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Thinkings 5: Collected Evocations, Interventions, and Readings

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THINKINGS 5

COLLECTED EVOCATIONS, INTERVENTIONS, AND READINGS 2015-2016

Jeff Noonan

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Cover Picture: Georg Baselitz, Trinker Mit Glas

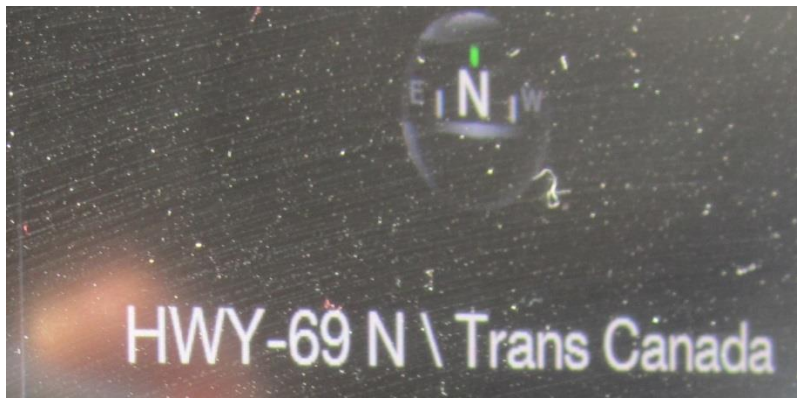
Photos: Casa Azul, Coyacan, Mexico City; Graffiti on the back of the Falconbridge Arena, Falconbridge Ontario; Anne Beer's much missed Bookroom, Windsor Ontario.

Evocations



Epic Working Class Poem

Originally Posted 1 July 2015



Home is the place where, when you have to go there,

They have to take you in.

Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man.”

I

Earth,

with the money extracted

and sent down South,

is just this blistered mass,

prime matter heaped beside railway tracks,

far from discriminating eyes.



But does that prevent
me, with broader tastes,
from suggesting (and not in jest),
that it is not waste,
but sculpture made by hands
that had no intention,
as they drilled and blasted,
crushed and roasted,
separated and poured,
colluded with the random geometry
of cooling and tumbling,
to produce something
that I am compelled to admire
here,
on this road,
that is quite literally,
the end of the line?



II

Grown

in the North.

Beards and bear piss blueberries,
rhubarb and Blezzard Valley potatoes;

these thin acidic soils

will not suffice,

I fear,

to attract network attention.



Unless,

in my long absence,

by grace of global warming blessing,

the sins of frost-bite winds

have been redeemed

with produce more exotic,

for your weekend farmer's market,

just one more token of a type

now found everywhere,

and locally!



III

City,

perpetually off-balance,

wobbling atop granite pullulations

that seem alive,

although they aren't.

Stubbornly, they refuse to hide

their still blackened surface from tourists,

otherwise impressed.



They used to say:

“It looks just like the moon!”

["Really, lady, have you been to the fuckin' moon?"].

Buzz Aldrin has and he,

il miglio fabbro,

saw and said it best:

"Desolation. Magnificent desolation."

Not everything beautiful, you see,

needs to be green and pretty,

and no one should be ashamed,

of how they had to make their living.



IV

Work

you never had to live

is easy to romanticise.

The too-young dead might disagree,
if they could speak.

But only the living can tell stories
of heroic union battles
not to be repeated anytime soon.



Somewhere,
a dusty archive proves
this place once had some fight.
But today all you hear
from the old timer in Rudy's,
coming in for a coffee,
and almost the best burger in the city,
is defeat:

“Hey Petey, where the hell is everyone?”

I just drove past Little Stobie
and there was hardly a goddamn person on the line.”



V

Cold,

there is something clarifying about it

that you have to breathe to understand,

something that maybe unhinges a man,

and makes him think

that his monstrous trapper's hat,

face of fox and tail of wolf

[I shit you not]

would intimidate the twelve year olds,

and ensure victory

for his son's side.



But no one traps a loon,
whose perfect melancholy
is never sung,
until he's sure that work is over,
and the sky's quiescent purple
has settled us on the dock,
to pour the rye and ginger,
and drink
a toast to each of us,
to the cliches we once were,
and loved.



VI

It is summer now.
And the night is warm.
And no one needs to rush.



Sudbury-Windsor, May-July, 2015

Fer Windsor (Re-gift Version)

Originally Posted December 24th, 2015

A re-gift (for my friends, colleagues, family, Josie, and fellow Windsorians) of my piece “Fer Windsor.” It was first shown in the exhibition, “Stories of the City 2015,” Organized by the (in)Terminus collective at the School of Creative Arts (SOCA), University of Windsor. Thanks to Michael Darroch and Lee Rodney for organizing the exhibition and Sasha Opeiko of SOCA for her lay out work.



1

1. The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
A matrix of promise,
Destiny
For the beautiful ones,
Unborn.

The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
The man so uselessly
alive,
In his name, no garden is
Grown.



2

2. The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Glass is sand, sand ground stone,
Grinding,
Labour, labour, bloody knees,
Scars.

The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
The hard, mundane world is
Tired,
Watching paint peel from wasted
Effort.



3

3. The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Nights of sexy meth-head
Smiles,
Love and alcoholic anger,
Shadows.

The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Greasy, stained and stinking
Coveralls,
Hidden in a locked backroom,
Embarrassed.



4

4. The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Nimble fingers, clean nails
Pretty.
Our past is gnarled and ugly,
Adieu.

The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Celebrant of the new mass:
Innovate
Or die, to make space
Sooner.



5

5. The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
Routing around bodies,
Life itself
Has been schooled, and now
knows,

The future is glass, fibre optic cable.
A matrix of promise
Not,
For you, hollow-eyed smoker,
Tonight.

READINGS: JOHN BROWN: NEW PAINTINGS

Originally Posted, November 27th, 2014

John Brown

New Paintings

Olga Korper Gallery

17 Morrow Ave.,

Toronto

(until December 19th, 2015)

Untitled



“The transitoriness of things is essential to their physical being, and not at all sad in itself; it becomes sad by virtue of a sentimental illusion, which makes us imagine that they want to endure, and that their end is always untimely; but in a healthy nature it is not so.” (George Santayana, “A Long Way Round to Nirvana,” p. 59). Look, the column is separating and soon it will collapse. No structure is so perfectly crystalline and internally stable that it can withstand time. Painting is not sentimental because it does not look back to what was, but makes a claim for eternity. The painting that you are looking at is always

now. However, it too, being material, cannot last and must go under. The column is separating and will bring the whole edifice down. But not yet.

Untitled



“At this stage you must admit that whatever is seen to be sentient is nevertheless composed of atoms that are insentient. The phenomena open to our observation do not contradict this conclusion or conflict with it. Rather, they lead us by the hand and compel us to believe that the animate is born, as I maintain, of the insentient.”(Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*,” p. 59). There, right at the centre, do you see it? Is that not a face emerging from the swirl of brush strokes, distinguishing itself from the block of material in the background? Out of the universal swirl comes order. The paint is affixed to the surface, it does not move, and yet it expresses dynamism and development, emergent coherence, structure, meaning, life.

Windsor



“Only art restores the dimension of the senses to an encounter ... Art, in all its forms, is a great reflection on the event as such. A great painting is the capture by its own means of something that cannot be reduced to what it displays.” (Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, p. 78). One wants to know, one demands, “what is that a picture of?” But no painting is a picture *of* anything, it is a picture, a creation; knowing it, “understanding” it, is not tantamount to reducing it to its origins “in the real world.” It is not a mystery to be decoded but a world to be entered into on its own term (terms which always change) The painting is its own real world, re-invented every time it stops one in one’s tracks and forces one to look at it. There is nothing hidden; the painting is the surface and the meaning is there, if anywhere.

Wrong Place Wrong Time



Aesthetic form is not opposed to content ... in the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa.” (Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 41). The problem with all formalisms is that

they are one-sided; products of prodigious cleverness or even genius, they nevertheless lack the reciprocity between form and content that truly *arresting* art possesses. There is no *versa* (content becoming form) but only *vice* (form becoming content). In formalism there is experiment and transgression of boundaries, and thus creativity and new openings, but the connection to ultimate problems is lost. Attention is attracted, but not held for long. The arresting work is the unity of form and content established by the *sui generis* rule by which each work is composed. The enduring work of art takes us somewhere else, down to the ground, to the real problems.

Green Figure



“It is not the artist’s job to restore a supposed “reality” that the search for knowledge, techniques, and wealth never stops destroying ... The spirit of the times is definitely not geared to what is pleasing, and the task of art remains that of the immanent sublime, that of alluding to an unrepresentable which has nothing edifying about it.” (Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable,” p. 128). Hence, what you see on first glance must be resisted— a dark figure emerging from a chrysalis, scowling, menacing. However, seeing the unrepresentable is also not a matter of treating the painted image as a symbol, a reference to something else. Always, it is a matter of seeing the thing itself, the painted surface as a complete whole which pictures that which photography or the literal eye cannot record— the act, the art, of picturing.

Grimm 96



“What distinguishes, among other things, man from the beasts is this capacity for abstraction. All our forms of communication are are abstractions from the whole context of reality. Moreover, one is able to chose on one’s own part the degree of abstraction one wants to be involved in.” (Robert Motherwell, “On The Humanism of Abstraction.” p. 250). That capacity distinguishes us, yes, but also, and moreso, the singularity of our faces. All painting involves abstraction, but it is not all, thereby, “abstract.” Then again, not is all painting that is not abstract is “representational.” It is picturing, an act, not a classification. The painting abstracts from the details of the face what is essential to the picturing of a human face– how little, indeed, is needed. Look- here is what a face is, concentrate on it.

Imaginary Portrait of Roy Orbison Singing Crying



“[The artist] must give the void its colours.” (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 84). And its humour. Neither the dignity of the human person, nor the dignity of the human body, not the dignity of human creations elevate us above the pleasure of giving funny names to things. To not be able to laugh at others and oneself in turn is inhuman. If one had to choose, it would be better to be the laughing animal than the rational animal. The void must be coloured and it must echo with our laughter. From void to void our lives move in tragicomedy. We are able to bare the terror of the idea of emptiness because there is music and laughter.

Yellow Head



“When our first encounter with some object surprises us and we find it novel, or very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed it ought to be, this causes us to wonder and to be astonished at it. Since all this may happen before we know whether or not the object is beneficial to us, I regard wonder as the first of all the passions.” (Rene Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, p. 350). In a whole universe full of objects of wonder what is more wonderous than we ourselves? Our motivations are endlessly opaque even to our own reflections, our bodies are beautiful in uncountably multiple ways, our senses and minds are constantly open to what may present itself. Our wonder at ourselves constantly engenders new ways to look, picture, sound, relate, build and interpret, all in the service of providing answers to questions that must always be posed anew.

WINDSOR SPACES: ATKINSON PARK

Originally Posted April 13, 2016

This essay will be the first in an occasional series of unambivalent notes of appreciation for some Windsor spaces that I like because they make me feel like I live in a city. Moving from Toronto to Windsor more than a decade ago generated some ambivalent (to say the least) feelings. Still, Windsor is now home, and I think, without being overly sentimental, that we should appreciate the place we call home (which does not preclude criticism of it, when necessary). Windsor's governance and leadership often leave much to be desired. For someone who thinks, as I do, that the living intensity and cultural and creative dynamism of cities are the greatest achievement of human social interaction, the suburban attitude that too often prevails in civic life here is lamentable. Nevertheless, while Windsor is a small city, it *is* a city, and these essays will share with the readers my admiration for some spaces that I find intensely urban. The guide books (are there guidebooks about Windsor?) won't know about these spots, so if you ever visit, seek them out and see if your feelings coincide with my own. First up: Atkinson Park.

No one will mistake Atkinson for Central Park. There was no Olmstedian moving of heaven and earth to shape it. It is an ordinary one square block flat field stretching from Riverside to University between Rankin and Partington. It is simply laid out: some picnic tables (far enough apart to conduct sheltered conversation, close enough to share if you prefer), to sit and listen to Detroit hum, to watch the ships go by and the river dance from slate grey to tropical turquoise, depending on the light or, in the dark, to see the water become a mirror, perfectly reflecting the lights of the bridge. A little further in, a utilitarian change room, swings and monkey bars for kids, a wading and an adult pool, a soccer pitch, and skateboard park. It is not a memorable work of landscape architecture. But parks are not museum pieces, artifacts, they are spaces for gathering and play.

Gathering: from around the world the soccer players come every spring, summer, and autumn afternoon that it is warm enough to play. From Africa, from across the Middle East, from Pakistan and India: whomever shows up seems to be included. I have never counted, but on good days there are certainly more than eleven aside. The game is played hard, but relations between the players seem friendly. Sometimes, when I see foreign students by themselves walking past my house I can see the depth of their loneliness in the desperation with which they clutch their phones. They are realizing that, ultimately, there is no substitute for shared presence. They find that shared presence on the pitch, where no one is lonely and laughter, calling for the ball, sighing after a missed attempt on goal together sing an atonal symphony of languages and accented Englishes. The joy of strangers together playing...

... playing and not talking into their devices the local boys (and sometimes girls, but mostly boys) risk a broken bone or a gashed knee (no helmets or knee pads for most) if they should spill. They nevertheless dare the jumps and ramps to upend them, hopping in real pain when the trick fails but always laughing too after even the nastiest of crashes. I admire their adolescent resilience from the soft safety of middle age rotundity. The equipment is now densely graffitied: an action painting has emerged from the overlapping and crowding of the individual tags. The Rothko-coloured store wall that frames the west side of the park is still relatively empty, an inviting blank canvas. If not for this park I might forget that kids and teenagers laugh, tethered as they usually are, staring mindlessly into a screen with ears plugged in, cut off from the material world that nevertheless won't go away. But here phones are not,

skateboards and BMX's are, carrying bodies (not avatars) in happy sweating motion, recovering a long suppressed truth: where movement is, boredom is not.

On occasion the acrid fun of pot smoke wafts across the park, and sometimes passing through on my bike I have to brake quickly to avoid running over shards of broken glass. But there is no moral panic from the neighbourhood- minding your own business can be a virtue in a city, and it is not that difficult to stop, bend over, and pick up some glass.

On other occasions a different moral panic threatens: The costs! The costs! Of what? The pool, used mostly by lower income kids from the social housing units on Union Street and the elderly residents who still live in the West End in great numbers but whose existence is almost always forgotten and ignored by the rest of Windsor. The vitriol directed against the meager costs of the meager pleasures of the poor and old tells one all one's needs to know about this world.

Or rather, it does not, for there is the other side: the commitment the community has shown to protect the park from the budget choppers. Atkinson's most engaged protectors have helped to create and preserve a small zone of urban neighbourhood life at the edge of the mostly uninspiring sprawl that concludes the country at its southwestern border.

OCEAN CYCLE: EIGHT MEDITATIONS

Originally Posted August 24, 2015



Gulf of St. Lawrence: West Mabou Beach

We call Henry Moore a sculptor, why not the sea? What makes a sculpture? Intentional transformation of structure? Or just material transformation? I stroll to the rhythm of the gently lapping waves and Moore's supple organic forms come to mind. I think: "There was a man who learned abstraction from spending time along the sea shore collecting bleached seal bones and caressing stones whose hard, dead, unloving, unlaughing mineral angles have been mollified into the rounder and receptive contours of living flesh." Metamorphosis of structure without conscious design, like John Cage, letting musical order evolve by *ascesis* to chance; not art imitating nature but nature as art. I do not mean picturesque appearances- they are merely pretty, pleasing to the eye, but the elemental forces of creation and transformation. The art that created the human artist from molecules in this sea that I walk beside.

Gulf of St. Lawrence: Inverness Beach

All along the coast the metronomic shwarshing of the waves, self-ramifying in their intensity under a steady North Easterly wind, relaxes the tension in my shoulders and dissolves the capacity to care about anything else but the next step. The mind is free to think and the idea comes to me: a manifesto of mechanico-natural art. The beautiful as the unintended product of blind natural forces doubling over against themselves: creation as material structuring, beauty as recreation of the material structure to something approaching the appearance of conscious intention where there really is none. And then further: a museum of mechanico-natural art, artistic practice displaced from production to selection (*not* curation, for all commentary will be forbidden- one will have to see without looking and feel without talking). But then, immediately, the objection: the human-loathing eco-crowd for whom nature is stasis and everything must be left alone, just as it is (forgetting, of course, that "just as it is" is an illusion born of *human* time consciousness, that a thousand years ago "just as it is" was very different, and a thousand years hence, will be very different again, and everything in the universe changes form and without assemblage and re-assemblage there would be no one alive to worry about the injustice of moving pebbles). And then the solution: the museum shall be empty, and the idea will be so irresistible that other empty museums of mechanico-natural art will spring up all along the world's coastlines, and

superstar architects will be hired to top each other's hundred million dollar empty buildings, competing with one another to construct ever more impossible geometries, and the tourists will come by the thousands to marvel at the exquisite complexes of emptiness, and justify the entrance fees they paid by projecting ever more elaborate fantasies into the empty spaces, and then afterwards dine at snob restaurants, drink, and later stroll along the beach, pausing to piss on the pebbles that it would have been an eco-crime to move.

Atlantic Ocean, Dominion Beach

Fortunately for the locals, the bourgeoisie do not like coal dust mixed with their surf, so the good people of Dominion have escaped the fate of other indigenous shore dwellers, of being herded inland and allowed back only with pass cards as servants to the not-beautiful people who fill the resorts that rise alongside privatised shores. A bay of irony: towering piles of coal feeding a generating station surrounded by wind turbines built along the headlands defying the Atlantic that will not be forever resisted. The people and their proud clapboard homes have held out against January gales and unfavourable economic climates, their past no longer possible and perhaps not ever good; the future jobless spinning turbines. But fuck 'em both, past and future, today the beach is a perfect crescent arcing from cliff to cliff. Just off shore, a lobster boat is anchored, lifted gently from below by the curling waves while above an unrelenting sun smiles at the collective laughing satisfaction with now.

Atlantic Ocean, Ingonish Beach

The inexperienced swimmer has no way of knowing what is coming. A dozen meters away what will be a six foot wave is just a dark exhalation; a gentle swelling of the sea then suddenly upon you, rearing translucent blue, at the bottom a turbulent green churning engine driving it up and over, urged by the whole ocean cramming itself into this bay, curving two-dimensional surface into three dimensional body, accelerating, rolling, arching over upon itself, holding its topography long enough to propel you forward, gliding irresistibly along its solid liquidity before it breaks and releases you, its Platonic geometrical perfection disintegrating into a chaos of bubbles and foam, and there you are submerged when only a moment ago the water was knee deep. A respite. Peace. It all slides back out to sea, tugging at your ankles and saying, "just let go, come with us, out to that perfect blue infinity, we'll carry you, you don't have to work, just let your self float." But the peace of the whole is death for the part, so you sturdy yourself and walk laughing back to shore, and then look out again to sea, Cape Smokey driving hard and fast into the Atlantic to the right, toney Keltic Lodge sneering down from the left. But here below a more proletarian feel. Beyond the massaging sands and exuberant crashing of the surf, struggle and pain and sadness demand our time. But they are not here, in this ephemeral democracy of playing bodies.

Gulf of St. Lawrence, Fishing Cove

Without contrast, no beauty. The sea without headlands, the headlands without sea, the living green spruce without the dead grey stumps, the dead grey stumps without the living green spruce, the sloshing of the waves without the trickle of the creek, the trickle of the creek without the sloshing of the waves, the peak of the mountain without the flat of the valley, the flat of the valley without the peak of the mountain, the slate grey of the Gulf without the copper of the river, the copper of the river without the slate grey of the Gulf, would never attract the eye or ear. They would be the whole, and thus not noticeable in their particularity. Their particularity depends on their opposition to what limits them, and this limitation is the difference that lets their beauty be perceived. One thinks that one could tarry forever at the sight and sound, but as beauty depends on contrast, so life depends on movement. The

steep upward path awaits. The pain the descent has produced in one's thighs has been relieved; the ascent promises a panting, gasping chest. It is good to be a body that sees and hears and sweats.

Atlantic Ocean, Middle Head Trail

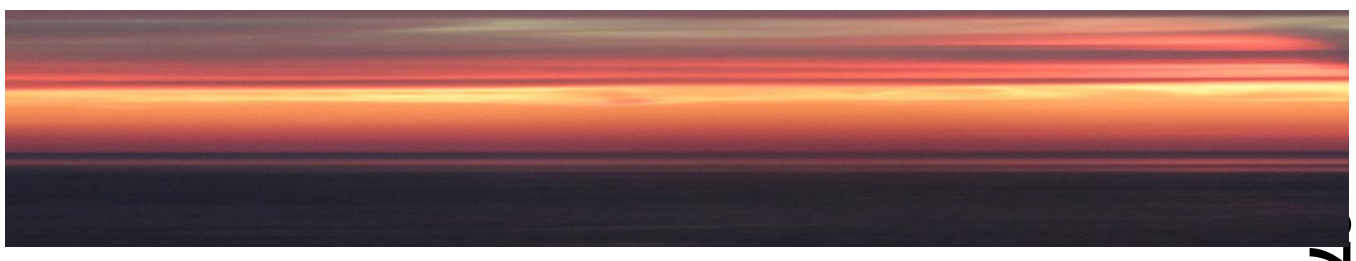
A paradox of distance. From afar it looks higher, but also, more gently sloped. But then the trail ends like you can't believe: grassy plane, slight incline, then straight down, forty five meters, no danger-destroying railing or fence, just sea stirred to churning indigo-sapphire-emerald whirlpools by the rocks that will one day succumb but not today, and you think: "There would be no surviving that!" And then: "Yes, it is good to be a body that sweats and sees and hears the haunting roar of the waves," and, wanting more, creeps forward a little more, apprehensive, but wanting to feel the sheerness in the tingle of the arches of my foot that say: "Don't go too far." But the good body is not a machine, and heights can summon strange thoughts: "Wouldn't my aching muscles be soothed by that frothing turbulence, so inviting? What if I were to just jump, ignore the height and the jutting rocks and leap?" It would be too late for that censor reason, once the descent had commenced, to correct the course and return to the cliff, for my arms, unlike the egrets ignoring me on their perch, cannot command the sky, and then, at the bottom, it would no longer be good to be a body. These are the thoughts a man thinks sometimes, when his mind is not set to working.

Atlantic Ocean, Aspy Bay

The clichéd response is to say: "Yes, each is as insignificant as these pebbles slowly being ground to beach sand in which our footprints disappear after only a half an hour; each is as nothing against the waves, one withdrawing meeting the other advancing and in the collision spinning themselves, like a dynamo, from soothing sloshing to jet engine roar, lifting up and crushing down in a tremendous wet thud that shakes the beach; each has come from those elemental forces and will return to them, and the names of all of us will be forgotten." But the truth is that it is the sea that is as nothing without the presence of the feet of each that feels the sand and the ears that hear the roar and the eyes that look out into the endless blue openness and the mind that is at once elevated and terrified by what it thinks in that moment.

Gulf of St. Lawrence, Pleasant Bay

Life and not just theory paints its grey on grey, but in the dreary absent colour of the withdrawing waves, in the force that sets the pebbles to rattlesnake hissing and the stones to haunted knocking (like someone trying to escape, but resigned to not being strong enough) there is beauty too: the beauty of subtle shading, of dynamic patterns in the ripples far out to sea, of its patient inhalation and exhalation; a beauty that requires attention. But there is no beauty without contrast. The clouds will clear and the grey will lift, the indigo blue of the Gulf will return, and then the sun will set in a Munchian palette of yellow and orange and red and magenta striations and swirls. A last exuberance. There is no beauty without contrast, but when the last purple line between sea and sky is erased, then there is disappearance. Void.



