and in doing so have changed not only what art means, but the way it is made. Having said that, the sad fact is that although the sums involved are not inconsiderable, relative to what corporations spend on other types of sponsorship or advertising and compared to their actual profits, the amount spent on the arts is actually minuscule. For instance, British Telecom's £1.8 million arts

budget amounts to less than five hours profit! (PC, 144) Putting it more melodramatically, then, contemporary art seems to have sold out for less than the standard rate of thirty pieces of silver. As with Featherstone's book, the political and philosophical questions this history raises are compelling in their own right and deserve more space and consideration than Wu was able to give.

The most challenging aspect of Chin-tao Wu's book, amply backed up by her research, is her conclusion that private and corporate capital has, as she puts it, genetically modified the cultural landscape. (PC, 299) She notes that in Britain artists have had to take into account the comparatively small scale of London offices in producing their works, whereas New York artists, by contrast, have to create works suited to the vast atriums of Manhattan skyscrapers. Corporate values are, both practically and aesthetically, incompatible with art. The nude, for example, is not considered suitable matter for hanging in boardrooms or waiting rooms and tends not to be collected, thus closing off an entire avenue of artistic exploration. Critiques of capital, or more especially, critiques of work itself, tend to be shunned as well. But here the exceptions are more telling because if the corporate world finds critiques of it insufficiently disturbing to feel it necessary not to buy them, then that says rather a lot about the fate of contemporary art. Also problematic are the depictions of brand names—in any light—either because they might indicate a bias towards one brand and not another or hint at a complicity with a 'leftist' position. For the same reason, overt political commentary is tabooed. (PC,

265) In a paradoxical double movement, whereby owning art enhances the corporate image and the spending power of the corporate world exerts a determining influence on the production of artworks themselves, contemporary art has found itself in a situation in which the question 'is it art?' ceases to be a right-wing cultural cringe question and gains a radical dimension.

If corporate-friendly art is no longer an oxymoron, then it is perhaps time to assess whether it is still art? Chin-tao Wu's reticence to raise this question is no doubt guided by the fact that it tends to be right-wing 'culture critics' (as Jameson calls them) who conduct their arguments in these terms and clearly she would want no part of that. Yet to concede this ground to the right is to relinquish the political itself, if by the political we mean the need to create to new ontologies. From one point of view then, it could be argued that the reluctance to deny that contemporary art is still art is symptomatic of the more general malaise affecting the political itself. When we lose the will to distinguish we lose the political itself. But on the other hand, since this kind of cultural gate-keeping has always been politically motivated, it is perhaps confusing matters to suggest otherwise. This situation is thus truly deserving of the name 'antinomy', for it seems the opposite course of action is not available. Just as the anti-corporate activists do not feel they can embrace a position identified as anti-capitalist without alienating their core constituency, so Chin-tao Wu cannot embrace the question 'is that art?' without becoming identified with something she precisely is not,

namely a right-wing culture critic. Yet as Slavoj Žižek argues, the truly radical leftist does not concede any ground to the right at all, even if it is theirs by right.¹⁰ I will wager that developing a way forward from such antinomies as these will be the form taken by the political in the future. However, it will not begin to take shape until the present 'postmodern' distaste for judgement is set aside.

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1. See Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, London, Flamingo, 2000, p. 237.
 2. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*, 2001, p. 195.
 3. Kitty Krupat, 'From War Zone to Free Trade Zone' in Andrew Ross (ed.), *No Sweat: Fashion, Free Trade, and the Rights of Garment Workers*, Verso, London, 1997, p. 63. See also Klein and Featherstone.
 4. It is perhaps worth adding, on this point, that in Australia where superannuation has been both privatised and made mandatory, we have all been made party to this viewpoint because the comfort and security of our retirement now quite literally depends on it. We rely on our fund managers to squeeze every last ounce of value out of our investment so that we may have an adequate pension in our post-work life.
 5. Klein, p. 22.
 6. Cited in Klein, p. 197.
 7. Source, Klein p. 16.
 8. Ross, p. 9.
 9. See Sally Singer, 'Rat-Catching: An Interview with Bud Konheim', in Ross, pp. 123–34.
 10. Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, London, 2002, p. 73.