COMMEMORATION

Originally Posted January 29, 2016

“But the dead know nothing, they have nothing for their labour, their very memory is forgotten, their love has vanished with their hate and jealousy, and they have no share now in anything that goes on in the world.” (Ecclesiastes, 9:5-7)

It is time which is unjust, not we the living. We remember, but time is indifferent to goners, always on to the next thing. It won't wait while we shed a tear or tell another story. It insists, and we have no choice but to follow. It is time that is unjust, not we the living.

We mean no disrespect. The dead, always gracious, do not accuse us. We say: “It is not true, we do remember, we have not let you go gently into that good night, you are not lost, the thought of you still stirs our hearts.” And it is true: we walk around in a cloud of sorrow and every street corner reminds us of you. We mean no disrespect.

But how quickly the details fade. At first: “it is like he is here with us.” But then: a shrinking repertoire of stock stories. And then: a shadowy caricature, tragedy lost in comedy. Finally: we are gone too, and with us, our memories. By what right could we task those who remember us with remembering our memories too? How quickly the details fade.

If the individual mind is too small, let us remember together. We will co-memorate, call matter to our aid in the struggle against time. We will outwit time by inscribing in granite all the names of all the dead. No one's name will be forgotten. If the mind of the individual is too small, let us remember together.

But after two generations, who visits? The name detaches from the person and soon there is no left who can “put a face to the name.” So who is the person, the face or the name? If the face, then what good is the stone? When the stone is, the face is not. We are creatures of time and our truth lives within it- each of us comes to be, and each of us passes away. After two generations, who visits?

It matters not how many names are remembered. Of all who have lived, but a few names live on, and for how long: a couple of millennia? Are we to say that all those whose names have been lost amounted to nothing? But they are your ancestors, and if even one had not been, you too might never have been. It matters not how many names are remembered.

The dead escape the vanity of the living. They do not ask whether or how they are remembered. Life does not tarry with the dead. It urges the living on to fresh action. Our work, not our names will endure, since it is what makes the difference. No one knows the name of the painters of Lascaux, it is their deed that endures. The dead escape the vanity of the living.

There is a reason we think in circles. As you did before, so others shall do after you-live. Once, you looked to the sky and expected it to darken, but discovered that it did not even flicker. The sky does not change colour at anyone's passing, the mountains do not surrender their majesty in sorrow, and the dance starts up again after only a moment's pause. There is a reason we think in circles

“Who can tell if the spirit of a man goes upward, while the spirit of a beast goes down into the earth? So I saw the best thing for man was to be happy in his work; that is what he gets out of life—for who can show him what is to happen afterwards?” (Ecclesiastes, 3: 21-23)

Interventions



AMERICA ON THE BRINK?

Originally Posted March 21, 2016

In 2006 I was attending the *ReThinking Marxism* conference at UMass Amherst where I heard a paper by Michael Roberto and Greg Meyerson. In as richly detailed and engagingly presented paper as I have heard at an academic-political conference, they examined the political, economic, and cultural tensions in America as they had intensified since 9/11. They concluded that American society was headed towards a crisis of such severity that a fascist solution could not be ruled out. “In short, ” [they argued](#), “the general crisis of Pax Americana becomes acute with 9/11 and the U.S. ruling class response to it. We suggest that this acute stage of the crisis may become the basis for what we call a fascist tendency in the United States.” They were careful to avoid a superficial identification of fascism with the particular appearances it assumed in Italy and Germany in the 1920’s and 30’s. They defined it in class terms as a *unified* ruling class response to a structural crisis of capitalism which could not be solved without the elimination of political pluralism and formally democratic institutions. The fascist solution is a single party that gains mass support with the promise to save the nation from imminent catastrophe before revealing the ruling class interests that actually drive it as soon as it gains power.

Fascism in this sense need not rely on uniformed armed thugs like the SA in Germany or mass spectacle propaganda. What is essential is ruling class political unity in eliminating existing democratic avenues of working class and subaltern opposition. “If the general crisis of Pax Americana in its acute phase contains a fascist trajectory, it will result from a crisis of capitalist rule, as history reveals. Equally important, it will look quite different from past fascist trajectories. In the case of Pax Americana in crisis, the intensification of fascist processes would unfold in a bipartisan political context, liberals and conservatives acting in concert – the whole ruling class.” Their fear in 2006 was that the still-reverberating aftershocks of 9/11 would be exploited to produce consensus around the claim that any opposition to whatever a government of national unity commanded as necessary to “fight terrorism” would be labeled treasonous, and liquidated on that basis.

It was a superb paper, and, with the spectre of The Patriot Act looming over the conversation, not without empirical support. Still, I left the room wondering whether their conclusion was rather too alarmist. I was not convinced that the crisis (of the economy and of democratic legitimacy) was as severe as they argued. As it turned out, despite the American financial sector leading the world into a recession from which it has still not recovered, Obama won the next American election. The central pillar of their argument– that American fascism would come wrapped in bi-partisan embrace of the Stars and Stripes– seemed to collapse. If anything, American politics in the last ten years has become more polarized, even as the economic crisis and the political crisis of Pax Americana has become more severe. While prospects for a fascist movement in Roberto and Meyerson’s sense has retreated under deepening splits in the American ruling class, *talk* of fascism has escaped stuffy classroom at UMass and entered the mainstream of American political discourse.

The never-to-be-confused-with-a-Marxist-or-alarmist Roger Cohen has warned twice in the New York Times of parallels between [Trump and Mussolini](#) and [Weimar Germany](#) and contemporary America. The parallels are superficial– at the level of rhetoric one the one hand and political stasis on the other and do not add up to conclusive proof that a Trump victory would lead to the destruction of

liberal-democratic institutions and fascist rule. On the other hand, that even a conservative like Cohen is sounding the alarm against Trump's race baiting, Islamophobic, the-country-is-on-the-brink-and-only-I-can-save-it rhetoric highlights the real danger of the forces that Trump has mobilized.

While Trump is obnoxious, megalomaniacal, has not shied away from encouraging thuggery, and has warned of riots if he is somehow denied the Republican nomination, he has not invented the deeper-seated ideological tropes he is relying upon to build his base. Trump did not create Islamophobia and he is hardly the first American politician to race-bait his way to popularity (does anyone remember George Bush Sr. and Willy Horton)? By the standards of official organized violence directed against Civil Rights protesters in the 1950's and 1960's (often unleashed by Democratic state governors) Trump's campaign had been mild. That is not to say that the forces that Trump is trying to cultivate are not dangerous. They are. But they are the same dangers unleashed by any xenophobic campaign: the nation is reduced to supporters of the candidate and everyone outside is demonized as a threat to the nation's survival and "greatness."

Rather than a fascist, Trump is perhaps better understood as an example of the phenomenon that Max Weber called "plebiscitary democracy." Andre Gorz's explanation accords well with what we are seeing from Trump. When a "society has disintegrated and been replaced by an industrial-bureaucratic megamachine, [it] can only gain the loyalty of the masses through the person of a charismatic leader. This leader must possess both the majestic authority that befits the driver of the state machine ... and a sympathetic concern for the interests and everyday problems of the people called upon to leave the management of the state in his hands." (*Critique of Economic Reason*, p. 49). Trump exemplifies both sides of Weber's charismatic leader: he promises to bring his business expertise to bear on the problems of the economy, and puts on an effective "I feel your pain" routine that has proven quite successful thus far with a large subsection of disempowered white workers.

Under constant social and economic pressure, seeing little hope for the future, a large section of the white working class see in Trump some sort of saviour. The Tea Party has already blazed the trail that Trump is following: Obama+Mexicans+the Chinese+radical jihadis are ruining and threatening America. All that is needed to solve the problem is a leader with the balls to stand up to them (which Trump has promised-literally- he owns). The machismo spills over into overt violence when anyone has the temerity to challenge the position- as the [black protester](#) punched by the Trump supporter in North Carolina found out. Still, the unity of the movement is not found in its macho-aggressiveness but in the magic-thinking involved in the belief- based on no evidence at all- that a *billionaire* is fundamentally concerned with changing the socio-economic structures that have undermined the life-conditions of the white working class. For magic thinking, material forces do not exist- they can be eliminated simply by the word of the magician. And so Trump will speak, the economic forces that have led American manufacturing industries to Mexico and China will be overturned, and steel mills will return to Pennsylvania and Nike factories will sprout up in the corn fields of Ohio.

The attraction of magic thinking is that it does away with the need for collective political work. If structural social and economic problems can be solved by incantation, then nothing is required of the victim save to trust. Whereas the trade union and socialist movement argued that only the working class could solve the problems of the working class, magic thinking invests supernatural power in the leader to vanquish enemies and restore the nation to its mythic greatness. While right-wing commentators crow about how Trump proves the vitality of American democracy, what he in fact demonstrates is the loss of mobilizing power of the idea of self-emancipation in favour of magic thinking.

The relationship between Trump and mass passivity is not accidental. The demobilization of working class politics is the other side of plebiscitary democracy. Trump (or any charismatic leader) needs crowds to generate the feeling of collective power, but at the end of the day he can succeed only by substituting himself for democratic collective action. If people organized themselves in a political movement that identified the causes of the threats to their livelihoods and well-being they would not need Trump. But self-organization and understanding takes time and effort, whereas Trump is promising immediate solutions. Time and again, despite the fact that abundant and easily accessible evidence proves that those who promise everything to the working class will deliver nothing, too many people choose to cast their lot with magic.

Is the Bernie Sanders' campaign the sort of mobilization I am talking about? No. While the fact that Sanders can call himself a democratic socialist and run a competitive campaign for the Democratic nomination is historically significant, Sanders is not running to create an extra-parliamentary movement that can carry him to victory and start to make the sorts of structural socio-economic changes that would begin to improve workers' lives. Instead, he is mobilizing supporters to fund his run for the Presidency but to otherwise leave matters in his hands to address in a top-down way.

Let me be clear. Of the alternatives on offer, Bernie Sanders is by far the best candidate for President. But simply electing a social democratic president is not sufficient to bring about the structural in-roads against the *social power of capital* that must be made if real improvements in workers' lives are to be accomplished. The history of the working class movement in Europe (and to a far lesser extent in Canada) is littered with the corpses of social democratic politicians who de-mobilized the movements that brought them to power as soon as they took their seat in government. So, while it is understandable that American socialists are excited by the success of the Sanders' campaign it is far too hopeful to say, as [Brad A. Bauerly and Ingar Solty](#), recently said, that:

“the American left has won by establishing Sanders' concrete left-wing social-democratic and/or transformative transition demands in the American political landscape and imagination: single-payer health care, free public education, a federal living wage of \$15/hour, the Workplace Democracy Act facilitating unionization, fundamental banking reform (even if focused on dismantling instead of socialization...). Hence, the American populace is now much more aware about the real tertium-non-datur alternative: A left-wing Social Green New Deal as a general, inclusive and solidarity-based high-road exit strategy from the crisis, which would re-shift the relationship of forces between capital and labour and could function as the most coherent entrance project to a post-capitalist future, or the global neoliberal unity coalition's low-road exit strategy of austerity with further immiseration, nationalist exclusion and destruction of the public good.”

What this assessment ignores is the fundamental importance of what Sanders is not building: a political organization outside the Democratic Party that can sustain the struggle for those laudable objectives between election cycles and after the disappointment and disillusionment with Sanders sets in. And set in it will, because the forces that will align against Sanders should he be elected will stymie him at every turn. If you think that Congress undermined the progressive heart of the Obama administration, what do you think it will do the agenda of a self-declared socialist? The only hope to moving Sanders' agenda forward (and then once it has started moving forward, to push it to the left) is a movement outside the Democratic Party that is broad and deep enough that it cannot be ignored and can bring business-as-usual America to a halt. It would have to link a revitalized labour movement to the young people and students who are propelling the Sanders' candidacy at the moment and build bridges to African-Americans and their myriad, creative, and powerful community-based organizations.

That said, the American left has indeed won something: the opportunity to build a new political movement that can make it relevant and effective for the first time in decades. And a relevant and effective American left could not be ignored by the rest of the world or have terms dictated to it by the financial industry. The worst thing that could happen this election cycle is not a Trump victory, but the squandering of the political energy of millions of hopeful Sanders supporters. Another generation lost to political cynicism could prove fatal to any future form of the American left.

NOW IS THE TIME!

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We live our lives as socially self-conscious subjects, experiencing the world from our unique interiority. It is this interiority that makes life both valuable and our own. The essential difference between a human being and a robot is that while the robot can perform certain forms of movement and work, it does not know or care about what it is doing.

At the same time, our lives, experienced and valued subjectively, are caught up in complex webs of external objective forces and dynamics that can undermine us even though we in no sense “deserve” to be undermined. Economic and technological change can destroy historically established forms of life and the subjectively valued lives that were dependent upon them. People can thus exist “out of time” with goals and skills valued in an earlier era but now obsolete. But the obsolescence of skills does not kill the person, and those who are “out of time” are damaged by the changes they had no say in approving. Much of the manufacturing segment of the North American working class finds itself in this position today— alive, but no social demand for its skills.

Change in the objective circumstances of life that undermines demand for a certain form of labour does not negate the value of the people who formerly did that labour. While this point might be acknowledged as an abstract moral principle, at the level of social organization those who find their former occupations eliminated by technological development or relocation to markets in which labor is cheaper are actively devalued. They are lectured and hectored to get with the times, re-train, re-skill, re-invent; they are forced into precarious labour or service (servant) industries without unions or bargaining power to dignify the work. Entire communities and working class cultures are gutted and left swamps of anger and addiction.

The simultaneous collapse of working class living standards and fighting organizations ignites anger and anger seeks immediate release. Demagogic politicians have long used this anger to pole-vault to power. Donald Trump is but the latest in a long-line of populist American politicians who have mixed legitimate white working class anger with the toxic racism never far from the surface in America to create political momentum. While his racism needs to be condemned roundly and repeatedly, it is also essential to acknowledge the causes of the real and legitimate anger of working class people. I think a recent essay by [McMurtry](#) over-estimates Trump’s commitment to curtailing the power of money-capital and armed violence as the default policy of the United States, but his essay does lay bare those elements of Trump’s platform that (at least rhetorically) challenge the forces that have undermined working class living standards in the US.

Critics of Trump have not consistently acknowledged this legitimacy, tending to treat his supporters as little more than a racist mob. While there have been awful displays of racist violence, the deeper issue is that Trump is giving voice (cynically, I would argue) to real and legitimate frustrations of millions of working Americans whose lives are being actively dis-valued by the loss of manufacturing industries. Cut off from a past that is gone and shut out of a capital and not labour intensive digital future, without fighting unions or a working class party to constructively channel their frustrations, millions of white workers are looking to Trump to restore dignity to their lives and security to their livelihoods. If there is such a thing as class-interest— and the capital-friendly policies pursued by governments everywhere prove that there is— then I predict Trump, should he be elected, will prove a disappointment.

At the same time, the political mobilization of working class anger should not be regarded as a bad thing— but it needs to be re-directed, away from nativist and racist anger against Chinese and Mexican workers and towards the global ruling class- whose interest in accumulating ever more money-value is the reason for lack of investment in life-valuable work— and the system-dynamics of capitalism- which unhinge objective social forces from the subjective good of individual lives. There should be common cause between the white working class, youth, energized by sanders talk of “political revolution,” and the women and African Americans mobilized by the Clinton campaign.

While the particular experiences of white manufacturing workers, university students, and the sexually and racially oppressed are distinct, the structural conditions that cause the oppression are the same. The collapse of manufacturing industry, the skyrocketing debt and predominance of precarious employment for youth, the intensifying attacks on women’s rights and black communities and the growing backlash against LGBTQ gains have different experiential contours, but they all flow from the same underlying system-drive: turn the world into an instrument of the production and accumulation of money-value for appropriation by a largely white, male, straight ruling class and use politics as a means of distracting and dividing those harmed by this dynamic. This dynamic generates all the social pressures that set people in conflict with one another: where life-resources are not democratically controlled their will be competition over access to them and where there is competition, there is the potential for conflict. Where there is the potential for conflict there is the potential for it to be exploited by those who benefit from the current arrangement, as well as opportunities for normalizing and demonizing campaigns, surveillance and policing, and repressive strategies of mass incarceration.

My point is not to say that the concrete expression and experience of racism, sexism, homophobia etc, is everywhere the same. Instances of hate-driven mass homicide such as that which just occurred in Orlando cannot be predicted in their singularity from any model of society. What is predictable is that in social circumstances where political power depends, ultimately, upon the control a small minority exercises over universally needed resources, everyone who is not in that majority is set against each other in competition for the resources that they need. This competition generates all manner of possibilities for the construction of demonizing ideologies. Internalization of the demonizing ideology creates feelings of collective strength against the perceived opponent (White Americans against Mexican workers, white against black, etc.) but in reality *weakens* the group in the fight against the real opponent— the institutions of money-capital. That result is of much service to the ruling class, which typically does not even have to consciously stoke such conflicts (although it can). Setting everyone in competition for life-resources generates the social pressures necessary to engender invidious hierarchies and demonizing ideologies.

Today’s predominant metaphor for understanding the multiplicity of experiences of oppression is “intersectionality.” The metaphor has the merit of highlighting the specificity of the historical development of different forms of oppression. Moreover, it highlights the complexity of identity: it is composed of individuated experiences of these histories and is not an undifferentiated point of consciousness. However, while intersectionality is useful for highlighting complexity and historical specificity, it has the demerit, I would argue, of failing to capture the internal unity of social identity. Roads intersecting are externally related to one another: the path of one does not shape the path of the other; they just happen to intersect at a given point. Social identity, however, is internally unified in such a way that each element shapes the others to form a person who experiences the world, acts and is acted upon, as this specific person. Of course, different contexts might call attention to one or other element of that identity (at work class might predominate and in a relationship one’s sexuality) but the person one is is the unified totality of the elements, not a crossing point where externally related factors happen to meet.

Why is this significant? Politically, it is significant because it emphasizes the need for an internally unified social and political movement directed against the underlying structural causes of all oppression, alienation, and exploitation, rather than an externally related coalition of different particular groups. The specificities of histories of oppression need not be submerged in an abstract unity in which one difference (class, in the Marxist tradition) predominates. We get around the problem of domination of the movement by one difference by working beneath them all to the common cause: all forms of oppression alienation and exploitation are different forms of being deprived of that which a human life requires to realize its life-capacities in concretely individual, socially valuable and valued, and meaningful ways. Racial oppression denies access to life-resources on the grounds of race and sexism on grounds of sex and one is not reducible to the other. But the general cause and experience of *deprivation* is the same.

By all means we should each tell our own stories and learn from one another. But common cause—which is what real social change ultimately requires—means finding a way of translating those particular stories into universal values. When we find that key we stop demonizing others who are, objectively speaking, on the same side. We do not dismiss unemployed white workers as racists when they lash out at foreign workers, we engage them in a debate that shows the underlying common structure of problems all workers face. So too for the black sexist or the female homophobe. We don't moralize and lecture at them; we work down to the common ground that has impaired all oppressed groups from expressing their human capacities in concretely individual ways.

In a recent New York Times essay [Thomas Friedman](#) has argued that the Republican Party is a lost cause that should be abandoned for a new center-Right party. The Left in the United States should draw the same conclusion with regard to the Democrats (but drop the qualifier “center.”) This new party needs to find the common ground linking those who have been “left behind” by the economy to those who fear for their future (the young people mobilized by Sanders). It also needs to link together the best of working class politics (solidarity across differences and the discipline of democratic centralism) to the legitimate concerns underlying the practically and theoretically problematic identity politics that attracts the passions of the young. It also needs to draw upon the rich cultures of community-based constructive politics of radical feminist and African-American history.

Clearly, building a new party and a new movement is not a short term project and there is no substitute for actual political arguments between activists on the ground to build it. Nevertheless, the threats posed by either a Clinton or a Trump presidency indicate that now is the time to break free from all cults of personality— Trump, Clinton, or Sanders— to build a new unified left movement for change.

RUSSIAN LIVES (DON'T) MATTER

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I have been listening for a week now and have heard no lamentations for the Russian lives lost on Metrojet Flight 9268. I can sit on my step and hear Detroit across the river, but I have not heard a peep about “ISIS barbarians,” renewing their “war on civilization” by bombing a plane full of vacationers. Russia must no longer be part of “civilization” as I cannot even hear any crocodile tears falling. Just silence. Stone, cold (like a tomb) silence.

From Britain too, (usually quick to sing tenor to the United States’ bass when it comes time to compose songs of mourning), silence. As usual, one hears post-facto reports about terrorist “chatter” about the bombing, but no expression whatsoever of solidarity with the Russian people in their time of collective grief. No “We are all Russians now” headlines, pas de “Je suis Russe” t-shirts, no “You are either with us or with the terrorists” ultimatums. Instead, a silence that tells us much about geo-political reality.

For all the posturing and poetry the “leaders of the free world” produce about the sanctity of life when it is their citizens being killed, their silence about the horrors of violent death when it is their opponents’ dying proves that for them it is not life that is sacred, but only strategic advantage. Their ability to subordinate life to strategic advantage does not stem from some innate monstrous character deep within them, but from their willingness to manage a monstrous world-system. They become monstrous in their differential apportioning of life value to friends and enemies, but just changing the people without changing the system means the same monstrosity will replicate itself. Obama replaced Bush, and the Middle East continued to be bombed. Trudeau’s “sunny days” are shining on an Ottawa made grey by Harper’s dour and destructive politics, but there is little chance, beyond cosmetic changes, that our [foreign policy](#) is going to change decisively in the direction of dialogue, disengagement, and peace.

Willingness to manage this world-system means willingness to calibrate the value of deaths in relation to an overarching strategic vision. At the moment, this strategic vision involves constructing a new and completely unnecessary cold war with Russia. Given that Russia has been reduced to “Putin-land” and Putin-land has been demonized as a new Stalinism, no Western leader even bothers to offer public condolences. Why? because when “enemies” do exactly as we do— support their allies with (ill-advised, to be sure) military adventures- and suffer “blowback” (Chalmers Johnson) they are just getting what they deserved (and what ‘we’ warned them would happen). When the Russians suffer a terrorist attack, it is just the karmic wheel turning; when it is the United States or Britain, it is decied as unholy injustice of cosmic proportions. Which proves: neither preserving *life* nor fighting *terrorism* is the issue for our leaders, but only pressing their agenda and their advantage, *by any means necessary*.

In their struggle to secure all of the world’s resources and subject everyone to their hegemonic decisions, they reject life as the ultimate and highest value. Entire peoples can be destroyed directly or indirectly if they are on the wrong side, or even just in the way. [Doctors Without Borders’](#) hospital was knowingly destroyed and doctors gunned down in cold-blood by American forces, but neither their superiors, nor their political leaders, nor American religious leaders who never tire of shoveling their sanctimony in everyone’s face said: “These people are deranged psychopaths and war criminals who deliberately destroyed a known hospital and trained their guns on people they saw fleeing from the wreckage.” Since the hospital was in Kunduz, and Kunduz had recently fallen to the Taliban, the deaths of these doctors and patients means nothing to the perpetrators. They will do it again (and again, and

again) . “Civilization,” when it is on the march, can kill whomever it needs to kill, and ignore the deaths of others if memorializing them serves no political purpose.

So don't expect any condolences. In any case, who cares about that bombing and that over two hundred Russian vacationers are dead? Didn't you hear that their [athletes](#) have been cheating?

PHILOSOPHY'S ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING PARIS AND THE ON- GOING CRISIS: 10 THESES

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1. At the basis of all concrete identities: “Muslim,” “Sunni,” “French citizen,” etc., lies a core human being, a capacity for self-making within the objective contexts of natural and social life. Selves are made, identities forged, reproduced, modified, and developed through processes of work and affective-symbolic interaction with other people within and across societies. Work relations and social interactions are contradictory– they are both creative and alienating, mutualistic and antagonistic, peaceful and violent. When politics loses sight of or ignores for partisan advantage the underlying human capacity for self-making and re-making it fixates on the abstractions. A fixation on the abstract markers of particular identities leads to their reification, and their reification leads in turn to false, quasi-natural explanations of conflict (the problems in the Middle east are the consequence of a ‘clash of civilizations,’ racism is a result of the ‘natural’ inferiority of the demonized race, etc).
2. Digging beneath the surface identity to the core human *activity* of *identity formation*, reveals it as the result (always modifiable) of a process of practical and symbolic labour that unfolds in dynamic interaction with other selves and the objective world. Other selves, the natural world, and the social institutions that mediate the relationship between individuals and nature are themselves dynamic and change in response to changed activities. Foregrounding this dynamic process and using it as a wedge against the stereotypes of reified thinking is the constructive political role that philosophical thinking can play. While philosophers will also be motivated by concrete political evaluations of the relative legitimacy of conflicting positions, if they are to be active as *philosophers*, they must ground their political assessments in the deeper understanding of human self-making activity explained above. By demonstrating the ways in which all sides to the conflict are struggling to forge a coherent and satisfying individual and collective identity and the social and environmental conditions in which that identity can be secured, the underlying humanity of all parties to any conflict is made clear. Once this underlying humanity has been made clear, invidious contrasts between positions according to which one side is inhuman and monstrous, the other side human and pure, (positions which, because they are reversible, do nothing but ensure cycles of violence) break down, and the opposing sides can begin to think about the reasons why the other side behaves as they do.
3. History proves that human beings, when they identify themselves as a member of a community under existential threat, can convince themselves that the most abominable acts are justified as matters of group survival. No religion, or culture, or ethnicity, or nation-state is prone by its very ‘nature’ to violence, but all can become violent when they are set in conflict with other religions, sects, nation-states in ways that impair the ability of the group to survive, develop, and flourish. When these conflicts are interpreted as zero sum games, such that the victory of the opponent would mean (or is feared to mean) the elimination of the group to which the self identifies, a logic of exterminism can be unleashed. Victory becomes associated with the complete pacification through the total destruction of the other side. Once this logic is unleashed, it appears impossible to arrest the cycle of violence, because any voice calling for restraint and negotiations will appear not only weak (which is typically politically unacceptable) but also suicidal.

4. Nevertheless, those voices, the ones that sound most irrational and out of touch with “political realities” are the only ones in touch with the deeper reality, namely, that no matter how abhorrent the tactics adopted, the struggle is comprehensible and defensible in human terms as a struggle for security over the natural and social conditions of life. Killing in response to killing is not the mark of a strong leader, but of a person who is behaving predictably, i.e., the way a machine would, and not like a rational human being. When thought is directed towards the causes of the opponents’ actions, the cyclical nature of violence becomes apparent. A political conflict degenerates towards a violent confrontations, which further degenerates towards a logic of exterminism, which amps up fears on both sides and makes it appear that the cycle can be resolved only by superior violence, i.e., by completely destroying the enemy. However, the struggle to destroy the enemy contributes to the destruction of the community one is trying to protect. The main victims of ISIS are Syrian and Iraqi civilians, hard won democratic freedoms have been undermined by the War on Terror. Further steps down this path of ”victory’ via extermination can only further destroy all parties to the conflict.
5. There is a time to assign blame and evaluate the relative merits of the opposing parties’ demands, but assigning blame and evaluating legitimacy, if it occurs outside of this deeper context and frame of the cross cultural human struggle to forge identities and secure the natural and social conditions of their development, will only allow the conflict cycle to repeat. Philosophy seems useless because it thinks at different time-scales than politics. Sometimes, the longer time scales in which philosophy thinks are useless– decisions sometime have to be made right away. But peaceful co-development between cultures formerly at odds with each other takes longer to develop and can only be grounded in mutual recognition of the different ways different groups can express their underlying human capacity for self-determination and self-making and the satisfactions that come with realizing that capacity. The practical value of philosophy is not only to bring to light that underlying capacity, but also to defend the need for long-term perspectives on conflict resolution which depend upon transformations of self-understanding and re-interpretation of the reasons why former ‘enemies behaved as they did.
6. The duty of philosophy in cases of violent conflict is thus not first of all to pick sides but to encourage each side to consider itself in light of the way the other sees it, and in light of the actual success or failure of its tactics. ISIS might think that it is conducting a heroic struggle against Western imperialism, but on its current path it will accomplish nothing but to ensure the ever more complete destruction of the lands and cultures of those areas of Syria and Iraq that it occupies. Western leaders might think they are defending the highest values of Western civilization against barbaric terrorists, but they have eviscerated the highest constitutional principles that past democratic struggles have achieved and killed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians across the Middle East, stoking the very anger and hatred that fuels the desire for revenge that leads to terrorist attacks. Both sides are destroying themselves as they try to destroy each other– irrationality at a mass scale.
7. Pointing out this reciprocal irrationality is not a substitute for concrete political struggle, but rather a precondition of turning those struggles in efficacious directions. All efficacious political struggles must be directed at the precise cause or causes of the problem threatening the groups. In the case of the current crisis across the Middle East, the depth causes are: the history of Western imperialism in the region, the destruction of the infrastructure of life-support by the “War on Terror,” and cynical exploitation of sectarian and ethnic differences by major Western powers and their regional allies. Simple Western withdrawal from the region, while a precondition of solving the domestic conflicts, will not be enough to ensure lasting peace unless a constructive politics emerges within the region. That constructive politics must stop targeting individuals in the West and justifying such attacks as justified vengeance. Such tactics undermine support for the legitimate demands of the peoples of the Middle East, embolden racist-militaristic

forces in the West, encourage backlashes against Muslim and Middle Eastern citizens of Western countries, as well as refugees and ordinary Muslim travelers.

8. Within the West, the political struggle has to be focused not only on particular governments and their policies, but the structural causes of military intervention in the Middle East and elsewhere. That which must be contested is the principle that the world's resources are valuable to the extent that they are controlled by Western corporations and exploited in the interests of their ability to maximize money profits and the world's people valuable to the extent that they serve these interests (and legitimately destroyed to the extent that they resist this subjugation). Both sides must work towards recognition of the deeper, common life-interest in living in a society that ensures the satisfaction of their fundamental life-requirements, that is governed by institutions that allow individuals to make decisions democratically, and that is open to mutualistic, respectful interaction and growth between distinct cultures.
9. Critics will respond to the last point in thesis 8 with the argument that there are radical differences between an enlightened secular cosmopolitan society and the reactionary, atavistic, irrational fundamentalism that drives groups like ISIS. There can be no reconciliation between western liberal democracy and the reactionary fundamentalism of the caliphate, critics will rejoin, because to do so would betray not only our own ideals, but also the goals of the majority of people in the Middle East struggling to create liberal democracy. In response, while I agree that Western philosophers should not make any excuses for religious fundamentalism of any stripe, at the same time we must not lose sight of the political dimensions of the conflict in the Middle East, i.e., we must not fall into the trap of seeing it as nothing but a problem of irrational sectarian hatreds. A group like ISIS might have irrational elements driving certain of its more horrific propaganda stunts, but a careful analysis cannot but uncover legitimate demands amongst Sunnis in Iraq and Syria for protection against the violence of the Syrian and Iraqi states. ISIS may be destroyed, but another movement will take its place until some political rapprochement is worked out by the parties to the domestic conflict themselves. At the same time, it is appropriate to criticize religious justifications of the tactics that target Western civilians. The legitimate critique of religious illusion should not be confused with Islamophobia (especially since most Islamophobes are Christian fundamentalists, who are equally irrational from the standpoint of enlightenment reason). By the same token, the value of enlightenment ideals of rational analysis and argument should not be exchanged for an uncritical pluralism, or worse, a belief that groups like ISIS should be celebrated for their uncompromising anti-imperialism. The struggle internal to the peoples of the Middle East is precisely to create a broad, democratic, anti-imperialist alliance of secular left and critical Islamist movements (the later might be understood as an Islamic version of liberation theology). Overall, an effective philosophical analysis and argument needs to identify the rational and the irrational in the opposed camps in order to demonstrate the possibility of future co-development in which cultural, religious, and sectarian identities open towards their outside. Beyond this outside exclusive communal closures give way to dynamic and democratic cultures that cross-fertilize and encourage creative ways of organizing human societies at all scales. One historical example of this process is the triple cross-fertilization between the remnants of Greek antiquity, the Islamic society of the Middle Ages, and Europe. When the Roman Empire closed the Greek schools and after Christian fanatics had burned the library of Alexandria, the works of Greek philosophy contributed to the flourishing of philosophy and medical science in the Islamic world, where they were preserved, built upon, and ultimately re-introduced to Europe through Morocco via Spain.
10. Nevertheless, it may also be objected that this argument is naive because it imagines that Western politicians will have to sit down with ISIS, that the caliphate will have to be reckoned with diplomatically and politically, its sins forgiven, and that it is inconceivable that such

meetings could ever take place. The actual process of political problem solving cannot be predicted at this point, only that the attempt to bomb ISIS out of existence will fail and provoke more attacks in the West. The current moment does not bode well for a political, non-violent solution. Nevertheless, thirty years ago, it was equally inconceivable that America would sit down with the Iranians who held American diplomats hostage and negotiate in good faith with them. Yet, this past year, American and Iranian negotiators worked out a treaty on the Iranian nuclear program. It is thus true, as Lord Palmerston said, that nations have no permanent friends or enemies but only permanent interests. What he did not understand— and this point is the most important— is that those interests are the permanent life-interest of the human beings who make up the citizenry of all nations, not the *raisons d'état* that have typically treated those human beings as expendable cannon fodder and collateral damage.

THE SPEECH I WOULD LIKE TO HEAR

Originally Posted on December 6, 2015

President Barak Obama is scheduled to address the American people on the evening of Sunday, December 6th, regarding the attacks in San Bernadino, California. Here is the imagined speech I would like to hear him give.

My fellow Americans,

Once again our nation is forced to confront the spectre of gun violence, but this time the issue is complicated by the fact that the shooters were, in some way that is still unclear, inspired by ISIS. While it is too early to say definitively what the precise nature or degree of external influence on their decisions was, it is clear that there was a political dimension to this shooting. The stark reality of bloodied and dead bodies that just moments before had been enjoying a holiday celebration forces us to confront some hard questions, and make some hard choices. The truths I feel compelled to share will be painful for you to hear, as they are painful for me to speak, because they require us to shed the illusions that we have been living and acting under since 9/11. However, at this late day in my Presidency, I want to be the leader that millions of people thought I could be. I speak not to ensure any legacy for myself, but rather to try to stop the headlong rush to openly Nazi tactics that some of my Republican colleagues are calling for, and to stop the decline of our nation towards a cowering police state domestically, and murderous imperialist abroad.

The first truth that must be spoken is that absolute security is impossible. Since 9/11 our nation has undermined the constitutional freedoms that our revolutionary founders secured in their struggle against British imperialism. The Patriot Act, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, mass surveillance, bulk collection of phone data, the militarization of the police, and the illegal rendition of suspects has pushed the United States towards the sort of authoritarian police state we used to abhor in our long struggle with Stalinism. Yet, none of this surveillance has provided any protection against the primary violent threat to our lives: death by gun at the hands of a fellow citizen. The truth is— and this truth is brought home very clearly by San Bernadino— no one can know who is harbouring a murderous grudge, or what its source may be. It can be purely personal, it can be delusional, it can be racially motivated, it can be inspired by ISIS, but the actual event cannot be predicted. Since it cannot be predicted, it cannot be prevented by police-state methods. If there is a solution, it has to be political and philosophical. Politically, we need new laws which immediately remove military assault weapons from gun store shelves as a prelude to much stricter gun controls across all types of firearms.

That will not be easy. Yet it will be far easier than the philosophical work we need to do as a nation. Philosophically, we need, first, to stop fearing one another. Second, we need to stop valorizing violence as the only means of resolving conflict. Thirty thousand of us were killed by guns last year. Guns do not kill people, people kill people, it is true. But why do we kill each other at such higher rates than other countries? Fear and the belief that only violence can solve the problem of violence. It is

clear that there are racial and gendered dimensions of each problem. Why are we more fearful of each other than the people of other nations? No doubt that is a complex question. But certainly part of the answer has to be: the foundation of our country is not only Enlightenment ideals, but also slavery. In order to justify slavery, African Americans were constructed as violent sub-humans ready at any moment to destroy white “civilization.” This racist ideology has worked deep into the American psyche, and drives the fear that fuels the gun sales that put assault weapons in the hands of people all-too-ready to use them. So we need to overcome the fear and the racist roots that nourish it. That will not be a short process, but it has to begin.

As for the valorization of violence, can we not see here all too clearly the psychology of the adolescent male who thinks that his masculinity requires him to respond to any challenge with physical force? Whenever there is an attack, whether politically motivated or not, the demand from almost all quarters is: respond with more devastating violence. If there is a killing in a church or a school, the “solution” is to arm the priest and the professor. If our nation is attacked, the “solution” is to kill orders of magnitude more on the other side. We have tried both. We are the most heavily armed nation on earth, and our wars have led, directly and indirectly, to the deaths of [4 million people in the Muslim countries](#) of the Middle East, Asia, and East Africa since 9/11. Saddam Hussein and Mohammar Gadhafi are dead, but their nations lie in complete ruins. We eliminated Al-Qaeda in Iraq only to watch it be reborn as the far more deadly and effective ISIS. All the evidence is clear: we cannot destroy violence with superior violence. You cannot kill every enemy. As long as there is an enemy who remembers that we have killed some of his comrades or her family, the possibility will always exist that he or she will want revenge. And if the desire for revenge is there, the possibility of its being exacted exists too. We cannot kill our way to peace and security.

Three weeks ago, my mind clouded by sorrow at the deaths of over 100 citizens of France, I agreed with President Hollande that we needed to intensify our attacks against ISIS. I can now see that this approach is not only futile, but irrational. It is not driven by a coherent political strategy, but only anger and the desire for vengeance. It is time now to break out of this cycle. In the place of vengeance we need understanding.

Let me be absolutely clear: “Understanding” does not mean sympathy for the perpetrators of attacks against unarmed civilians. At the same time, I have to say that Prime Minister Cameron is grandstanding in the worst way when he called MPs who voted against expanding the British bombing campaign [terrorist sympathizers](#). Until last night, I would have agreed with him, but I now see that such attitudes are exactly what keeps the conflict moving in perpetual cycle. That cycle keeps the terrorists happy, because we furnish them with excuses to attack us. It keeps the generals and the military industrial complex happy, because they can demand more bombs which arms industries will happily supply. But for the people of the Middle East it means more life-destruction, and for the people of the United States it means more fear, which drives more gun sales, which ensures more killing of Americans at the hands of other Americans.

There is a terrible tradition, not only in this country, but throughout political history, of equating leadership with hard choices and hard choices with killing people. The first link is true: leadership does involve hard choices. The second link is not: when you have unchallengable military superiority over any foe, especially a foe like ISIS, which has no sophisticated weaponry or air defenses, the choice to kill more is easy. No one can stop us from killing weaker enemies. But look at the evidence—this approach has not eliminated the threat it is supposed to eliminate. Instead, ISIS is spreading, from Iraq to Syria, from Syria to Libya. The truly hard choice is to *not* strike, when one has the power to strike, and when everyone else is urging you to do so. Yes, the hard choice is to work to understand the cause

and start the political process that can lead— over the long term,— (let us not kid ourselves, the roots of these conflicts are deep, and cannot be solved overnight) to real progress.

What can be solved overnight is our involvement. In closing I am announcing that all US military forces are being withdrawn from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and anywhere else they are currently operating. Our presence is doing nothing save to exacerbate the sectarian conflicts that only the parties to those conflicts, the members of those cultures and religious traditions, can solve for themselves. We hope that they will find their way to peaceful resolutions, but also know that wars sometimes have to exhaust themselves before they end. But they do end. Who, in 1983, would have thought that Lebanon could become a relatively stable and peaceful society in which the factions to its long civil war learned to work together? But they did, and eventually, in some configuration, the parties to the current conflicts will work things out, if they are allowed to do so. The United States would never tolerate foreign political and military intervention to solve our racial conflicts, it is nothing more than arrogance to think that others genuinely desire our meddling in their business.

So, in closing, I say to everyone, Americans and others around the world, we have made many errors in our dealings with the Arab World, mistakes which have fueled anger and the desire for revenge. Yet, the anger of the Arab world has fed tactics that have caused us to respond in ways ever more destructive of Arab societies. It is time to change course. From tonight on you are free to resolve your conflicts with no more counter-productive intervention. Our door is not closed to constructive interaction, but our bomb bay doors are closing once for all. We have erred, and we will try to correct those errors. As for your conflicts, you are free, as we all are, to resolve them as you will.

Thank you, and good night.

CREDIT DUE, BUT ...

Originally Posted August 9, 2015

August 6th, 2015, marked the 70th anniversary of the American atomic bomb attack against Hiroshima, Japan. Contrary to widely circulated myths, the bombing was not a necessary evil to force the surrender of Japan and avoid an invasion predicted to produce even higher number of civilian casualties. [Abundant testimony](#) from the highest ranks of the United States military and government, including Douglas MacArthur (commander of US forces in the Pacific), and Dwight Eisenhower, (Commander of Allied Forces in Europe and later President) as well as military historians, conclusively proves that Japan was willing to surrender and that the bombing was really about sending a message to the Soviet Union.

August 6th, 2015 was also the day that Sen. Charles Schumer decided to cave into pressure from the Israel lobby and not vote for the recently negotiated treaty to limit Iran's nuclear program to purposes of civilian power generation. Succumbing to the Orwellianism of the Israeli threat narrative, according to which the strongest Middle East power by far (Israel) is under "existential threat" from forces with no where near the military capability to carry out such threats (and only threaten in the ways that they are capable because of on-going Israeli aggression and expanding colonialism); in which a nuclear capable Israel is threatened with non-existent Iranian nuclear weapons; in which a treaty to prevent Iran from acquiring those weapons (assuming, as is not certain, that Iran ever had their acquisition as a goal), becomes licence for the Iranians to acquire them, [Schumer](#) announced that after much "soul searching," he would not support the treaty when it comes to Senate for ratification in September.

Schumer's reasoning is deeply confused. He argues that once European countries sign lucrative trade agreements with Iran, they might back down from the demand for rigorous inspections, *even though it is the agreement and its inspections regime that would allow them to sign those deals in the first place*. Moreover, he has no answer to the question of why Iran, after signing a deal precisely to gain that investment, would risk it by re-starting a military program, or how it would do so, given the inspections regime to which *all parties including the Iranians* have agreed.

Nor are his political calculations at all clear. If he is worried about losing Jewish votes in New York, he should consult [The Jerusalem Post](#), which recently published a poll showing that 49 % of American Jews back the accord, with only 30 % opposing it. More than a dozen retired [Israeli military officials](#) also recently signed an open letter to Benjamin Netanyahu urging him to support the deal.

The reasoning of these groups *is* clear: negotiations and verifiable treaties lead to peace from which new plateaus of constructive interaction can be built, while military adventures lead to wars whose outcomes cannot be predicted (see Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya ...) but which are always life destructive to the targets of Western armed force and lead to violent revenge cycles that serve no one's good. When people are threatened and killed, their cultures demonized and their institutions and infrastructure destroyed, they fight back, because they have no choice since it is their home being attacked. Their response fuels Western accusations of "terrorism," which is invoked to justify further military adventures, which generates more destruction, which fuels more resistance, and on it goes— for more than ten years in Iraq, for more than thirty in Afghanistan.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the political orientations of a threatened regime, or the variety of popular resistance organizations neo-imperialist invasion spawns, all historical evidence proves

that people will defend themselves, and any sound moral system must recognise and accept peoples' right to defend themselves as an indispensable element of their right to life. The best way of protecting one's own life, politically, is then, not to threaten others' lives, and the legal-institutional means of mutual life-affirmation is the international treaty. The Iran-P5+1 agreement does not radically alter the balance of power in the Middle East, it does not erase decades of British, French, and American imperialism in the region, but it does prove that the military strategy pursued in the Middle East since the First Gulf War (1991) by America and its allies and aided and abetted for the most part by the United Nations has been an unmitigated disaster.

Perhaps the real reason so many odious American congress members are vocal in opposition to the deal is because it obviously stems from a clear political defeat for American policy in the region. Every political objective driving that policy as laid out in the [Project for a New American Century](#) and as pursued since the first Bush administration— creating new client states, securing access to Iraqi oil, isolating Iran— has failed, and failed absolutely. The failure of these neo-imperialist policies is a good thing, for worry all you want about ISIS or Iranian terrorists, they have not killed hundreds of thousands of Canadians, Americans, and Europeans, but Canadians, Europeans, and mostly Americans have killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans, as well as untold numbers of Pakistanis, Yemenis, and Somalis in the on-going “drone war.”

Western societies remain politically stable and relatively prosperous, while Syria and Libya are consumed by civil war, Egypt is back under the control of the generals, and [Saudi Arabia](#) is given a free hand to fund and support the very ISIS and al-Qaeda “terrorists” we are supposed to fear. The Second Gulf War created the conditions for Shia hegemony in Iraq, which made it the natural ally of Iran, which that war was supposed to isolate and contain. Now, in order to combat ISIS, the United States is forced into a de facto alliance with Iran, while its NATO ally, [Turkey](#), bombs another US ally, the Kurds, in Northern Iraq, and openly refuses to identify ISIS as the main enemy.

Oh what a tangled web we weave ...

To support my claim that the current negotiations with Iran are a consequence of defeat of American policy in the region, let us turn to the explanation of one of the main architects of the strategy that led to the treaty, President Barak Obama. While his recent speech defending the agreement was replete with the expected boasting and swagger about his [military bona fides](#), it also contained this extraordinary admission:

If, as has also been suggested, we tried to maintain unilateral sanctions, beefen them up, we would be standing alone. We cannot dictate the foreign, economic and energy policies of every major power in the world. In order to even try to do that, we would have to sanction, for example, some of the world's largest banks. We'd have to cut off countries like China from the American financial system. And since they happen to be major purchasers of our debt, such actions could trigger severe disruptions in our own economy, and, by way, raise questions internationally about the dollar's role as the world's reserve currency. That's part of the reason why many of the previous unilateral sanctions were waived.

What Obama is clearly asserting is that it is time for Americans to shed the illusion that that their geo-political and economic power is unlimited, that everyone will simply fall in line with the demands of an American foreign policy conceived with parochial American interests at its root; that the age of

American exceptionalism is over. This reading is further supported by the sharply critical barbs directed against supporters of the Second Gulf War that Obama included later in the speech:

For the last couple of weeks, I have repeatedly challenged anyone opposed to this deal to put forward a better, plausible alternative. I have yet to hear one. What I've heard instead are the same types of arguments that we heard in the run up to the Iraq war. "Iran cannot be dealt with diplomatically." "We can take military strikes without significant consequences." "We shouldn't worry about what the rest of the world thinks, because once we act, everyone will fall in line." "Tougher talk, more military threats will force Iran into submission." "We can get a better deal."

I know it's easy to play in people's fears, to magnify threats, to compare any attempt at diplomacy to Munich, but none of these arguments hold up. They didn't back in 2002, in 2003, they shouldn't now.

(APPLAUSE)

That same mind set in many cases offered by the same people, who seem to have no compunction with being repeatedly wrong...

(LAUGHTER)

... lead to a war that did more to strengthen Iran, more to isolate the United States than anything we have done in the decades before or since.

As Habermas once remarked, the human species seems to learn geo-political lessons only through catastrophe. Sine World War Two, those catastrophes have generally played out far from European and North American shores. They have been visited upon peoples of Asia and Africa and Latin America by bombs wrapped in American flags and platitudes. Despite the overwhelming military violence brought to bear against them, the peoples of the Third World have not surrendered their right to determine their own futures. Perhaps at least a few people in the West have now learned from the latest series of Middle East catastrophes that real progress can only be achieved through real negotiations.

THE POLITICS OF HUMANITARIAN DISASTER

Originally Posted on September 9, 2015

“Even the mind of the small man is no different. Only he himself makes it small. Therefore when he sees a child about to fall into a well, he cannot help a feeling of alarm and commiseration. This shows that his humanity (jen) forms one body with the child. (Wang Yang Ming, Confucian philosopher, quoted in McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, 1998, p.368.

And when millions of people see a dead child washed up on a beach in Turkey, their anger and their outrage and their demand to help the suffering refugees fleeing their destroyed homes in the Middle East and Africa proves that their humanity forms one body with this child. Wang Yang Ming’s observations, as moving as any I have read in 20 years as a philosopher, still ring true across cultural differences and 2500 years because they state what most of us know to be the case from our own lives: when we pay attention to the suffering of another living being, we suffer too and cannot bear it, and we instinctively want to do something about it. This capacity of fellow feeling (what McMurtry calls the life-ground of value) cuts beneath all differences of culture, nationality, gender, and species. If you let your consciousness focus on anything that is clearly suffering you will suffer too, and be moved to try to relieve it (or flee because of your inability to help).

The conscience of the world has been aroused, and our shared humanity recognized and affirmed. Ordinary people in Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, Austria, and Germany have been reaching out in support and solidarity and doing what they can to assist their fellow human beings. As one [volunteer](#) from Austria, when confronted with the fact that it was illegal to transport refugees in her car from Hungary to Austria said, “It’s a global problem. It’s very important that we, altogether, give this big sign that refugees — the people that need our help and come from the war — have our solidarity and support.” This type of solidarity and support is pre-political, the fellow feeling from which demands for institutional changes derive and without which critical politics is just words.

But if this response is in a sense natural to human beings, why is it not universally expressed? Not everyone has responded with support and solidarity. The Israeli, Hungarian, and Macedonian governments are building barbed wire fences to keep refugees out, the chilling spectacle of razor-wire enclosed camps has returned to Europe, and neo-fascists have attacked refugees in Germany. Just as it is natural for functioning eyes to see, but what they look at and notice depends upon where the brain directs their attention, so to our capacity to feel the suffering of others and respond in solidarity depends on our directing our attention to the other person. It is when our focus is on our own self, “our” country/land/resources/wealth as exclusive private possessions, that we see the needy other as a threat, and work to fence them out. However, it is always possible to redirect the eye, for people to open themselves to the needs of others. The suffering that the eye sees is all the ethical argument needed: suffering cannot be borne, so it must be alleviated, and that is the material basis of any conception of the *human* good.

Getting people to shift their focus, from holding on to what they have to sharing it with vulnerable others is made more difficult by the fact that there is often political advantage to be gained from exploiting xenophobic fears. But as the massive outpouring of critique against the Canadian minister of Immigration Chris Alexander proves, xenophobia can always be trumped by human heartedness. At the

root of xenophobia lies ignorance: of the actual wealth of this country, of its capacity to help without noticeable cost to Canadians, but also, the ignorance lying behind the nonsense that refugees are lazy and greedy, simply looking for “handouts” and a free ride. It is obvious to the eye that looks at what is really happening that people do not undertake life-threatening ocean crossings and then walk hundreds of kilometers on foot unless they have concluded there is simply no other way to save their lives. Windsor has the highest unemployment rate in the country, but I do not see people trying to swim across the river and walk to California in search of work. People flee their homes only as a last resort. And that which they must undertake to reach their destination is work if anything is, and the hardest imaginable.

Again, no theoretical sophistication is required to understand this truth. Moving voluntarily can be an exciting and life-affirming experience, but people will also fight to stay in their homes. Whatever “home” means exerts a powerful emotional pull on human beings and they do not easily abandon it. That is why civil wars are so brutal and deadly. Both sides claim the same space as home, and neither can be driven out. Likewise, to those who pay attention to their humanity, refugees elicit a sympathetic response precisely because everyone with a home understands how traumatic it would be to have to leave it under duress. Thus, they reach out to try to help.

At the same time as everyone who can must be willing to help in what ways they can, it is also true that individual acts of solidarity are not going to be enough to solve this crisis. First of all, the scale of the crisis already exceeds what individual sponsors will be able to solve. That is not an argument against individual sponsorship or the human heartedness from which it flows. But no individual or family acting alone will be able to house, clothe, feed, provide language training, help re-start careers, deal with the psycho-social trauma the experience of war will have caused in the refugees, ensure that they have access to health care and can re-activate their lives in meaningful ways.

Individual responsibility is real and must be assumed to the point of everyone’s individual capacity, but we must not lose sight of the *collective responsibility* we have as citizens of a global North whose ruling classes have pillaged and stolen the wealth of the rest of the world to hold those ruling classes and the governments that serve them to account. The Conservative government would like nothing more than to privatize ethical responsibility— “if you love them, you save them,” while continuing its policy of starving public institutions of the publicly created wealth they require if they are to serve the needs of Canadian citizens and refugees alike. Exercising our collective responsibility means not only forcing the government to become the primary sponsor of refugees, but also not letting them blow the ideological smoke of the need for ‘security screenings’ in our eyes, and most importantly, of ensuring that the government makes available to the refugees allowed in the full range of public institutions and resources they require.

If anyone objects that Canada cannot afford to take in anymore refugees, they need to be confronted with some of the comparative numbers. First, let us take the case of Germany. Germany predicts that within a year it will have welcomed 800 000 refugees. The population of Germany is 81 million people, and its [GDP](#) is 3.4 trillion US dollars. That means that Germany is taking in 1 refugee for every 101 Germans. Canada has a population of 33 million people and a GDP of 1.61 trillion dollars. If Canada took in 1 refugee for every 101 Canadians, we would be welcoming 300 000 (instead of the 25 000 that opposition parties are talking about). GDP per capita in Germany is approximately 41 000 US dollars, and in Canada approximately 48 000 US dollars. If Germany is not worried about bankrupting the country or imposing impossible costs on its citizens, then neither should Canada be reticent about taking a proportional number of refugees, given our higher per capita income.

But there is another comparison that needs to be made. Venezuela has just volunteered to take in 20000 refugees. Although it is suffering an economic crisis in part caused by the decline of the price of oil, in part by a capital strike driving up inflation, and partly by on-going hostility from Washington because it has, since the Bolivarian revolution of 1998 had the gall to expropriate capital and use national wealth to satisfy the needs of and politically empower the poor, the Maduro government understands what is most important: to share that which one has with those who have even less so that their lives are maintained. The per capita [GDP of Venezuela](#) is roughly 12 000 US dollars— about one quarter of Canada's.

Pointing out the mismatch between Canada's resources and willingness to help and that of a struggling country of the global South only emphasizes the life-blindness of the Conservative government. It has ideologically committed itself to the geo-political economic system that is the underlying cause of this crisis. For more than a century the lives of people in Africa and the Middle East have been treated as expendable to the machinations of European and American Imperialism. The natural wealth of Africa has been plundered and the life-spaces of Arab peoples manipulated to the detriment of all save the elites who are willing to sacrifice their own people for the sake of local political power.

The crisis, therefore, is a crisis of the money-value system and the politics of military violence that supports it that is causing millions of people to flee their homes. This crisis is certainly not caused by "jihadi terrorism" as Chris [Alexander](#) argued. Rather "jihadi terrorism," in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria is an effect of, a reaction to, imperialist intervention in the Middle East. That is not to say that it is an effective response— it has simply provided the pretext for more destructive intervention, but it is clear that ISIS would not now exist had there been no second Iraq war. The [main organizers](#) of ISIS are former officers in Saddam Hussein's army.

Unfortunately, path dependency exerts a powerful hold on politicians. Once you have invested money, materiel, and people in "military solutions" it becomes more and more difficult to admit failure. Instead, like a gambler trying to recoup his loses by placing another bet, the architects of war think they only need to refine their strategy, or bring in more allies, or attack another target. Thus, last week we heard Prime Minister Harper argue that the only solution to the refugee crisis was military victory in Iraq and Syria. Victory for whom, however? The Western alliance, which (historically, since the end of the Ottoman empire) and proximally (since the first Iraq war) has been the cause of the life-destroying instability in the first place? ISIS, who will benefit most of all from a "no fly zone," in Syria, calls for which have now been renewed? Assad? who only a year and a half ago was being compared to Hitler? The secular revolutionaries of Syria? That would be excellent, but it is obvious, no matter what one's political affiliations, that they are marginal to the struggle. The Shiite government in Iraq, whose allied Shiite militias have perpetuated the massacres that have pushed Sunni villagers into supporting ISIS? Iran, who, despite the recently concluded nuclear treaty, is still itself threatened repeatedly with invasion of bombing?

In situations like these, where millions of lives are in the balance and the warring factions lack the strength to win but are not weak enough to lose, temporary solutions that save lives and allow for the constitution of progressive political forces has to be the short term goal of anyone who actually cares about the refugees. That means that somehow- and it will perhaps prove impossible— all sides, ALL sides, including ISIS, need to be politically engaged, to sit down and to work out some sort of calming compromise. If that cannot be accomplished— and frankly, I do not know who in this world has the credibility, power, and political intelligence and human heartedness to do it, there will be no end to the refugees crisis no matter how heroic the response of individuals who stand up to help.

THE PERSISTENCE OF MISERY

Originally Posted April 26, 2016

Fantasies of Classlessness

The justification of re-distribution through taxation is that by this means the wealthy contribute to the commonwealth of the nation. It is a justification that presupposes that all citizens of a nation share a common interest in each other's material well-being. This assumption of a shared national interest has always been contradicted by the reality of class interest, which, in economic matters, typically trumps the ideology of shared citizenship. That classes and class interest are still real and not just a problem of the past or a construct of Marxist argument is proven once again by the revelations contained in the [Panama Papers](#).

While the revelations contained in these papers cost a few sitting politicians their jobs and occasioned promises for investigation and change, the key political truth that the papers revealed is that most of the practices that allow the wealthy to shield their income from national taxation by hiding it in tax havens are legal. Those methods that are not strictly speaking legal are not pursued (typically) with the diligence one would expect if the law were really no respecter of persons. It might not be a respecter of persons in their individuality, but it is certainly a respecter of class. How could it be otherwise: the poor do not write the law; they are its objects, not its subjects.

And When They Try to Become Subjects...

...they are demonized and attacked no matter what means of resistance and change they choose to employ. The latest victim of the global right-wing reaction is Dilma Rousseff and the Brazilian Workers' Party. She is suffering from the same mobilization of anti-democratic forces that have largely undermined the Venezuelan experiments with new models of socialist development.

Anti-democratic? Did I say anti-democratic? How can massive street demonstrations against proven corruption and obvious economic crisis be anti-democratic? The answer demands that we think through the value-implications of the term "democracy." By "value-implications" I mean the goods that animate the struggle for democracy and the institutional requirements the realization of those goods entail.

We can start to get at these implications by looking historically at who has led the struggle for democracy. In all cases, excluded groups have been central to the mobilizations against entrenched elites. While ancient and modern conceptions of democracy are distinct, as are liberal, republican, and socialist conceptions, what they all have in common is a rejection of the principle that political power is the proper preserve of a noble class fit by their superior nature to rule. In a democracy the shared interest is supposed to rule. It is because there really is a shared interest in access to fundamental means of life and life-development that demands for democracy arise wherever these life-goods are denied by a ruling elite claiming the mandate of heaven or nature to rule. Spartacus and the protesters of the Arab Spring were united by the rejection of the idea that it is ever just to prevent the majority (who do the necessary work of society) from accessing the means of life and life-development by excluding them from political and economic power.

If we look at the current mobilizations against Maduro and Rouseff, it is clear that many of the protesters are working class men and women, but they and their life-interests are not driving the movement. While the specific history of state development in Latin and South America encourages corruption (for the case of Brazil, see [Perry Anderson's](#) excellent article in this month's *London Review of Books*) corruption is the surface justification but not the real driver of the mobilization. The leaders of the reaction are the leaders who have been displaced from their historical positions of power by the "Bolivarian" Revolution in Venezuela and the Worker's Party in Brazil.

The right-wing reaction has been made possible by the [end of the boom in commodity prices](#). It was this commodity boom that allowed the Venezuelan socialist party and the Brazilian Worker's Party to fund real improvements in the lives of working and poor Venezuelans and Brazilians. As prices collapsed, government income was reduced, an [inflation crisis](#) hit Venezuela, and austerity measures introduced in Brazil in an effort to placate the right wing. But rather than placate them it has emboldened them to discredit the socialist parties as the cause of the economic crisis (when in fact of course the cause was the banking industry, centred in New York and London, not Brasilia or Caracas).

The real democratic movement was the mobilization of the social power of working people and the poor that Chavez and Lula were able to ride to victory (and, in the case of Chavez, mobilize to defeat a right-wing coup attempt). If anyone has any doubts about the real social achievements of Chavez (vastly improved medical care in alliance with Cuban doctors, public housing, the slow emergence of a parallel solidarity economy, nationalization of key industries) they should read Gregory Wilpert's superb account of the first ten years of the Bolivarian Revolution (*Changing Venezuela by Taking Power*, Verso, 2007). Wilpert is far from uncritical, but puts paid to the slanderous misrepresentation of the Chavez government that is typical fare in even the best North American newspapers.

While the achievements (and limitations and problems) were real in both Venezuela and in Brazil, the decline in commodity prices has exposed the fatal flaw of the model pursued by both countries. In neither case were there system-wide efforts to change the structure of property ownership. As a consequence, economic power remained in the hands of the traditional ruling class. So long as there was a lot of money flowing into the state, public infrastructure projects could be advanced and the lives of the poor improved. But as soon as that money dried up, the traditional elites struck back, asserting the power they never lost over the economy and exploiting the local effects of a global economy to discredit the alternative model (very tentatively) explored by the left wing parties.

This leads us to what I might call a paradox of transition: if electoral parties of the left pursue a vigorous transition to socialism through wide-spread expropriation and socialization of property, they risk the *coup d'état* and civil war their electoral alternative to armed revolution was supposed to avoid. On the other hand, if they avoid civil war by being cautious, they leave preponderant power in the hands of the right wing and risk being undermined from within, as is currently happening. [There is no easy or obvious solution to this paradox](#). To simply allow the achievements of the past decade to be undone by a right-wing re-conquest of power would be a defeat that would undermine the credibility of the South American left for the foreseeable future. At the same time, with unfavourable global economic conditions, a return to policies that helped consolidate the legitimacy of the alternative will prove difficult if not impossible.

The Political Stakes

Whatever policy decisions are ultimately made, the crucial political task is to defend the democratic legitimacy of the Bolivarian Revolution and the PT. That does not mean uncritical support for either;

means that *democracy* remains rooted, as it always has been, in the shared life-interests, and the *struggle* for democracy with those popular forces whose life-interests are most threatened by undemocratic forms of social organization. Those undemocratic social forms are the very social forms the right-wing is trying to drag Brazil and Venezuela back to, and they are why people who support democracy in the Global North must avoid being hoodwinked by mainstream media reporting about the “democratic” opposition to authoritarian and corrupt socialist governments. The structures that feed corruption (as Anderson shows) long pre-dated Lula and the PT and the real authoritarianism is the authoritarianism of capital, which claims the sovereign right to rule over everyone and the shared life-interest, unaccountable to and unconcerned with real life-conditions on the ground.

DEMOCRACY AGAINST CAPITALISM

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The development of a body of philosophical work, in my experience, is not a linear progression from insight to insight but a constantly circling back and going further/deeper into a set of problems. Hence, in the course of my own philosophical development I have found my thinking drawn back to certain books that continue to help make sense of structural problems as they manifest themselves in changing contexts. One on those books is Ellen Meiksins Wood's *Democracy Against Capitalism*. 2015 is its twentieth anniversary. Far from being dated, it is essential reading for anyone trying to understand the current conflict between Greece and the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Despite its unsurpassed insights into the limits that capitalism poses for democratic self-governance, Wood's book, I feel, has never received the attention that it its due.

When it was published, it significantly advanced the state of Marxist political philosophy, replacing the unenlightening blanket rejection of "bourgeois democracy" with an historically rich and philosophically astute critique of liberalism. Against received wisdom in both Marxist and liberal camps, Wood demonstrated the *undemocratic* origins of liberal democracy. Drawing out the hitherto overlooked sophistication of Marx's own critique of liberal democracy, Wood revealed that the essence of liberalism was a formal distinction between public and private realms, a distinction which allows the social forces generated in the 'private' economic sphere to undermine the democratic decisions made in the formally 'public' sphere. The brilliance of the argument— and what should have made it more widely discussed in liberal circles— is that Wood substantiates her claims not through rote citation of Marx, but from an historical comparison between the practice of Athenian democracy and the pains English and American liberals took (following their respective revolutions) to normalise the identification of democracy with voting, and then *only on those issues which had no bearing on socio-economic life*. "In Athens, there was no ... clear distinction between 'state' and 'civil society,' no distinct and autonomous 'economy.' ... Political and economic powers and rights, in other words, were not as easily separated in Athens as in the US, where property was already achieving a purely 'economic' definition, detached from juridical privilege or political power, and where the 'economy' was acquiring a life of its own. Large segments of human experience and activity, and many varieties of oppression and indignity, were left untouched by political equality." (p. 224). Political equality and voting rights might be necessary conditions of free social life, but they are by no means sufficient. The current crisis in Greece illustrates clearly why not.

That which so alarmed European and global finance capitalists about the Greek referendum is that it forced open the normally closed circuits of money-capital to democratic power. Under normal circumstances, as Wood notes, economic forces are treated as if they were powers independent of human social activity to which that activity must conform in order to be rational. "Freedom" including democratic freedom, is thus identified with its opposite— compliance to external and unchallengeable forces.

To understand my point, consider any of a number of official response to the Greek referendum. They all end up sounding the same alarm: the Greeks have defied the power of "markets" and will now suffer even worse consequences than had they complied with finance capital's demands. Here is one example amongst many that could have been chosen. [Simon Smith](#), an analyst at FxPro concludes: "If Europe isn't prepared to relax the terms it was offering Greece just last weekend, and there's no indication it will, Greece will have to start printing its own currency so . On the other hand, if Europe compromises

and agrees to write off some of Greece's huge debt, the credibility of the currency will suffer. "Whatever the outcome of the next few days, there is no way that the eurozone or the single currency can come out stronger as a result." The point to pay attention to is the hidden framework within which Smith's "no way" comment is made. He assumes, not only as given (as is the case) the ways in which financial markets operate today, but also that they are obligatory for all time and unchangeable by collective social decision. It may well be the case that *tomorrow* a revived *drachma* will be weak or the Euro will decline, but that is not equivalent to the implication (which Smith wants us to draw) that Greek society will be weaker, *over the long term* if it rejects the demands of its creditors.

Smith thus excludes the possibility (of which human history is the living proof) of fundamental social change— change in the ruling value system and the purposes of major social institutions. He cannot imagine that the Greek crisis could be the beginning of transformational changes in the advanced capitalist West, changes which reconnect economies to their real purpose: the production of [life-capital](#): "the *life wealth that produces more life wealth without loss and with cumulative gain.*" Life capital is not a fictitious or a utopian idea— it is the food you eat, the water you drink (processed for safety) the education you have enjoyed, the health care that is available for you when you need it, the roof over your head. If you live in a society in which these life-goods are not available, then you live in a society that is failing, *regardless of what financial markets "think."* Greek society is failing, *precisely because governments before Syriza have obeyed the dictates of financial capital to convert their shared life-resources into money-capital for bankers to appropriate for themselves.* Even [mainstream business papers](#) now recognise that the loans being given to Greece are part of a shell game in which money is advanced to pay back money that is owed— Greek society starves, goes deeper into debt, and the banks receive back only that money they have already leant. Money is certainly not being extended to the Greek people so that they can survive (the crisis has created a massive public health crisis that is killing people. (see Stuckler and Basu, *The Body Economic*, pp. 77-96).

By voting "no," not only have Greeks magnificently refused to give into blackmail and intimidation, they have also exposed the fundamentally undemocratic character of capitalist society and the traditional parties, including social democratic parties, that support it. (If anyone needed more proof than Tony Blair that social democracy is fully incorporated into the capitalist mainstream, Francois Hollande and German Finance minister Wolfgang Schaeuble are it). What was so alarming about the referendum was that it gave Greeks an explicit say in the macro-economic policy their government would pursue. Of course, part of the strategy here is brinksmanship of a thoroughly ordinary sort— Tsirpas trying to give himself some leverage in future talks. But principles matter in politics— and the principle instantiated by the referendum is dangerous to the ruling financial oligarchy and orthodoxy: if democracy is a formally legitimate political system, indeed, the one that capitalism is naturally supposed to lead to, and citizens begin to democratically reject cornerstone elements of capitalist society, capitalism will not be able to legitimate itself by its traditional means— that it is the only democratic society. The contradiction between capitalism and democracy will be exposed again, and the capitalists will have to choose to re-impose their will by force (as they have never been shy to do, when pushed) or they will have to yield: in the short term, substantive concessions to Greece, and in the longer term, an opening into which more systematic transformational projects in democratic economic organization in the shared life-interest can be set up.

The no vote clearly does not solve all of Greece's problems. Nor can they be solved simply by reciting slogans about worker's control. While it is indeed time, as [John Milios and Dimitris P. Sotiropoulos](#) argued back in March, is for Syriza to mobilise the Greek people, not just against the bankers, but for concrete steps towards mobilising Greek labour to rebuild Greek society, not so that the surplus can be pumped out of the country as money-capital for the financial oligarchy to consume, but to satisfy the

life-requirements of Greek citizens. But in taking this step caution is required: nothing will spell doom for Syriza more quickly than failed experiments in socialising key sectors of the economy. That is what must be done, but it must be done with care and intelligence, and it will require international solidarity to succeed. That solidarity may be taking shape. In May, Podemos and its allies swept the [municipal elections](#) in Spain and are poised to win parliamentary elections in the fall. Should that occur, and the powerful social movements unleashed by resistance to authoritarian austerity in Spain keep a Podemos government pushing to the left, a period of serious challenge, not only to neo-liberal orthodoxy, but to capitalist misrule might really be emerging.

CAPITALISM AGAINST DEMOCRACY

Originally Posted July 13, 2015

By fortuitous coincidence, I happened to be reading Paul Virilio's *The Futurism of the Instant* just as the breathless rush to judge the meaning and implications of Syriza's agreement with the Eurozone consumed the left bank of the Internet. Virilio makes a most salient point about the patience that historical understanding requires: "we now have a better sense of the disastrous importance, for the human environment, of this information bomb that disintegrates all natural magnitudes, the very scale of all natural reality, whether geographic, cultural, historical." (p. 78). Unceasing streams of data flowing from every point on earth demand instant response, whereas actual understanding of historically significant events requires that judgement be held in abeyance until the actual implications of particular decisions reveal themselves. The web generates the illusion of omniscience, but no finite intellect is omniscient, and the whole truth of an event is never fully disclosed in the immediacy of its present.

The Syriza information bomb was detonated by [Richard Seymour](#) when he claimed, within hours of Greece's agreement with its creditors, that Syriza's capitulation was a "world historic defeat for the left."

So it is important to be clear: if Syriza supports and implements this deal, it is over. It will not recover. It may exist as a party, but as a force of the radical left it will be all but redundant. It may as well be a centrist, austere coalition. A left that goes along with this will be committing suicide. And finally, don't put your faith in the idea that maybe if Syriza hangs in there, does what it's told, eventually, after a while, Podemos will come, maybe some other radical left formations will come, and the balance of power will tilt. Even if that *was* how the European institutions work – and they have proven they aren't susceptible to that kind of pressure – this outcome will seriously undercut the chances for the European radical left. Be clear that we are looking a world-historic defeat in the eye.

This outcome is certainly possible, but it is not inevitable. Even if it were, Seymour does not answer the most important question raised by his position: if European institutions are not susceptible to pressure of even multiple far left formations, then how can it be the case that Syriza's capitulation is a world historical defeat? If Syriza plus Podemos plus other left movements cannot tilt the balance of power, then Syriza in particular, and the left in general, it would seem, was already defeated. If not Syriza and Podemos and other far left groups winning power, then what real alternative would Seymour recommend? If there were an appetite for vanguardist revolution in Greece, or Europe generally, it seems reasonable to believe that it would have been satisfied by now.

Seymour's criticisms drew a swift reaction from [Leo Panitch](#). Writing from Athens, Panitch argued that Seymour failed to give appropriate weight to the force of immediate circumstances: the very real threat of the collapse of the Greek banking system, and the failure of workers in northern Europe to mobilise in support of their Greek brothers and sisters. With no cards left to play, Syriza struck a deal which, according to Panitch, staves off an even more severe crisis and thus (perhaps) saves the government to fight another day.

It will not be a “world historic” victory, for those who like such language, since it will still involve tying the revival of the Greek economy to the fate of what remains a very much capitalist Europe, but this would not mean that the Syriza government would exclude itself from the continuing struggle to challenge and change that. On the other hand, if Tsipras walks away today accepting the same conditionalities as before to debt restructuring, and without any guaranteed investment funds on top of this, then it will indeed be interesting to see where Lenin will take us once he is let out of his tomb, and sees that he faces yet again the sad fact that a break in the weakest link could not break the stronger links of the labour movements in Central and Northern Europe to both domestic and global capitalism.

While Panitch’s long-standing contribution to radical political economy earns his perspective the utmost respect, I cannot agree with this assessment.

To read the [text of the agreement](#) that Tsipras signed, it is difficult, even on the most liberal application of the principle of charity, to understand Panitch’s interpretation. Syriza has committed not only to wholesale privatization of vital public services like electricity distribution, increases in consumption tax increases, cuts to pension programs and social spending of all sorts, weakening job security, and mass layoffs of public sector employees. No: after agreeing to all that and potentially more to come, it did not even secure agreement that they will get the money they are counting on to bail out the banks. The transfer of funds is still conditional on the Greek parliament proving to Europe that they will make good on the promises made in the agreement:

Immediately, and only subsequent to legal implementation of the first four above-mentioned measures as well as endorsement of all the commitments included in this document by the Greek Parliament, verified by the Institutions and the Eurogroup, may a decision to mandate the Institutions to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) be taken. This decision would be taken subject to national procedures having been completed and if the preconditions of Article 13 of the ESM Treaty are met on the basis of the assessment referred to in Article 13.1.

In order to form the basis for a successful conclusion of the MoU, the Greek offer of reform measures needs to be seriously strengthened to take into account the strongly deteriorated economic and fiscal position of the country during the last year. The Greek government needs to formally commit to strengthening their proposals in a number of areas identified by the Institutions, with a satisfactory clear timetable for legislation and implementation, including structural benchmarks, milestones and quantitative benchmarks, to have clarity on the direction of policies over the medium-run.

In other words, this agreement comes at the cost of surrendering Greek economic policy completely, making Greece in effect a vassal-state of the European Central Bank.

It is difficult indeed to see anyway in which Syriza can regain any political momentum after this deal.

However, the fact that they signed this deal in the first place indicates something of importance about their bargaining position going in to the talks. The courage that a majority of Greeks showed by voting no in the July 5th referendum was a direct challenge to the power of its Eurozone partners. However, when a nation of eleven million people, without formal support from any other quarter, takes on an

international coalition of three hundred million, it could only ever have been a bluff. Bluffs can work, but only if the other party does not pay to see your cards. The Eurozone could afford to pay to see Greece's cards. Once their bluff was called, there were no politically real options left but to accept Europe's terms, given how the process had unfolded up to this point.

Let us therefore be clear: the real enemy and the real problem is the Eurozone governments and the European Central Bank, who have clearly set out to destroy Syriza as a potential challenger to the power of money-value, and as a warning to others (Podemos) not to follow suit. If this claim is true (and what evidence could falsify it?), then what others owe Syriza is support— critical support, yes, but support nonetheless.

In a follow up piece to his original (obviously rushed) intervention, [Panitch and Sam Gindin](#) make roughly this point:

Syriza's unique capacity on the international left to build the type of party capable of both mobilizing against neoliberalism and entering the state to try to actually do something about this has always hinged on the way it sought to find room for manoeuvre within a European Union which has neoliberalism in its DNA, going back all the way to the [Treaty of Rome](#) let alone the Economic and Monetary Union thirty years later. Anyone who at all seriously followed developments in Greece over the past five years should have known that the leadership of the party would only go as far as the Europeans would let it, and that the balance of power inside the party made the Left Platform faction's strategy for Grexit an effective non-starter. Those on the revolutionary left who hoped that after Syriza's election this leadership would get swept away by a massive popular upsurge for Grexit in face of the limits and contradictions of a Syriza government were, as usual, dreaming in technicolor.

While it is true that technicolor dreams rarely come true, it is also true that anyone who is committed to a future in which the life-destroying norms of capitalism have been finally overcome must allow themselves to dream at least in black and white. Otherwise, it is impossible to ever get beyond what capitalist normality dictates.

I am a philosopher and not an economist, but if there is a promise of debt relief that even the International Monetary Fund acknowledges is necessary in the agreement that Greece just signed, I did not see it. Unless there is significant debt relief, then the measures just agreed to— which amount to nothing more than taking on more debt to pay existing debt— will only exacerbate the crisis. Might that intensifying crisis produce a revolutionary break? Perhaps, but there is no evidence to this point that a politically significant number of Greeks want socialist revolution. They want a solution to the murderous austerity imposed upon them. If they turn now turn on Syriza as the cause of austerity (rather than on the Eurozone and finance capital), a much darker future might be in store for Greece.

In a recent interview with *The New Statesman*, ex-Finance Minister [Yanis Varoufakis](#) returns to an article he first wrote in 2013, and which explains Syriza's reticence to choose the Grexit strategy. (To be fair, Varoufakis also noted that he did set up a team to study a measured way of exiting the Euro, b

those who favoured it could never win a majority to their side). Varoufakis was afraid that a Greek exit from the Euro could have a cascade effect that would plunge Europe into a deep recession and strengthen neo-fascist forces:

A Greek or a Portuguese or an Italian exit from the Eurozone would soon lead to a fragmentation of European capitalism, yielding a seriously recessionary surplus region east of the Rhine and north of the Alps, while the rest of Europe is would be in the grip of vicious stagflation. Who do you think would benefit from this development? A progressive left, that will rise Phoenix-like from the ashes of Europe's public institutions? Or the Golden Dawn Nazis, the assorted neofascists, the xenophobes and the spivs? I have absolutely no doubt as to which of the two will do best from a disintegration of the Eurozone.

Perhaps Varoufakis exaggerated the threat. Nevertheless, if even left critics of Syriza like Seymour seem to rest their arguments on the weakness of the left, then it is not sheer cowardice or over-caution to worry about the potentially disastrous implications of forcing through anti-Euro policies without well-laid alternative plans in place.

The looming spectre of the Golden Dawn is another reason why the left has no choice but to (critically) support Syriza. Its election was not a world-historic victory of the left; its signing on to this agreement need not be a world-historic defeat. The Greek people retain their freedom of action. They are not bound for all time by this agreement if they decide not to be. But that decision has to be made in light of a social alternative whose first steps can be taken right now. The difficulties standing in the way of even small concrete alternatives are formidable. With no alternative source of funds to the European Central Bank and the IMF, and without the natural resources of Venezuela and other Latin American countries which enabled them to support small but real movements away from capitalist markets in the provision of life-necessities (at least until the price of oil fell) Greeks are in a profoundly difficult situation.

Whether it is a world historical defeat for the left will depend upon whether they can mobilise effectively in the short term to protect public institutions and assets (as potential sources of funds for reinvestment in need-satisfying economic activity) and in the longer term on their ability to mobilise effective (and not just rhetorical) solidarity. This solidarity must take two key political forms: 1) elected governments of broadly representative parties to the left of now fully complicit social democratic parties willing to challenge the hegemony of the forces of austerity in Europe, and 2) a reactivated labour movement willing to organize behind demands for an economy that understands value in terms of life-needs satisfied and life-capacities enabled.

ON CORBYN, COMPLIANCE, AND CONFIDENCE

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Second Time Farce?

Less than one month after Syriza's capitulation to the combined forces of European and global finance capital, the UK Labour Party has, surprisingly, elected Jeremy Corbyn as its leader. (See [Democracy Against Capitalism](#) and [Capitalism Against Democracy](#) for my analysis of the Syriza situation). Corbyn articulates many of the same structural criticisms of capitalism as the original Syriza program, and is advocating an analogous set of radical reforms. By "radical reforms" I mean policies which challenge the principle that collectively created wealth belongs to the owners of capital exclusively, and that that proper use of such wealth is to create more capital for the owners. Instead, Corbyn defends [a program](#) which would end austerity, re-invest in public institutions, re-nationalise certain industries, replace a foreign policy based upon military adventurism with one based upon diplomacy and dialogue, and promote environmental health through support for ecological localism. As an [open letter](#) from the leadership of the Socialist Worker Party to Corbyn rightly argued "his success is a clear sign of the feeling against austerity, racism and war. His victory is an utter rejection of the warmongering and veneration of big business that were the hallmarks of the Tony Blair era." The same letter points out the danger he will face. "There are 20 Labour MPs who really back Corbyn. There are 210 who don't." While new members to Labour attracted in the wake of Ed Milliband's disastrous election campaign forced this new direction (which is, in essence, a journey back towards the sort of labour Party Tony Benn and others in the left opposition wanted to see), the party establishment is certainly not on board.

Syriza stirred similar hopes (mine included) that a new generation of socialist politics was emerging in Europe, learning the positive lessons taught by Venezuela under Chavez and Bolivia under Morales, in which the power of past democratic victories, embodied in parliamentary institutions with the formal power to change property relations and make inroads against ruling class control over universally required life resources, would become the primary vehicle of struggle. The power of this politics (I and others hoped, and still do) derived from its *democratic* legitimacy. A party duly elected on an explicit platform of investing collectively created wealth to serve the shared life-interests is (as the United States found in its long history of trying to undermine Chavez) almost impossible to discredit.

Thus far, Syriza itself it has disappointed those hopes, although not to the point where everyone on the [Greek Left](#) has abandoned it. Still, its performance lends support to critics like [Richard Seymour](#) who have argued that Syriza's disintegration in the face of ruling class opposition was a world historical defeat. Whether Corbyn's election signals an over-hasty rush to judgement on Seymour's part about the radical potential of parliamentary socialist parties remains to be seen. In any event, [Leo Panitch](#) is correct (even though he was not correct in his own rush to defend Syriza) that "the kind of democratic socialist struggle that we are embarked on is a marathon, not a sprint." However, even marathons have ends, and if runners are not periodically refreshed along the way, they will die. Unless a movement like Corbyn's insurgent candidacy, or Syriza, or some other movement attains some sort of concrete victory soon, this new path of socialist struggle will be found along the roadside next to the corpses of Third Way social democracy and Leninist vanguardism.

Fuck You, I Won't Do What You Tell Me.

The election of Corbyn is a refreshing example of people doing exactly the opposite of what the power brokers told them to do. They were irresponsible, they took a risk, they turned their back on the polite alternative. Such refusals are rare. As if Corbyn and others struggling against austerity and eco-environmental crisis did not have enough objective- structural opposition to contend with, there are also powerful subjective headwinds impeding the ability of socialist to build a unified and powerful movement. Even though the necessity for fundamental change cannot be rationally denied in the face of the evidence (faltering economies, a culture of cynical withdrawal from mainstream politics, a global refugee crisis, unending wars, the manifold threats posed by climate change), this necessity has not proven sufficient subjective motivation for new movement building in most of the Global North. A culture of compliance dominates working class consciousness that complicates organizing the sorts of mass movements parliamentary socialist parties need as goads to stay consistent with their transformational platforms.

Two examples, one seemingly frivolous (but not), and one serious, (but presented as frivolous) illustrate my point.

We are all shaped by the culture of our origins, and for me that means loving hockey and wasting time reading about it in the sports pages. Training camps are opening and the papers are full of analyses and prognostications about each team's prospects for the coming year. The news from the Toronto Maple Leafs camp is focused on changes to management (which is itself telling). One story in the [Toronto Star](#) last week noted how in response to an edict from the new General Manager, Lou Lamoriello, the players have shown up to training camp clean shaven. It turns out Lamoriello does not like beards and has banned his players from sporting them. It would seem all have complied, without argument.

Well, so what— team sport is a school of conformity, one might quite sensibly reply. It is that, to be sure. On the other hand, hockey players are also unionized workers. Moreover, they are unionized workers many of whom have talents that are for the most part irreplaceable. On top of that, many of them have guaranteed contracts worth millions of dollars, which gives them tremendous leverage in any conflict with individual owners and managers. No one is going to pay to watch a 72 year old authoritarian scowl from a press box. In other words, had the players all said: “Go to hell. We are adults and we will dress however we want to dress,” (i.e., had they reached the level of political consciousness of adolescent girls in Toronto High Schools fighting against dress codes) Lamoriello would have had to back down. But they have not. They did what they were told. And if even the most wealthy unionized workers cannot stand up to the petty totalitarianism of management, that tells us that working class power has been profoundly undermined by four decades of neo-liberalism.

The second example is, at a substantive level, far more troubling. A recent story reported by the [CBC](#) reports that the latest trend in worker oppression is a badge worn by employees that records everything they say for later analysis. “The information from the badges,” the story explains, “which were created by the Boston-based company Humanyze, was gathered anonymously, and workers were given personalized dashboards that benchmarked their performance against that of the group.” One might expect that workers would immediately see what these technologies are really about— complete control over all thought and action in the work place— but by and large they do not. One of the directors explains just how effective the technology is at making workers want to change their day to day performance:

“The minute that you get the report that you’re not speaking enough and that you don’t show leadership, immediately, the next day, you change your behaviour,” says Silvia Gonzalez-Zamora, an analytics leader at Deloitte, who steered the Newfoundland pilot.”

“It’s powerful to see how people want to display better behaviours or the behaviours that you’re moving them towards.”

There is something bewitching about these technologies which makes managerial domination seem fun. Instead of throwing them out the window, they are embraced as [games](#) in which people compete against themselves to conform and become more productive— serving the bottom line of the company, revealing information that could be used against them, all the while believing they are engaged in an amusing self-improvement project.

It is true, of course, that part of the culture of compliance is real and heightened vulnerability of workers to management power. Still, even in those cases where workers have a high degree of job security (like hockey players or tenured professors) too often the response to increased bureaucratic oversight and interference is: comply first, complain (over drinks) later. Compliant is not critique: the path to change begins with protecting existing workplace rights and ends with overthrowing the exploitative and alienating structures of capitalism.

Looking, Not Leaping

The culture of compliance is not a function of individual character flaws, but a real crisis of confidence in working people borne of decades of defeat. Hence we find ourselves in a catch-22- in order to break the cycle of compliance, we need confidence, and to gain confidence, we need a victory, but to win a victory, we need to stop complying, but to stop complying we need confidence.

People are confident when they feel that other people have their backs and that there are organizations and institutions in place that can protect them from reprisals. But solidarity and the fighting and protective organizations working people have created over two centuries of struggle have been the targets of neo-liberal globalization. Where labour markets are tight, workers can easily be set against each other, non-unionized labour undercutting unionized labour, unionized labour in the Global North seeing lower cost labour in the global South as the enemy. Everyone’s bargaining position is weakened, everyone becomes fearful of losing even more than they have already lost, and the idea of an offensive struggle to reclaim form capital what we all need for life sounds insane.

Thus, when a movement like Syriza or Jeremy Corbyn makes noises about the need to make those sorts of structural inroads against capital, they are mocked and called mad. Like the fool in *King Lear*, they are actually speaking the truth, but it takes confidence to listen to fools.

ON RADICALISM

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The world capitalist system is obviously exhausted. The values that distinguished it as a progressive alternative to feudal aristocratic-monarchical rule- liberty, equality, fraternity- have been replaced by surveillance, inequality, and violent factionalization. True, people are still free to pursue happiness, but the form of happiness on offer- the accumulation of money and consumer goods- is, on the one hand, impossible for more and more people because they lack secure and well-paid employment, and, more deeply, unfulfilling, even for those who can afford it. The system lives on only through violence and distraction.

The distractions have become increasingly perverse. [Physicians for Social Responsibility](#), using well-established empirical and statistical methods, estimates that 1.3 million people have been killed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan in the “War on Terror” since 9/11, almost all of them Muslims, killed either directly or indirectly by Western armies. (By ‘indirectly’ I mean killed as a result of the sectarian violence engendered by Western intervention. In this case the Western armies are not the cause of death, but the cause of the cause of death; i.e., the force that created the conditions in which the sectarian could be enflamed). Yet, absurdly, governments continue to portray *our societies* and *our lives* as under threat. Disgracefully, unacceptably, too many citizens in the West allow themselves to be frightened by racist government led fear-mongering.

The lengths to which Western governments will go to excite this fear and to turn each citizen into a spy on his or her neighbour leap into the deepest wells of stupidity. Recently, the [Australian](#) government published a guide for parents and teachers purporting to help them spot “radicalization” in Australian teenagers. Harkening back to the “listening to heavy metal leads to devil-worship” idiocy of my own teenage years, the pamphlet warns that one sign that your son or daughter might be planning to pack his or her bags and head for Syria is that he or she starts listening to “alternative music.” If you do not believe me, throw a shrimp on the barbie, open up a big can of Foster’s, crank up your favourite Birthday Party album as loud as you can, and read it [here](#) (then weep).

Perhaps I should not poke fun. It is true that there are a large number of foreign fighters in ISIS, but, as with their targets, these are mostly young men (and some women) from the Middle East. The [latest estimate](#) puts the number of foreign fighters at 30 000, from 100 countries, but of those 30 000 only 250 are known to be American (out of a total US population of 318.9 million) and, from our cousins of the Southern hemisphere, a grand total of- wait for it- [61 from Australia](#) (population, 23.13 million).

By contrast, there are an estimated [100 000 satanists](#) in the world, most of them in the United States. Statistical correlations between membership in various satanic churches and having been a metalhead as a teenager were not available, but on the basis of the raw data we can conclude with certainty that devil-worshippers are much more effective recruiters (about 400 times better) than ISIS, at least in America.

More seriously: since 2004, [Americans have killed 316 545](#) other Americans with firearms. During the same period, 313 Americans have been killed by terrorism. In other words, “ordinary” gun violence in America out kills terrorism by a factor of 1000.

While these numbers show that the endless droning about how ISIS is coming to steal your baby to be moronic, it does cause a real problem. It diverts critical intelligence away from the real issue. The real issue, the real threat to peaceful co-existence in the world, is the messianic zeal with which the West destroys other societies and cultures from the air and then blames the victims as “enemies of civilization.” Astounding, no, that our governments can get away with destroying what civilization there was (functioning health care systems, schools, water treatment facilities, museums, family and social life, ...) in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and so on, and then blame forces like ISIS, which were able to grow only because of the power vacuum our assaults caused? That they can get away with it suggests that the problem is not radicalization of Western youth, but rather the de-radicalization of almost everyone.

The Australian government’s pamphlet and analogous ideological devices hope to link ‘radical,’ ‘radicalization,’ and ‘radicalism’ with ‘violence,’ and to frighten people on that basis from doing or saying anything that can be construed as radical. Yet here again an astounding inversion of reality obtains— these political masters of the world’s most lethal military machines, these directors of global surveillance and police regimes, these hoarders of the earth’s wealth, call those who would merely criticise them “supporters of violence” for the act of pointing out the truth— they are the cause of most of the violence in the world.

It is true that such arguments are radical. But “radical,” (as Marx famously argued in 1843) derives from the Latin for “root.” All a radical agenda or a radical person demands is to understand the causes of problems. In this proper sense, science just as much as philosophy or politics can be radical. Think of the leading work scientists have done to expose the links between fossil fuel consumption and global warming, or the heroic efforts of Physicians for Social Responsibility to uncover the true death toll of the War on Terror.

Violence is always a substitute for understanding— where everyone concerned knows and acts on the truth- or at least agrees on the procedures by which the truth may be discovered— violence is impossible, because irreconcilable opposition of interests has been set aside in favour of a joint search for solutions. If everyone together looks to find the cause, the root of the problem, then it becomes apparent what the real danger is: not the radical demand to understand, but the distractions and the ideological obfuscations that impede understanding. Radicalism is not violent, it is the opposite of violence; the obfuscation in itself is not violent, but it prevents the real causes from becoming known.

Properly understood, all thinking is radical in so far as it aims at the truth. When we confront any social problem: poverty, anomie, violence against women, climate change, and, yes, terrorism, the properly attuned mind wants to know the cause, so that appropriate measures can be taken to solve the problem, by addressing the cause. We know whether or not our account has captured the truth by whether or not the problem is solved, or keeps recurring. Let us perform a simple test to see whether the War on Terror has gotten to the truth, or addressed the causes of, terrorism. In 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, the avowed aim of the War on Terror was to eliminate Al Qaeda and its Taliban sponsors. Al Qaeda has been weakened, but it still exists, the Taliban have been toppled from power, but are still very much active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a new force, which did not exist in 2001, ISIS, now currently controls half of Syria and Iraq. Insurgencies have also cropped up in the Sinai peninsula, and a brutal, US-Saudi enflamed civil war is raging in Yemen. In my assessment, these facts spell failure, on the War on Terror’s own terms.

Nevertheless, it would be naive to expect that Western policies will be changed. First, there is no political pressure behind demands to change course and deal with the causes. Far too many people in

the West fear terrorist attacks, although there is almost no evidence that the groups they fear will carry them out– ISIS above all, right now– have any capacity to do so, their internet blather notwithstanding. More deeply, there is little reason to expect change because change would require admitting that the West itself has caused the problems it projects on to others. As the Palestinian activist and intellectual [Rami G. Khouri](#) argues, any approach to the problem of “violent extremism” “that leaves in place existing Arab, U.S. and Israeli policies merely perpetuates the colonialist idea that violence is a consequence of alien values or mindsets in the Arab and Islamic world.” Unless those policies are radically challenged, there is no reasonable hope that the violence everyone in the West claims to abhor will stop.

ON THE MEANING OF “POTENTIAL” IN POLITICS

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In “The Problem of Society,” George Herbert Mead argues that a most important outcome of the French Revolution was the incorporation of the principle of revolution into the basic institutions of democratic society itself: “The French Revolution ... in a sense incorporated the principle of revolution into institutions. That is, when you set up a constitution and one of the articles in it is that the constitution may be changed, then you have, in a certain sense, incorporated the very process of revolution into the order of society.” (p.20). If his argument is correct, then the age of violent revolutions should end with the universalization of the democratic principle, since the main aim of revolution—overcoming a systematic divorce between the interests of the ruling group and the majority of people—should always be corrigible by legitimate mass mobilization in the service of constitutional change.

Mead’s principle has been put to the test recently in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador, where citizen assemblies wrote new constitutions which challenged foreign and corporate control over these nations’ life-resources and asserted the principle that natural wealth and social labour are for the sake of need satisfaction. Most crucially, these new constitutions formally repudiated the distinction—central to most liberal-democratic constitutions—between politics as the public sphere and economics as the private sphere not subject to even regulation in the universal life-interest. The [achieved results have fallen short of the principles](#), but where and when in history have the comprehensive progressive implications of a principle been fully realized in the first attempt?

What is more important than the setbacks is the demonstration that Mead’s argument is not— as it might at first blush be dismissed as being— liberal-pragmatic wishful thinking, but rather indicative of a hidden potential in liberal-democratic institutions that Marxists and others committed to fundamental social transformation might at first ignore. That potential is that if people can be mobilized in support of a project of constitutional change, these constitutional changes can make inroads in the struggle against class power. In the short term, there may not be dramatic effects on the extent of ruling class control over life-resources. On the other hand, dramatic intensification of ordinary peoples’ active engagement in the democratic process can occur. Whatever one believes about the necessary means to system-transformation, only those forms which involve the majority of the people becoming subjects of their own history, awakening to the fact that nature and labour, not money-capital, is the basis of life and social development, can be actually liberatory.

It seems a long way from processes of popular constitutional assemblies and society-wide debates over the sources of wealth, the centrality of labour to human life, the practical implications of the idea of democracy, and the real value of socialism (sustainable use of natural and social wealth for the sake of the free development and enjoyment of individual life-capacities) to a Canadian election campaign as intellectually and politically dreary as a grey October afternoon. It *is* a long way, but still, it is important to look at every election as a crack in that facade of seamless institutional continuity which every society relies upon for its own reproduction. While the undemocratic first past the post electoral system and the deep uniformity (beneath superficial differences) of major party platforms do well to hide the fact, every

election cycle is, in principle, an actual holding up to question of the legitimacy, not only of the government of the day, but of the entire system.

However, this depth questioning, while objectively possible, is never systematically pursued. Opposition parties question the record of the government, but never whether the ruling value system, class structure, and political institutions are consistent with the idea of a free society all invoke. Such superficiality is not surprising: mainstream politicians of all parties all have a material interest in preserving the legitimacy of the existing institutions and the value-system that makes them appear good, just, etc. The mainstream media muckrakes, but never provides a forum for [robust critical investigation](#) of the crucial political questions in a democratic society: does what is on offer in the policies of the contending parties satisfy the real life-interests of the human beings who make up that society, and, if not, what are those citizens going to do about that failure?

Election time is a time of much hymn making to the power of the people. What is missing is any space for a *philosophical* intervention. Because philosophy is not beholden to the empirically given as ultimate and final, it can articulate the deeper human values existing potentially within the problematic actuality. The idea of “potential” is the idea of a hidden reserve of value lying unrealized within an already existing system. No process of fundamental change can be initiated without the idea of potential— if no one believes that there is anything left to be realized, no one can struggle to realize it.

Furthermore, since potential can be demonstrated by philosophical argument (drawing on the reality of historical change, one can demonstrate the actual role the idea of potential — rather than *ex nihilo* invention— played in times of fundamental transformation) it undermines the charge that the ideals fundamental change seeks to realize are utopian (u-topos— “no place”), and therefore irresponsible. Potential is not an empty box into which any idea whatsoever can be placed, but is always emergent from the existing state of affairs. If liberal democracies like Canada claim to be free, it follows that they must enable each of their citizens to fully exercise their life-capacities, which current economic and social structures clearly do not. Since the material and social means to enable everyone’s life capacities do demonstrably exist, there is no magic involved in the claim that the potential for Canada to become a fully free society is present, but it requires removing the institutional impediments— and the values that legitimate those impediments as just and necessary— to the ability of each and all to fully express and enjoy their life-capacities.

Hence, there is nothing utopian or irresponsible with the argument that takes us from where we are (systemic blocks to people’s free activity) through the idea of potential (the existence of life-requirement satisfying resources combined with the idea of a different use of those resources), to where the idea of freedom implies where we should be (a social structure and value system which distributes resources on the basis of life-need, for purposes of free self-realization). If that goal is not definitive of a free society, what is?

Liberal democratic institutions and the elections they require for re-legitimation do not so much deny the possibility of citizen mobilization (and therefore, political potential) as they do channel it in the least demanding ways. Political potential is confined to the potential to change the government and the prevailing policy options, but not the values and the institutions that are the cause of the damage every party’s platform promises to solve but never does.

In order for people to realize the deeper potential that the idea of a free society contains, they need to mobilize as a collective (or interlinked collectives) and work to realize it. In order to mobilize in the service of this potential, they must be exposed to arguments that it exists. But neither candidates

debates, nor the distractions of attack ads, nor the platitudes of speeches, nor the meaningless micro-analytics of ever fluctuating poll numbers refer to this idea of potential, even though real political action cannot even be imagined without it. Real political action is not system-management, but collective work in the service of better lives for each and all. Philosophy, therefore, is that which is missing from official politics. A free society does not require philosophers to be kings, as Plato thought, but it does require them to intervene as critics who give voice to the reality of a potential for “real change” (as both opposition candidate keep repeating, without specifying what it is they mean by that all important ontological term “real”).

ESSAY OF 1000: CAMPAIGN BLUES

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It's not that it didn't go down well – it's that there was point blank refusal to engage in economic arguments. Point blank. ... You put forward an argument that you've really worked on – to make sure it's logically coherent – and you're just faced with blank stares. It is as if you haven't spoken. What you say is independent of what they say. You might as well have sung the Swedish national anthem – you'd have got the same reply. And that's startling, for somebody who's used to academic debate. ... The other side always engages. Well there was no engagement at all. It was not even annoyance, it was as if one had not spoken.

Former Greek Finance Minister [Yanis Varoufakis](#) explains the mindlessness of European politicians and bureaucrats.

The philosopher embroiled in politics has no choice but to stick by reason, not out of a self-righteous sense of superiority, but as a commitment to the human capacity to solve problems through dialogue, through commitment to letting the truth of the object decide the dispute between subjects, but at some point, this commitment to rational argument in politics becomes irrational, since it rests on faith against all evidence that arguments matter in politics; that the force of evidence and the better reasons will carry the day; that there is all-round shared commitment to objective evaluation of policy in terms of service to the shared life interest rather than one's partisan advantage or ideological perspective; to changing that perspective and foregoing private advantage if the either demonstrably fails to serve those interests; to listening to critique and counter-argument, to admitting fault; but now the writ has been dropped and we know what is coming, not argument, not reason, but: derivative theatre; staged debates, a tired production, same story, different actors clustering around the safest of safe positions; defending, attacking, distorting, manipulating, spinning, selectively selecting, stoking fears and allaying fears and decrying the politics of fear while pointing the finger at something else to fear, posing, posturing, tendentiously packaging, repeating, emphasising, tweeking, hair-splitting, staying on message and subtly changing the subject, sloganeering, disseminating sound-bites, floating trial balloons and serving red herrings, fashioning the right image, striking the right pose, sounding the right note, choosing the right tie, timing the bad joke, pounding the fist and shaking the finger, standing on one's record, downplaying the economic situation, evading the issue, playing up the failures, harping on the scandals, ignoring the evidence, sidestepping the inconvenient contradiction, concentrating one's fire, holding one's fire, feigning interest in the factory, looking for the fatal flaw and exposing the faux-pas, invoking history, puffing the chest, waving the flag, deflecting scrutiny, reminding of the gaff, taking the attention off, dodging, prevaricating, rewording, rebranding, qualifying, insisting, emphasising; all the while relentlessly campaigning, mobilising the base, getting the vote out, suppressing the vote, analyzing the data, gauging the influence, making the hard choice, sacrificing a region, seeking the women's vote, pleading with the young to vote, cultivating the ethnics, demonizing the ethnics; energy devoted not to proving the case but mining the data, mapping the demographics, reading the tea leaves, seeing what the metrics say, analysing the polls, tracking the trends, predicting the seat distribution, currying the pundits' favour, targeting the audience; at root fundraising and spending, an avalanche of spending, yes, building up the war chest, lengthening the campaign, emptying the war chest, advertising, messaging, busing, flying, flyers, social media strategizing, stupid faces popping up, dinner-interrupting door to door volunteering, securing support, spreading patronage money, hand shaking, hair tossing — to hug

or not to hug— smiling, always smiling, polluting with lawn signs, rallying, asking for trust, decrying untrustworthiness, barbequing, regular-guying, promising, promising, promising: change, stability, a different sort of change, the same sort of stability; all distractions distracting from the real issue: how the resources are used, to what ends, for who's good, who owns them, who controls them, how are they valued and what alternatives are available; if we, we the people, so chose to exercise our energy and intelligence in a different way, to assume our responsibilities as free people to do more than complain and let someone else do it, to actually demand an accounting of what has gone wrong and why, what are the causes and how can they be addressed; to demand an argument and to respond in kind, not with platitudes but ideas that can be substantiated, with actual positions, not likes and dislikes and laundry lists; engaging, challenging, exposing, not-allowing-them-off-hook but setting it, firmly, in their ideological gums and reeling them in, proving that not only do they look the same (white, men) but also that they all affirm the same value system, hammer the same talking points: security, economy, accountability, the other party's misdeeds, floating free of the real ground, making lives better and explaining what they mean by that; instead, money-power rolls on whatever its costs; human costs, not jobs lost and gained, enough of jobs, good jobs, bad jobs, well-paying jobs, we are not born just to find a job but to do things that befit human beings, yes, human beings, social self-conscious individuals, not just dumb unfeeling elements of a "labour force," a mere/sheer surging to be absorbed, not tax payers to be appeased or voters to be groomed, but participants, citizens, *the demos*, subjects, the creators of social reality re-awakened to their constitutive role, for whom x marks the spot is not enough, but barely a beginning of *self-government*; but never, it never happens premise-supporting evidence-valid inference-conclusion-counter-consideration-repeat for as long as it takes, never an admission that expectations were wrong, predictions were off, assumptions were faulty, evaluative grounds and criteria inadequate to the object evaluated, the opposition correct; this road never taken is too long and too uncertain, along it lies weakness and vulnerability; politics is power, securing victory, exploiting positions of advantage, exposing the soft underbelly of the opposition, pouncing, crushing, imposing generational defeats, that is the way of politics, not truth but winning.

SO IT COMES TO PASS...

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In [Fear and Loathing in Ottawa](#), I worried that Bill [C-51](#) contained provisions that made it analogous to the self-undermining [Law on Suspects](#) from the French Revolution. According to this law, the police could arrest anyone based only on the accusation of another citizen that he or she harboured anti-revolutionary sentiments. The end—protecting the revolution against monarchical enemies—was good, but the means—arrest without solid evidence or trial—was certain (we can now see in retrospect) to help destroy the democratic politics necessary to ensure the revolution's success. Allowing arrest on mere suspicion could not but become a political tool to eliminate not only monarchical opponents, but also factions within the revolutionary camp who disagreed with the leadership. From being a tool justified in the name of democracy, the Law on Suspects contributed to the undoing of the revolution as a democratic mobilization of the majority of (poor) French citizens.

The analogy with Bill-C-51 can no longer be denied with news of the [arrest of Kevin Omar Mohamed](#) under the “fear of terrorism” provisions contained in Bill C-51. Supporters of the bill will no doubt rejoin that extraordinary conditions (the ever-present threat of terrorist attack on civilians, a threat only reinforced by the Belgian attacks) justify extraordinary measures (i.e, measures which contradict the long-established principles of liberal-democratic right). Moreover, they might say, the authorities cannot simply round up anyone they chose, but must have some real evidence to support their fear that an individual under suspicion really is about to commit a terrorist act.

Let us start with the last point first. It assumes that there is some way to tell the difference between a person who is merely ‘talking’ about terrorism and a person who is on the verge of translating theory to practice. However, a recent story in the [New York Times](#) reports that all psychological and social scientific attempts to date have failed to isolate any set of factors consistently correlated with terrorist activity. If there is no consistent correlation, there is no known causal connection that determines what sorts of people become terrorists and what sorts do not. If there is no knowledge of causal connection, there can be no prediction, and if there can be no prediction, there can be no justification of preventative arrest on the grounds that someone fits a profile or that there was a high probability—based only on what the suspect said— that he or she was likely to commit an attack.

Worse, fixation on “fear” of terrorist attacks over-valorizes the role of increased surveillance and more totalitarian police activity in the prevention of terrorism. This fixation displaces effort from what alone can, over the longer term, help prevent terrorist attacks: critical reflection upon the life-destructive implications of American (and allied) foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. While there might not be any consistent psycho-social markers of terrorist behaviour, there is a consistent *political marker*, typically ignored by governments and the police, because it exposes Western complicity with the terrorist outrages they claim unique power to prevent: opposition to the destruction of Muslim life by American and NATO armies and their local allies. As [Sheldon Richman](#) points out in a recent essay, “telling the full story about the terrorists’ objectives might inadvertently prompt a fresh look – maybe even a reevaluation – of America’s atrocious foreign policy. The ruling elite and the military-industrial complex would not want that.” So instead of self-scrutiny, self-criticism, and self-transformation, Western nations continue to portray themselves as the victims and persist with the same failed policies.

(As a corollary, it is worth pointing out that those who choose the terrorist path are also pursuing the path of murderous failure. Each attack in the West only intensifies the violence of the Western

response, ensuring only more suffering in the Middle East and North Africa. Revenge cycles are irrational by definition, since they never achieve satisfaction each side desires. Instead, each side provokes the other to more of the same life-destructive behaviour that motivates the desire in each for revenge on the other. Desire seeks satisfaction, so rational behaviour in this dimension of human activity is activity likely to ensure the satisfaction of the motivating desire. Revenge cycles ensure that the desire can never be satisfied. Hence their structural irrationality).

However, it is not my main purpose here to examine the irrationality of revenge cycles or propose a fully worked out solution, but to respond to the counter-argument to my criticism of the “fear of terrorism” provisions of C-51. The other plank of that counter-argument was that extra-ordinary measures are required in the wake of Paris and Brussels to disrupt terrorist plots before they result in attacks. The problem with this argument is not only that this policy will not prevent some attacks from happening— as long as there is wide-spread revulsion with Western policy there will be attacks,— but that there is no specifiable limit to interference with freedom of thought and political expression if something as vague as “fear” of terrorism is allowed as cause for arrest and preventive detention.

Let us take two examples— hypothetical, but hardly hyperbolic. A Muslim author writes a fictional account of a sleeper cell organizing an attack in a major Western city. The narrative is crafted in a realist fashion to be as accurate as possible to the known training and communication methods of Islamic terrorist groups. On reading it, a number of citizens become alarmed and start to worry that the novel is not a novel but coded instructions to a real sleeper cell. can we not imagine this author being targeted for arrest and interrogation?

For the second example, let us consider a politically charged debate in a university classroom (let us say, in a political philosophy class), about the legitimacy of terrorist methods. Free inquiry, as well as a good faith attempt to understand terrorism in order to solve the problem, demands that all perspectives on a given problem be aired. Is it unreasonable to imagine a group of students who object to the tenor of the debate and complain that the professor or another group of students are terrorist sympathizers, again sparking an inquiry and perhaps arrest?

Opponents might object that I am committing a slippery slope fallacy (drawing outlandish conclusions from limited or no evidence). I am certainly exploring worst case scenarios— the loss of artistic and academic freedom if imagination and critical discussion are confused with advocacy, and advocacy confused with the actual commission of political crimes. However, there is abundant evidence that unless restrained by clear legal limits, police authority will push beyond traditional liberal legal constraints on their surveillance activities. Moreover, there is some evidence that even the threat of surveillance causes people to censor themselves. A recent study by [Elizabeth Stoycheff](#) of Wayne State University has found that people are more and more reticent to express challenging political positions on Facebook for fear of attracting the attention of the police.

If we see liberal democratic rights as important victories on the road to a fully democratic and life-valuable society in which problems are solved by mutual understanding and not violent destruction of the opponent, then we must be loath to allow the ruling power, against whose interests the rights were initially secured, to weaken or undermine them. When the ruling power is allowed to weaken democratic rights, people are never made better off. If- as defenders of emergency measures maintain, citizens can be made better off by having some of their democratic rights curtailed, then would they not be best off with no rights at all? Of course not. But this totalitarian logic is implicit in the fear-mongering and unwillingness to change our own geo-political course that underlies wrong steps like Bill-C-51, whose most dangerous implications now appear to be coming to pass.

THE UNSAID

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Unlike the physical world studied by natural science, political reality is not simply given, but is in part the outcome of people's beliefs, actions, and interactions. There are of course objective structures and forces in social life (laws, institutions, resources), but their effects on people are not like the force of gravity (which is indifferent to peoples' beliefs). Instead, objective social forces change as beliefs and actions change and give rise to new patterns of interaction in the service of different goals and values. One way to understand political power is as the collective capacity to define and change the given reality in according to a guiding value system.

Struggles for institutional power always involve struggles to define the scope of possibility for political action. Mainstream politicians of parliamentary parties all define political reality in such a way that changes to the objective forces that currently structure social life and the existing money-value system that legitimates those forces appear unchangeable. The way they accomplish this goal is to not speak about these objective forces as social, political, and economic products of collective human action and interaction, but as permanent constraints on human life which must be accepted as limits within which "realistic" policies must operate.

Hence, to understand the deeper identity of interest that all mainstream politicians and political parties serve, we need to pay attention to what they leave unsaid. Their differences—always superficial—are disclosed in their policies, platforms, and pronouncements, but to understand what they are really about we need to bring to light the unstated assumptions about what they take the field of legitimate political action to be.

One of the most difficult, but also most important abilities, that critical social philosophy teaches is this ability to uncover and understand the relationship between the unsaid in political speech and the attempt to make changeable institutional forces appear as unchangeable natural laws. While understanding the way in which what mainstream politicians keep silent helps them make the historical appear natural does not in and of itself lead to the solution to key problems, it is a first step in understanding why parliamentary politics never solves the problems the different parties all claim to want to solve. They never solve the problems because they accept the real causes of those problems as unalterable structures of social life. The result is that the real issues never even get discussed, let alone systematically addressed. Let me illustrate my point with three examples drawn from recent history and relevant to the on-going federal election campaign.

A few months ago the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) examining the history of residential schools and their destructive impacts on the lives of people of the First Nations submitted its final report. It made a number of far reaching recommendations about how the historically oppressive relationship between the Canadian state and the people of the First Nations could be transformed and equality and justice promoted. While all political parties are courting the aboriginal vote, there is complete silence about the report. Why? Because the testimony, analysis, and recommendations it contains all smash key elements of the myth of Canada: as a historic compromise between two founding nations, as the triumph of conservative (in the true sense of the word) pragmatism over mutually destructive confrontation, and of democratic accommodation over revolutionary violence. Judged from the perspective of the people of the First Nations, the truth of the Canadian state is the opposite on every score: not a compromise, but an all-out attack on First Nations' societies, not conservative, but destructive of First Nations' cultures and

institutions, and not democratic, but a colonial expropriation of First Nations' lands. All of that must remain unsaid, because all parties (with the exception of the Bloc Quebecois, which relies on a different myth of origins) tie their own legitimacy to the resonance this myth has with many Canadians.

As always, "the economy" is the focus of most of the arguments between the three major federal parties. Occasionally, mildly critical arguments erupt about the level and extent of inequality, about the disappearance of 'good jobs,' and the need for financial security in old age. What is always left unsaid in these arguments is an explanation of why our society is so unequal and growing moreso, what a good job is and why they are disappearing, and why the financial security of more and more people, and not only the elderly, is being undermined. To answer those questions would mean using the term "capitalism" and lead into an analysis of its class structure. An analysis of its class structure would provide strong evidence that poverty, inequality, menial and poorly paid labour, and financial insecurity for everyone but the very wealthy is not a function of bad policy-making by the government of the day, but endemic to an economy that produces profits through the exploitation of labour, that treats working human beings as disposable "human resources" and has tied personal income security more and more to volatile stock markets that work for major corporate investors but only rarely for working individuals. To raise these questions would again jeopardize each party's election strategy: of positioning themselves as the best party to manage the economy. Instead, it would allow people to ask the question of whether we need to build a different economy on the basis of a different value system if the goods of equality, meaningful work, and life-security are to be served.

Finally, let us take an example from international affairs. The refugee crisis gripping Europe might seem to have little to do with Canada (beyond the debate about whether the Conservative government has allowed enough Syrian refugees into the country). While the government's response thus far has been shamefully inadequate, there is again an unspoken dimension to the problem. In large part the refugee crisis is testimony to the failure of the neo-liberal political-military and economic agenda in Africa and the Middle East, a set of policies which is never exposed to view by any of the parties, (even if some its results are lamented by the NDP and Liberals). No one is exposing to light the destruction of African economies through IMF structural reforms imposed through the 80s and 90's until today, or the way in which the collapse of stability in the Middle East is a consequence of Western intervention. Instead, all sing from the same hymn book about ISIS and wave the flag in support of our bombing missions and blind, unthinking support for Israeli colonialism, when it is clear that no solution that can restore peace to the Middle East be achieved through bombing and that a better future for everyone will require the end of the occupation of Palestine and the creation of democratic Palestinian state.

Bringing these unstated assumptions to light shows us that mainstream political parties accept as necessary the very structures that cause the fundamental problems of our world. Understanding these causes cannot on its own solve the problems, but there is abundant historical evidence to support the claim that unless we understand and address the causes of key social problems, solutions will never be found.

TAXES AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PUBLIC GOODS

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In capitalist society, surplus wealth beyond what is necessary for basic social reproduction is created by the exploitation of labour. “Exploitation,” in the Marxist sense means that labour produces more value over the course of the workday than it is paid in wages. The argument is typically dismissed by mainstream economists who reject the “labour theory of value” on which it is based. Briefly, the labour theory of value (which goes back to Adam Smith and David Ricardo) holds that value is created by the labour time expended in the production of a good. In this theory, labour has a price (the cost of purchasing the basic goods and services that labourers need to reproduce themselves). This objective cost of labour establishes the floor of wage rates (any lower, and workers cannot survive, any higher, and profits are cut into). Let us say that workers require 10 dollars a day to reproduce themselves, but over the course of a work day produce 30 dollars worth of shoes. Once the shoes are sold, the capitalist pays the workers 10 dollars and reaps a surplus of 20 dollars. After other expenses are paid, the capitalist appropriates the remaining surplus as profit.

One can make all the technical economic criticisms of this theory that one likes, but two facts remain unavoidable: 1) if there is no labour, there is no product of labour, and 2) if there is no product of labour, there is nothing to sell, and therefore no possibility of realizing a profit. So whether or not one

believes that the labour theory of value can explain the technical problem of prices, or whether labour contracts are formally just, there is no getting around the fact that labour cannot be paid the full money-value of the product it produces if there is going to be profit for capitalists to appropriate.

However, the real problem with capitalism is not the exploitation of labour in this somewhat narrow sense, but with the private appropriation of the surplus wealth that labour creates. Profitable production is made possible by nature (which contributes raw materials) and multiple forms of labour (scientific, technical, physical), and protected by the laws and institutions of capitalist society. In other words, profits depend upon the cooperation of almost everyone in society, in one way or another, but most people whose labour creates the profits have no say in how they are re-invested (or whether they are re-invested). The surplus wealth generated by *collective* labour is appropriated for the exclusive use of *individual* capitalists. This process of private appropriation of a surplus that depends upon collective labour is the underlying dynamic that drives the inequality that has become such a concern, even for critical mainstream economists (see, for example, Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*).

Both exploitation and inequality are real problems, but they are only expressions of the deepest problem of capitalist society: there is no system requirement that the surplus wealth produced by the exploitation of labour be invested in what McMurtry calls "[life-capital](#)" ("*life wealth that produces more life wealth without loss and with cumulative gain*"). Life-capital (food, homes, education, health care, the arts, etc.,) sustains life and enables the development of the capacities that make it meaningful and good. The system dynamics of capitalism encourage capitalists to chase the highest monetary return on investment rather than contribute to life-capital development (except accidentally). This process is justified by the claim that when capitalists are allowed to decide as individual competitors how to reinvest their capital, the market works 'efficiently.' There is a high demand for labour to produce goods and services that people want. Workers are happy because there is work, consumers are happy because there are goods to consume, and capitalist are happy because their capital is producing profits.

The problem is not only that markets are not always efficient in the real economy, but also that even if they were, they would waste resources in the production of goods and services with no value as life-capital at all. There is no reason why a capitalist should not invest in a chemical weapons plant if she can make more profit there than invest in an organic farm in her home town. Nor is there any requirement that capitalists invest in any physical good or service at all. As of 2014, Canadian corporations were sitting on [cash reserves of 630 billion dollars](#). This money is not creating any jobs, is not being invested in anything that anyone needs; it is only earning more money by being invested in stocks and bonds and other securities, enriching the owners but contributing nothing of life value to anyone else.

Just because the socially produced surplus is controlled by individual capitalists with the right to invest it to further enrich themselves, the surplus is always an object of struggle. Workers have typically struggled to secure as much of the surplus as possible in the form of wages. The struggle for higher wages is an important element of the struggle against inequality, but on its own does not solve the deeper problem noted above: individual workers can spend their wages as they see fit, and how they see fit to spend them does not always coincide with the consumption of life-valuable goods and services. A vast network of consumer industries has arisen since the 1920's devoted exclusively to finding ways to get workers to spend their money as soon as they are paid, thus returning to the capitalist in the form of expenditure the capital he just paid out as wages.

However, while it might be more ‘fun’ in the short term to buy a dune buggy than a bicycle, life (and good lives, too) ultimately depend upon investment in life-capital. Some life-capital takes the form of goods that are best distributed through producers markets and consumer choice (healthy food, for example), while institutionalized forms (water treatment plants, schools, hospitals, libraries) require public investment. Alongside the struggle over wages (which, if spent wisely, procure life-capital for individuals) there is a struggle over the social re-appropriation of the surplus. Taxes have been the primary vehicle for this social struggle.

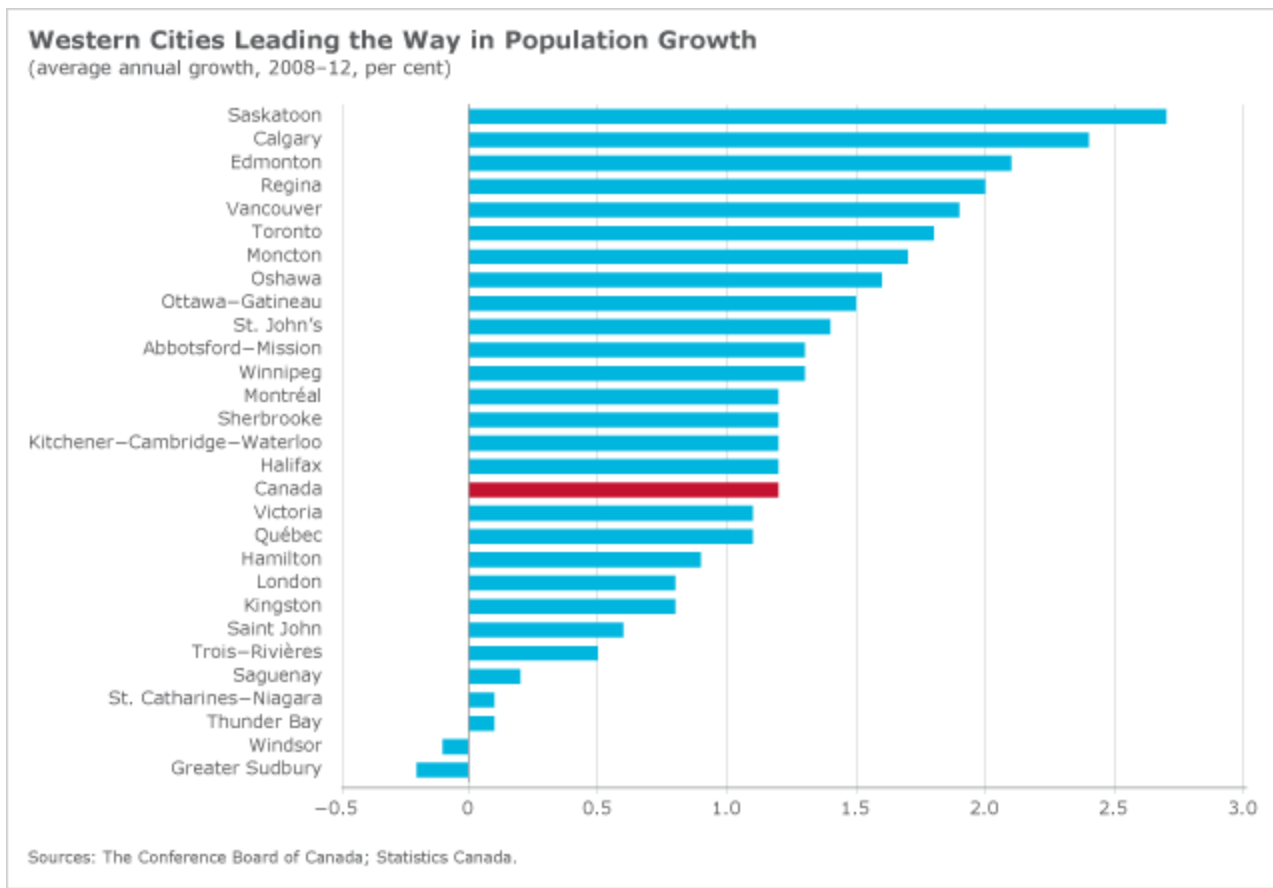
Historically, the struggle for socialism was a struggle to overcome the private ownership of the universal means of life-support and development. Taxing capital and the high incomes that derive from it does not on its own overcome this structure of private control. Nevertheless, historically, taxes, and especially progressive income taxes, have been the primary means by which capitalist states have been pushed by workers’ struggles to control inequality and reclaim part of the social surplus as a pool for investment in public goods. The anti-tax ideology of the ruling class is directed against the role progressive taxation has played in redistributing wealth. Their argument is couched in the language of taxes as “job killers,” but this argument assumes that all surplus wealth not taxed will be invested in the domestic market to create jobs, which, as we saw above, is not always the case. So, the argument that there is a *necessary* connection between lower tax rates and job creation does not stand up to analysis.

The forgoing argument provides some context to decipher what is at stake in ubiquitous debates about the value or disvalue of taxes. Let me take one example, the now eight year saga of property taxes in the City of Windsor. In December, Windsor City Council approved its 2016 budget which held the line— for the eight straight year— on property taxes. The right-wing press crowed at this triumph of fiscal prudence, but even they cannot ignore the fact that frozen property tax rates have done nothing to attract either investment or people to the city.

Between 2007 and 2014, youth unemployment has held steady, at around 16%.

During the same period, the city has failed to recoup the jobs lost during the recession. In 2014, there were almost 4% fewer jobs than there were in 2007. The overall unemployment rate stood at 10 % in November, 2015. Holding the line on taxes has not produced the “private sector” investment tax-freeze champions cite in support of their policy.

Well, one might respond that the tax rate applies to property taxes and property taxes alone are not positively correlated with business investment. Let us grant the objection for the sake of argument. One would expect that property tax rates would be positively correlated with population growth, but that is not the case here. Windsor has a shrinking population despite frozen taxes. If low and frozen taxes were the panacea they are supposed to be, should Windsor not be reaping the rewards in terms of population growth?



Source: [Conference Board of Canada](#)

Of course, there are a wide variety of factors that determine where people live. My point is that not raising tax rates has clearly not helped to address the severe economic problems the city continues to face, while the right-wing argument hangs everything- jobs, population growth, the good life itself- on lower taxes. I am not claiming that simply raising tax rates will address those problems either: taxes are neither good nor bad in themselves, but a means of raising revenue. They become good when they are progressive, when they leave individuals with sufficient income to purchase the life-goods it makes most sense for people to purchase as individuals as well as to save, and when they are used as a pool of investment for life-valuable public goods. And that is really the argument that citizens of Windsor (as elsewhere) need to be having: not whether to raise or lower or keep tax rates the same in the abstract, but whether the revenue existing taxes are raising is adequate to the public goods required. Related to this debate is a debate on whether existing public spending is directed to the public goods required. We have seen that not raising taxes on Windsor property owners has not led to economic development or attracted new people to the city. Perhaps focused investment in the life-capital of the city: bike paths, cleaning up polluted brownfields, adding green space, community gardens, supporting local producers markets (but not subsidizing the individual producers), libraries, galleries, and other public cultural institutions, a strategy to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, subsidies for workers' cooperatives rather than private corporations, schools, and protecting public sector jobs, etc., will.

PITY POOR WINDSOR B/W THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PHILOSOPHICAL

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Pity Poor Windsor

Money follows money, and it also follows lack of money. Growing urban centres whose economies are dominated by advanced industry and research clusters exert a centripetal effect on money-capital, drawing it in from around the world. Massive inputs of capital fuel cycles of “creative destruction” (Schumpeter) which knock down the old, re-develop the freed up space, generate new technologies and methods of production, and experiment with new cultures of work, organization, and play. For people at the centre of these city-regions there is unlimited money to be made— a building purchased today can be flipped tomorrow for double the price, companies compete for workers, driving salaries up, exciting urban neighbourhoods arise and spawn global styles that enrich the designers and chefs and lifestyle promoters that create and market it all.

But poverty also draws money, but for different reasons and with different effects. In the impoverished, abandoned, and desperate small cities of the manufacturing heartlands of central Canada and the US Midwest, a massive reserve army of labour is in need of work. Their need for work— exacerbated by cuts to unemployment insurance and public assistance— draws money capital too, but not to creatively destroy past accumulations of capital but just plain old destroy the hopes of the masses it has abandoned. The creation happens in Stanford and San Jose, the destruction is felt in Windsor and Gary, Indiana. Those on the wrong side of the dialectic are hunted down by money-capital on the lookout for impoverished and demoralized workers who can be repurposed as low-wage, non-unionized servants of the “creative capital” working its magic elsewhere.

It is with this system in mind that we must understand the “major jobs announcement” that had Windsorites holding their breath during the last week of October. When we exhaled: [320 part-time positions](#) at Sutherland Global’s existing call centre operation. Hooray for the company spokesperson’s attempt to make this announcement sound transformational. She promised future workers that they would be answering phones for “a very hip, innovative and fast-growing high-tech company based in Silicon Valley.” San Jose has its Google bus and Windsor has the Crosstown 2— not hip, but it does have wheels.

If the 12\$ an hour salary (which wouldn’t buy a Martini— hell, it probably would not buy a pint of craft beer— in Silicon Valley), is not enticing, the spokesperson promises a coffee bar and, (perhaps if workers are well-behaved and do not call UNIFOR) “maybe” ping pong tables! While a confidentiality agreement prevented the spokesperson from disclosing the name of the customer, she did note that the firm was “high value” (to Sutherland Global) and “known for its hipness.” I am getting older, it is true, but “hipness” and “corporate world” were once antitheses. While Sutherland Global can only offer hipness via ping pong proxy, it is at least seeking the young, underemployed but well-dressed set to staff those phones (or whatever hip name phones go by these days). Our Mayor, beating the same relentless drum beat of enthusiasm his mentor never tired of beating, no matter how grim the reality, gushed: “This is a really great announcement... We’ve been hearing from a lot of youth in the community looking for opportunities.” Are part time, no benefit jobs the “opportunities” young people

are seeking? Maybe if they work hard one of them can graduate to the 120 000\$ per year “sports tourism” position the city decided to create three days after these “opportunities” were announced.

Madness, but little in the way of criticism from those who ought to be most critical.

Jaydee Tarpeh, the President of the University of Windsor Student’s Association, simply re-iterated the mayor’s enthusiasm: “It is awesome news, sometimes it is very hard for students to find jobs.” Indeed it is, but ought a student leader not question *why* it is hard for students to find jobs or, better, *why* society so disregards the intellectual value of scholarship that it sees no problem forcing students to work in soulless call centres part time while at the same raising the cost of tuition and turning them into indentured servants of the banks for decades after graduation? Alas, nothing seems able to motivate Canadians to question, criticise, and protest for something better .

[In South Africa](#), by contrast, a country with far fewer financial resources, militant students have just forced the national government to back down from double-digit fee-increases. The South African university system is not going to collapse, and nor would the Ontario university system were it forced by (an as yet non-existent) student movement to begin to reduce its fees.

The issue is not affordability, but the principles that govern budget-allocations. At present, neo-liberal policy continues to cut spending on public education on the basis of the claim that education is a personal investment in one’s individual future (for which one willingly pays because it will yield positive returns in the form of a job). We need a student (and faculty, and society-wide) movement that returns public education to its real value as an essential life-requirement of human beings. When this requirement is satisfied, our understanding of the physical, social, psychological, ethical, and aesthetic worlds in which we live is increased. In turn, this heightened understanding yields more intelligent, far-sighted, life-creative action in those worlds, and more peaceful, mutually affirmative relationships between selves and societies.

The Importance of Being Philosophical

Different models of public expenditure in the service of different values are possible. The victory of the South African students shows that political mobilization can change priorities. Cuts or fee increases that are announced as absolutely necessary can disappear from the agenda without the institutions collapsing, provided people understand how to expose false necessity and ideological generalizations. Properly questioned, the ruling power’s “necessity” can be exposed as an ideological construction, a sham, a stick to beat people into line. Philosophy, in its most fundamental public expression, teaches us how to ask the questions that expose the ways in which power constructs false necessities. In so doing, it clears the ground for thinking about the values that really are in the universal life-interest, how those values can be institutionalised, and how resources can be mobilised to pay for them.

Without philosophy (which is not the same thing as philosophy departments, or philosophy professors), social life remains hostage to ruling group interests and the power rulers employ to maintain that system. No specialized methods are required to practice philosophy in this way, (although one does need to practice, always). To begin, all one needs is the capacity to ask two questions: 1) Who is the stated beneficiary of a given policy championed by the ruling power? and, 2) what actual effect does the policy have on the lives of its stated beneficiaries? Wherever the stated beneficiary is said to be “the public” we must press beneath the rhetoric of universal inclusiveness and evaluate whether the public actually does benefit. Where a contradiction is exposed between the justification and the outcome, we

know we are dealing with a false universality asserted only to cover the real agenda: the extension or consolidation of the ruling group's power.

These questions work to expose ruling agenda at any level: local, regional, provincial, national, or international. Let us take two examples of local and provincial significance to illustrate my point.

First, a local story. On Hallowe'en the Windsor Star reported that [Windsor Chief of Police Al Fredrick](#) was angered by the Ontario government's decision to ban the practice of "carding," i.e., stopping people at random, because, in the Chief's words, they "look suspicious." Across the province, it turns out, that "looking suspicious" and being black are nearly synonymous. Of course, the Chief is not going to admit to racially profiling Windsorites, but tries to sell his position on the grounds that it helps keep the streets safe. In fact, in the article he segues, without any connective argument or evidence, from a general critique of the province to the suggestion (which readers are clearly supposed to interpret not as a suggestion, but as fact) that carding keeps guns off the streets. In philosophy, a conclusion that does not follow from its premises is called a *non sequitor*, from the Latin for "it does not follow." Chief Fredricks certainly commits this generic fallacy.

But more, and deeper, the Chief tries to identify the good of the public ('safe streets') with the arbitrary power of the police to stop and question people for no reason other than that they "look suspicious." But there is no such thing, objectively, as "looking suspicious" but only stereotypes about what criminals look like. Now, these stereotypes can change. Hence, any one is in principle "suspicious looking" depending upon whatever stereotypes about "criminal appearances" circulate. Thus, the public interest is actually in constraining police power, limiting it to the investigation of crimes actually committed and never permitting fishing expeditions like carding. If public safety requires stopping suspicious looking people, would we not be safer if we moved straight on to imprisoning suspicious looking people? Of course not, because if the police had the power to imprison on the basis of their "gut feelings" we would be living in a totalitarian police state, and living in a totalitarian police state is clearly not in the public interest.

The second example concerns the announced sale of 60% of publically owned Hydro One. Despite a report from the Province's [Financial Accountability Officer](#) that demonstrates conclusively that the province will, in the long term, lose money on the sale, the Premier insisted that the sale would go ahead, because it is good for the Ontario economy. Her argument is based upon speculation (because, projections about future economic growth as a result of infrastructure investment can only be speculative, there being no data from the future). The FAO report, by contrast, is based on demonstrable fact: Hydro One brings in 750 million dollars a year, and will do so in perpetuity, because electricity must be delivered to end users, and Hydro One controls the means of delivery.

At present, therefore, Hydro One brings in 750 million dollars a year which, in principle, is available for investment in ways that the people of Ontario decide (I realize that the truth of public ownership in a capitalist economy is not as straightforward as I am making it out to be, but the principle, if not the practice, is clear: public ownership means democratic control over the resources owned; private ownership means private control over the use of the resource and the money such use generates). If publically owned resources are sold to private interests, democratic control is eliminated, in principle and in practice. The citizens of Moose Factory or Kirkland Lake will see no improvement in their lives because of transit improvement in the Greater Toronto Area, (the stated reason for the sell off). GDP growth, assuming there is any following the infrastructure investment, tells us nothing about how the increased money is distributed or spent. All we know for certain is who will benefit: the private investors who gain control over Hydro One.

The claim is that “Ontario” will benefit, the truth is that “Ontario” gives up control over a public utility which provides necessary resources to everyone in the province and returns public money to the provincial treasury, money that is in principle under the control of the collectivity of Ontarians to invest in institutions and public goods from which we can all benefit.

Simple questions, answers that disclose the truth about the city/province/country/world we inhabit. Without philosophical questioning (again, always to be distinguished from academic philosophy) those truths remain buried.

IN DEFENCE OF LIBRARIES

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In its colloquial image the library is a place of quiet contemplation and withdrawal from the conflicts of the world. In fact, since the burning of the [library of Alexandria](#) in 391 CE libraries have been at the centre of those conflicts. The library seems to be a strange target for religious and balanced book zealots alike, but if we think through the principle on which the library is based, the (sometimes literal) political firestorms in which they get caught up is not surprising. Libraries are repositories of knowledge, testaments to the range of human thought and creativity, material proof that not everyone thinks the same way. Hence they are always a danger to dogmatism, because within their walls opposed perspectives can be found. That is why the Christians of Alexandria burned the library: it contained “dangerous” pagan philosophy and literature.

Today there are no Christian mobs threatening to burn libraries (although groups still do get vexed by this or that book). Today the library is not so much in danger of being torched as axed by budget cuts. The most recent threat is in [Newfoundland](#), which announced that nearly half (54) of the libraries in the province will be closed because of a one million dollar budget cut. Presumably the Newfoundland government is not threatened by the content of the libraries’ collections, but the effect of the cut will be to deprive rural Newfoundlanders of access to the ideas and stories contained in those collections. And to save what? One million dollars!

Think of that sum and what the citizens of Newfoundland are getting for such a modest expenditure: 54(!) libraries, for one million dollars. That strikes me as an incredibly productive investment in public education and edification. Yet, might we not see this efficiency (great public benefit for minimal public expenditure) as the underlying reason that libraries are under threat: they constitute objective proof that competitive markets are not always the most efficient means of distributing resources. Their brilliant success as *public* institutions is proof positive that collective investment in accessible institutions can—contrary to neo-liberal dogma that rejects all public institutions as inefficient when compared with independent firms competing for monetary advantage—meet shared needs and enable life-capacities.

For a very modest investment the public library returns vast stores of life-capital in the form of literacy, education, edification, and communication. It is a maximally open institution: there is no tuition fee, you do not have to explain to anyone why you are there, they are at the forefront of the struggle against censorship; their entire *raison d’etre* is to make the world of ideas accessible to everyone.

The right-wing disdain for libraries has long roots. In the nineteenth century, forerunners of today’s neo-liberals denounced public libraries as “socialist continuation schools.” They were not, at least in the direct sense in which M.D. O’Brian intended when he denounced them as such. (M.D. O’Brian, “Free Libraries, *A Plea for Liberty*, p. 415). However, the principle of the public library *is* socialist: collective contribution to an open institution through which individuals develop their understanding and interests through their own decisions: from each according to his ability (paying through taxes), to each according to his needs (for education, edification, enjoyment, etc). They are proof that this socialist principle works. And that is why, from O’Brian to [Rob and Doug Ford](#), critics of public institutions have always included libraries in their attacks.

But libraries are not only valuable because they demonstrate the economic rationality of publicly funded institutions open and accessible to each and all, they are also essential for scholarship. Google seems

magical, an anticipation of your thoughts, but in fact it can narrow the scope of research in very pernicious ways. The search algorithm knows nothing about the subject it ‘searches’ for, and there are all sorts of tricks to move websites higher up the search engine rankings. Invariably, the Wikipedia entry for almost any serious subject is the first one that appears and people usually click on the first link, assuming it is the most authoritative. But it is not: it is only the site with the most hits. Hence, a tool like Google can grossly limit the scope of information that people actually access. As Jean Noel Jeannene, director of France’s Bibliotheque Nationale argues, the main problem with Google as a research tool is that it operates according to the principle that “success breeds success, at the expense of newcomers, minorities, marginals. Its a system that could seriously harm the balance and energy of world cultures unless other forces, eschewing market interests, intervene.” (*Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge*, p. 45). In intellectual and cultural life quantity is not quality, the number of hits and links does not ensure the most penetrating insight or profound revelation (although it can translate into the most advertising revenue).

Compare this logic of sheer quantity to a professionally organized library. The key to a great library is not only the size of the collection, but the contiguous organization of books by field and sub-field which permits, assuming a certain level of comprehensiveness to the collection, the immediate grasp of the history and the state of the art in the field. To walk the stacks (rather than surf the web) is to be exposed to the (more or less) full range of thinking in the field, and thus to encounter directly approaches that you might not have been aware of when you came in, but which claim your attention as you look for the book for which you were looking. In twenty years of being a professor who still spends time in libraries, I have *never* not encountered a book other than the one for which I was searching that I thought I would have to read at some point. The physical presence of the unexpected is crucial to pushing scholarship to ever more comprehensive scope.

Of course, the library is not simply a collection of books anymore. Sadly, it has grown to include the abominable “e-book,” but it has also expanded its role (and the work of librarians) from cataloguing and organizing a physical collection to helping people negotiate and think critically about information in cyberspace. Hence, librarians can help to counter-act the uncritical use of tools like Google (which are of course useful, provided that they are understood and used effectively and treated like the screwdrivers they are and not the mind of God). Moreover, libraries today are also one of the few places those without the financial resources to own home computers, pay for high speed internet, or afford a data plan for their phone can access the Internet. Closing libraries- as with closing other public institutions- is thus another front in the war on the poor.

So once again we find the most glaring hypocrisy at work in our public discourse. Politicians never cease singing peans to the supreme importance of education at the same time as they defund or underfund or undermine it. Which is, of course, madness, since the humanity of the human project lies not in the transmission of DNA (which is but a material condition) but in the critical appropriation, development, and transformation of the values and ideas that regulate our societies and which determine the extent to which the lives of each are meaningful and good. If we lack access to alternatives, if we are unaware of historical differences, if we are cut off from the magnificence of human literary creativity, if we cannot connect with the wider world, then challenging oppressive conditions of social life is all the more difficult. Attacks on libraries, whatever forms they take, are thus attacks on the ability of people to access the richness of the intellectual and artistic heritage of human beings as well as to find silences that call out for new voices. This attack is thus directed against the future development of that heritage itself. Those are the real stakes of budget cuts.

AGAINST “INNOVATION”

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Is there a more ubiquitous category mistake (Gilbert Ryle) today than that involved in the use of the term “innovation?” Categories are fundamental concepts which do not name things but instead different modes of understanding reality. “Tree” names a type of plant. There is an actual tree in my backyard, and the seed it produces is a potential tree (if it takes root it will become an actual tree). If we confused the potential tree with the actual tree, we would be making a category mistake. We might understand what a tree is, but not the difference between potentiality and actuality.

In the case of “innovation” the term is merely descriptive but is constantly used in a normative sense which makes no sense, unless further qualified. Descriptive terms simply assert the way things are or name the things of the world. Take for example the statement: “The internal combustion engine was an innovation in transportation.” The term “innovation” refers to a novel feature of reality, typically created by human thought and action. As a descriptive term it says nothing about whether the innovation was good or bad, but only that at time t the innovation did not exist and at time $t1$ it did. However, if we look carefully at the way in which the term is used in the media, by government officials, and business leaders, it becomes clear that when they use the term normative content is smuggled in: the change in question is assumed good just because it is a change, when in fact the goodness or badness is in fact still in question. The normative content is illegitimate because change is not necessarily good *just because it introduces novelty*. A moment’s reflection makes it clear that *the new* and *the good* are conceptually and ontologically distinct (that x is new does not entail that x is good). Hence to argue as if everything that is “innovative” is good, i.e., better than the thing it changes or replaces, is to commit a category mistake.

Let us take two obvious examples to illustrate the point before coming back to the real social implications of the confusion. Plutonium is amongst the most toxic substances in the known universe. One could imagine scientists devising an innovative method for vaporizing it and disseminating it throughout the entire atmosphere, thereby poisoning everything that breaths. That would be an innovation, but it is hard to see it as in anyway good. Perhaps one objects that the example is too hyperbolic in its negative implications. Granted. Let us take a more mundane example, the size of a smartphone. Having run out of qualitatively new technical capacities for the time being, smartphone manufacturers have been reduced to touting merely quantitative alterations as “innovations” worth opening your wallet to acquire. But is a marginally bigger or smaller phone really better in some important way? The answer depends upon information that the term “innovation” alone cannot capture. We have to know what the device is for before we can decide whether the given innovation is good. An innovation is good only to the extent, a) it enables a thing to better accomplish its purpose, and b) that purpose is itself essential to the health, well-being, and meaningful life-activity of human beings.

The problem should now be clear. When a descriptive term is confused with a normative term, then its uncritical adoption commits people to accepting the merely different as good. When we accept something as good we validate it as a goal to which we should aspire. So, when politicians and business people talk about the need for innovation, they are asserting that whatever changes governments or businesses introduce that can be sold as innovative are good, and we should not only accept them, but think of ourselves as “change agents” whose goal in life should be to “innovate” as well, in all spheres of life, *just because contemporary socio-economic dynamics demand it*. However, without critical

reflection on the purpose of the processes and things we aim to change, and especially on our own (human) purposes and what sorts of social institutions support and what sorts undermine them, we can in no sense ensure that we are making things *better* just because we are making things *different*.

Let us take a concrete example to better explain my concern. In a recent series of articles in *The Toronto Star*, Don Tapscott argued that Ontario's universities need to innovate in order to stay relevant to a new generation of students: "If there is one institution due for [innovation](#), it's the university. It's time for a deep debate on how universities function in a networked society. The centuries-old model of learning still offered by many big universities doesn't work any more, especially for students who have [grown up digital](#)." I will come back to the substantive claims he makes about teaching methods and students in a moment. First, notice the category mistake. Tapscott clearly means that universities cannot fulfill their function unless they change (innovate). Innovation is identified with the better and stasis with the worse. But before we can accept that equation we must know what universities are for, what it is they are actually doing, and where, in what they are actually doing, they are failing (and where succeeding) to fulfill the purposes they serve. There may indeed be changes that need to be made in some areas of university life and others may be perfectly fine. But blanket statements of the form "universities need to innovate" clearly confuse a mere change with "better fulfillment of the function," because "innovate" is being used in a normative sense to imply that change as such is good.

To better understand the specific and the general social problem involved with this confusion let us examine Tapscott's argument in more detail. He argues that universities fail to take advantage of the full possibilities that digital communication technologies provide for collaborative learning, that they remain wed to hierarchical pedagogical styles (especially the lecture), and that their insistence on testing the knowledge of students treated as abstract individuals is in tension with the collaborative learning today's students have grown up with on social media.

On empirical grounds much of what Tapscott argues is simply false. No area of university life (save buildings and administrative positions) has received as much funding as teaching and learning centres. For the past decade North American universities have dedicated themselves to trying to understand better what makes for an effective learning environment, what best pedagogical practices are, how to assess effective teaching, and how to help professors value and improve their teaching capacities. Moreover, there have been massive investments in technology (smartrooms, campus-wide WiFi, software platforms for student interaction...), on-line course delivery, digitization of libraries and archives, open source journals, and more overt collaboration between the campus and the community. If anything is archaic, it is Tapscott's understanding of teaching and learning in the twenty-first century university.

The more important question remains to be asked: has any of this investment improved the teaching mission of the university, and is technological change (innovation) identical (as Tapscott implies) to effective learning? The answers here are "of course" and "of course not." Tapscott complains that professors are still lecturing, some even (heaven forbid!) reading notes, instead of taking advantage of technological possibilities for collaborative learning that better fit with students' experience of interaction through social media. The implied disjunct: either "traditional" lectures or on-line collaboration is false. The use of lectures for one purpose does not rule out the use of new media for others. Beyond the fallacious false dichotomy is the absurd implication that human beings interacting in shared physical space (the lecture) reduces students to passivity while only virtual interaction in cyberspace counts as active learning.

Lectures— good lectures, in any case— are not one way transmissions of information to a passive audience. To be effective they must be interactive. For the interaction to be effective, however, students must develop an understanding not only the meanings of the ideas at issue, but the historical context of their emergence and the purposes to which they were put. These are not just facts that can be gleaned from a book or website: proper explanation requires expertise, and that is the reason the professor is there. An effective lecture is a dialectic in the original sense: a dialogue that develops through opposed perspectives on a shared subject matter: the effective lecturer does not transmit information but explains so as to engage the interest and critical capacities of the students such that they become the main drivers of the subsequent development of the conversation. The shared co-presence is essential: the tension and challenge of face to face interaction is essential for learning (development of cognitive capacities to more comprehensive scope and not just information acquisition).

The point: “old” techniques like lectures are not worse because they are old and new technologies like on-line networks are not better because they are new. Good and bad, better and worse in education, as in all fundamentally important social practices and institutions, is determined by whether and to what extent the technique and the technology satisfy the human needs that bring people together in the institution in the first place. It would be as contrary to the realization of essential human purposes to forbid old techniques that have proven effective for millennia as to ban the introduction of new technologies that open up new forms of satisfying the needs that the realization of the purposes presupposes.

In order to have a rational conversation about how best to satisfy human needs, it is necessary to avoid the category mistake of confusing the novel with the good. The novel might be good, but it might also be bad, while an old practice or technique might be good and its elimination bad. But the category mistake is no mere logical error. Behind the conceptual confusion lies social and economic interest. The supporters of innovations always have something to sell: the innovation. In order to cure the conceptual problem the self-interest behind the sales pitch needs to be exposed in all cases.

THERE'S NO APP FOR THAT

Originally Posted February 23, 2016

Faced with the prospect of being left by his girlfriend, Rasheed Amini, a physicist working at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, worked out a mathematical proof of why she should stay with him. (Toronto Star, Sunday, February 14th, 2016, p. A1). There is an app for everything else, why not one that takes all the fun out of fighting with your partner: when times are tough, turn to the spread sheet.

On one level Amini's app is certainly *au courant*, yet another attempt to marshal computing power to discover patterns which, when modeled and used to predict outcomes, can unburden us from decisions which, when not made in light of "the data," can be messy. On another level, however, Amini is not really doing anything new. Both arranged marriages and bad poetry have tried to eliminate chance and work from love, the former by subordinating the impetuosity of youth to the wisdom of aged command and the latter by reducing love to list of properties ("How do I love thee, let me count the ways" Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnet 43). All three commit the same mistake of reducing feelings (love, happiness) to end states (family honour, economic advantage, desirable properties) the attainment of which can be guaranteed by following a mechanical pathway. They confuse knowing what the value of the feeling is with providing an *account* of some of its properties.

One does not have to give into any mysticism of romantic love to object to all three. Love may not be ineffable, but that does not mean that it is explicable by lists or mathematical functions. As with every element of human emotional life and motivation, the experience of love can only be understood in terms of the commitments and desires it provokes in us as specific individuals and the precise ways in which these are qualitatively *different* from closely related but distinct feelings (liking someone, lusting after them, etc). It is by paying attention to the nuance and the specificity, *searching* for the words to capture the *uniqueness* of the feelings (as good poetry does), that we understand love, and any other human emotion. We would destroy the qualitative richness of human experience—the very substance of lives worth living— if we reduce it to those aspects of it that can be listed or modeled.

Here is the real problem with Amini's and all related attempts to model emotional life so as to guarantee the attainment of some purportedly desirable end-state (happiness, etc). It is not that they simply cannot work because there is something essentially unknowable about the "passions of the soul." Rather, they depend upon reducing those passions to their quantifiable elements only: the predictive devices work, in their own terms, but their own terms are so one-dimensional that any victory over messy uncertainty is pyrrhic. If we equate love with happiness and cash out happiness as a set of typical social outcomes (nice house/career/kids/sexual relations within the statistical norm/enjoying time together/ etc...) then it is certainly possible to write a computer program that will predict whether two people will likely attain those outcomes. However, as divorce rates between couples "who *seemed* so happy" prove, it is quite possible to have all the *external trappings* of happiness, and be miserable "inside." It is the inside that matters, and it is the inside that cannot be modeled. It can be *understood*, but only by paying attention to what is unrepeatable, what is unique, what is most *you*. Love is the attunement of the lover to the unique identity of the beloved, not a set of generic properties instantiated in the individual. The ubiquity of the question: "How can you love him/her" is all the proof we need that its ways are not subject to understanding through observation of external properties.

The uniqueness of our identity means that not only is there is no formula to making one another happy, happiness is not the truth of love. Much of life does not make us happy, and nor should it, and love

must persist through these moments (in pain we need love most of all, a truth which no love-as-happiness predictor is going to be able to capture).

In the rush to turn decisions over to apps which function by discovering patterns in behaviour, the real risk is that we begin to edit our identities and our decisions according to what the app is capable of modelling. La Mettrie was wrong when, in 1752, he argued that man *is* a machine. But he was not wrong to point out that there are many mechanical dimensions to life, only to ignore all the non-mechanical dimensions of the same phenomena. The computer has carried forward this same lamentable human propensity for turning parts into wholes, metaphors into literal meanings. The partisans of “big data” still think of humans as machines, digital machines, which can *program themselves for optimal success*. Since they treat the outcome as given (happiness), they think they can guarantee a life worth living, if only they set the value of the inputs correctly.

What is missing here is not only valorization of the effort which the attainment of any worthwhile outcome requires, but, more importantly, reflection upon the meaning and value of the ends of decisions. If we take happiness to be some quantifiable end state whose attainment can be modeled statistically, then a program that we ask to predict happiness will make predictions for us. And if we allow ourselves to be programmed by the program, we can then start making the decisions that are statistically correlated with the quantified definition of happiness.

And then what? A prediction of my own: we will not be any happier than before, not because there are not statistical correlations to draw between behaviours and outcomes, but because happiness is not something that can be modeled in the same way as a weather system. Since it necessarily involves evaluative interpretation of particular and unique lives (yours, mine), there is an irreducibly subjective and particular (i.e., not modelable without loss of that which was to be modeled) element to happiness. But the more important point is that happiness is not the only end of a meaningful and good life, and part of what any reflection on happiness must include is a reflection on the proper place and scope of happiness in a life like ours: uncertain, with competing demands, ambivalent desires, conflicting goals, the need to make ultimately unrevisable choices.

If you try to manage this complexity by assigning weights so as to be able to include them in a program, you have already misunderstood the issue. Take ambivalence, the most human of all feelings. When we are ambivalent, we want one thing, and we want its opposite. Mathematically, the two would cancel, and so an ambivalent desire would actually appear as zero (want = +1 want the opposite = -1 = 0). Yet this result is the very opposite of what ambivalence actually is in life: a tension that pulls us in opposite ways at once with equal force.

We learn to deal with ambivalence by tormenting ourselves and playing over different scenarios and making decisions— often, if life is fully lived, the wrong one, from which we learn, but which we had to choose in order to learn. In order to live fully, humans have to make mistakes. To rob someone of the mistake is to cheat them out of an essential element of life. Sparing people the mistakes of ambivalence is thus not helping them live a better life, it is emptying life of the most powerful and valuable experiences. Life needs tears and anger because both let us know that we are alive as embodied, committed, engaged, passionate beings making decisions under conditions of uncertainty. If a program could spare us tears and anger it should be avoided for precisely that reason: in sparing us both, it spares us of life. That which is satisfying to a program (efficient attainment of the outcome) is death to a thinking and feeling individual, who must learn for him or herself through experience what the right decision will be (there being no way to predict in advance whether any choice will produce happiness and whether this happiness proves ultimately worthwhile).

In making these decisions we are not completely blind— literature and philosophy are both repositories of qualitative insights into the human condition. Unlike the hoped for predictive models, they do not try to eliminate the messiness, but learn from it that in essential dimensions of human experience certainty is the enemy of meaning and life-value. Ask yourself whether you could value a life that was nothing but the predictable execution of a routine. By definition, such a life would exclude our decisions making any difference to outcomes. A life in which our decisions have no causal efficacy is unfree. Hence, the logical implication of the search for algorithmic solutions to existential problems is the elimination of freedom from human affairs.

My argument is taking a long time to get to the main point: models are useful solutions to problems that involve patterns generated by inanimate matter, or problems of human interaction in domains of life that have purely instrumental value (traffic flows, for example) but for all problems that concern motivation, mutualistic relationship and interaction, and political goals, conflict, and structure, there is no app that can solve our problems. Since there is no quantitative model, our motivations, our relationships, and our political problems need to be worked out and solved on the basis of interpretative understanding of what life is and can be, what the value of other people in our lives is going to be, and how we can arrive at institutional structures that are as free of destructive conflict as possible.

I do not want to pose solutions to these problems here, but instead conclude that because the most essential problems in life (the one's that no person can avoid, no matter what historical period they live in or what culture they come from), are not soluble through the mechanical application of an algorithm, literature, philosophy, and history must always have a place in any credible education system. And so when we hear that universities (and even secondary and primary schools) need to prepare students for “the jobs of the future,” those of us who toil lovingly in the jobs of the past (as poets, literary critics, philosophers, and historians) need to stand up and say to the young:

“Emancipate yourselves from the republic of fear that politicians and business people have tried to trap you in, so as to determine your choices for you.

Not even engineers are always engineers: if they are at all reflective they too have to pose questions about the meaning and value of their work, and answer them in non-engineering terms (the value of a structural engineer's work is not measurable by its load bearing capacity, since the work as vocation does not bear any load). The most pressing philosophical problems are at the same time the most pressing practical problems of our age: cultural difference, civil war, religious belief versus secularism, the possibility of artificial intelligence, the future of art, the status of democracy, the best economic system, the meaning of love and happiness (and also hate and sorrow), the meaning of human freedom. There are no mechanical solutions to these problems, but all require attending to experience, your own, and the accumulated wisdom of past ages of all cultures, the ability to detect contradictions between principle and practice and principle and stated goals, to discover hidden agendas, private interests masquerading as the general, but also the ability to see underlying shared interests and commonalities, the ability to make an argument without ad hominem attack, and the ability to accept criticism without thinking your person is under attack.

Laugh when they call these “soft skills,” and rejoin: “what important human problem can be solved without them, and what aspect of the human project (to build a world in which each person who is born into it finds a place to freely contribute to its further unfolding) can be advanced if we were to close off the institutional time and space required to develop them?”

WHAT IS CALLED CRITICAL THINKING?

Originally Posted December 17, 2015

On December 7th, 2015 the Ontario Ministry of Education released [a report](#) detailing what it heard during its year long consultation with university educators and administrators regarding planned changes to the province's university funding formula. The report does not make recommendations, but it does telegraph the government's position that any new funding formula be tied to measurable outcomes. This position is not new, and I do not want to concentrate on the general problems raised by the belief that everything of value in an education is subject to quantifiable measure. That which I would like to examine is the suggestion- repeated three times in the report- that one key outcome of a quality education is the development of "critical thinking skills." The problem, as the report notes, is that there is no agreed upon method to measure the development of these skills:

Many jurisdictions are trying to find ways to measure learning outcomes – an attempt to capture growth in cognitive abilities that should reasonably be expected to occur as a result of an undergraduate education. Problem solving, critical thinking, and communication are all higher-order thinking skills that are generally agreed to be core to an undergraduate experience, yet these are not transparently or consistently measured, assessed, or validated across the system.(p. 38)

Before we can agree on how the development of critical thinking skills can be measured, there needs to be some agreement on what "critical thinking" is. The report makes no effort to define the term. Hence my interest here is not to propose a metric, but to answer two questions: what is *critical* thinking, and do all disciplines equally cultivate it.

Let us start with the second question. One danger of tying funding to outcomes and defining outcomes in terms of generic skills purportedly subject to definitive quantitative measure is that in an effort to protect their funding, all disciplines will be forced to engage in bad faith re-descriptions of themselves in terms of whatever buzz-word the government has latched on to as its preferred criterion of quality. If "critical thinking" catches on and funding becomes tied to demonstrating that each discipline cultivates it, then you can be certain that Chemistry, Business Administration, and every other academic department will start producing arguments that purport to show how they teach critical thinking skills. They will not define "critical thinking," but instead simply repeat what they have always already done– teach chemistry, etc., but call what they are doing critical thinking.

I think that there is a good faith sense in which any department can teach critical thinking. However, before we can understand what that sense is, we must turn to the first question and try to come up with a working definition of critical thinking.

Let us begin by treating each element of the compound term "critical thinking" separately. In colloquial language to be "critical" means to point out flaws in the object of criticism. If it is possible to point out flaws in the object of criticism, then it must be the case that the object is subject to better or worse states. Criticism is thus an evaluation that demonstrates the ways a given object of thought falls short of whatever criteria of excellence properly applies to it. Is critical thinking therefore *nothing but* the application of given standards to given objects?

No. it is not, and in order to understand why not, we must turn to the second term: thinking. What does it mean to "think" about an object? First, if we think about objects, it is clear that thinking and the object

of thought are distinct. Thinking is, therefore, in the most general sense, the *subjection* of the objects of thought to concepts. This subjection is not random or arbitrary: when we think about a given object, we are trying to discover something about it: what elements it is made of, or what categories of classification apply to it, what its mass is, etc. An innumerable number of empirical questions can be asked of any object, and it is by various types of empirical thinking that these questions can be answered.

However, as our analysis of “critical” revealed, not all questions are descriptive or empirical. There are also evaluative questions. If a descriptive question asks (in general) “what is x,” an evaluative or critical question asks “what is a good x and is y a good example?” Hence, critical thinking is in the most general sense the subjection of objective reality to evaluative (critical) appraisal. Here we find a role for all disciplines to teach critical thinking. Rather than just teach students to follow the rules of the discipline, teaching that develops critical thinking skills must enable students to evaluate the content and history of the discipline and subject its methods to critical appraisal. By teaching students to think critically about their discipline their capacity to think beyond the established consensus in the field is enabled: they will be able argue about why theory x is a good theory, and not just that it asserts a,b, and c.

Despite the spirit of positivism that still too often rules discussions of the value of higher education, the objects of thought are not limited to the objects of the empirical disciplines. Thinking can become its own object, not (as in psychology) as a function of brain operations, but as the defining human practice of trying to understand our world as a meaningful whole. Philosophy is the discipline that studies thought in this sense. The most fundamental form of critical thinking is the critical evaluation of thought itself: what is good thinking? The philosophical understanding of critical thinking will be (as it was in the empirical disciplines) evaluative, but its object of evaluation will be universal in a way in which the empirical disciplines cannot be.

The first point to note is that when we approach thinking as practice of understanding our world as a meaningful whole, the strict distinction between thought and world breaks down. A “thing” may be distinct from the thought of the thing, but “meaning” is a creature of human reality alone. When we think about the meaning of objects we cannot radically divorce the reality of the object from the concepts that we apply to it, concepts which are not thought up *ex nihilo* but develop out of human historical experience. When we think about things philosophically, it becomes apparent that thinking itself changes reality, converting it from a mere set of givens to a set of problems or questions that concern the *reasons* why we confront one reality and not others and whether the reality that we inhabit is the best reality possible. Philosophy thus allows a gap to open between the reality that is given, alternative realities that are possible, and thus the question of which reality, the given or the possible, is better.

The fundamental problem of philosophical critical thinking is, therefore, the problem of the criteria by which given possibilities for living can be evaluated: why is one form of life better than another form of life? Again, we cannot answer this question in abstraction from the systems under which people have actually lived. Hence, an important element of critical thinking in the philosophical sense is understanding that human life has a history. No past form of life proved permanent, and if no past form of life proved permanent, then none (in their details) were natural or necessary. Still, although no particular way of life has proven natural or necessary, they may share some common features that help us discover the criteria of better and worse living in general.

The idea that there are objective criteria according to which better and worse ways of living can be determined has been subject to skeptical criticism since ancient times and the work of Sextus Empiricus. However successful skepticism has been in destroying naive illusions and one-sided theories of truth, there is always one reality which no skeptic has been able to undermine, and that is that human beings are (as are all life forms) vulnerable to external threats to their life. There is therefore an objective basis to distinguish better and worse ways of living. Those ways of living which protect us from objective threats to our existence are better than those which do not. As threats can be both natural and social, the critical judgement applies to all human activity and organization: the better way to live is to ensure that all are protected from the natural and social threats to their life and well-being (leaving open the question for now about the meaning of “well-being.”)

Societies can both protect well-being (for some, the ruling groups and those who unquestioningly serve them) and damage the life and well-being of other groups (who are subordinate and meant only to serve, and who are attacked if they cease to comply). As philosophy makes inquiries into the principles that governed different ways of living, it is impossible not to notice that in all cases of subordination and servitude, the subordinate groups eventually become conscious of their subordination, organize against it, and articulate a set of more comprehensive principles for life-organization which demand that their interest be included in the circle of interests recognized and protected by society. And from this insight comes the basic criterion of better and worse lives: those forms of life are better that “coherently include” the satisfaction of the life-interest of everyone, now and into the open-ended future.(McMurtry, *The Value of All Values*). In every case of real growth of understanding, what happens is that a new, comprehensive, more inclusive system of thought replaces an older system reduced to the status of legitimating the power of ruling (social, scientific, etc) groups.

Since human life is complex and multidimensional, many disciplines can contribute to the “coherent inclusivity” of better forms of life. To cite just one example recently in the news, the science of climate change has helped promote a growing global consensus (at least in theory) against the dangers of over-consumption of fossil fuels. However, the critical value of the empirical disciplines depends upon their insights being integrated into an overall criticism of the systematic blocks to the formation of a society that coherently includes and satisfies everyone’s fundamental life-interest. Hence, philosophical critical thinking remains basic and foundational to the critical thinking other disciplines might cultivate. All contributions are valuable, but philosophy’s is essential because only philosophy can integrate distinct insights into an overall criticism and alternative.

Thus, in its philosophical sense, critical thinking is thinking that exposes the contradiction between established systems of thought and the steps that would have to be taken to improve the conditions of life and the goodness of life itself. How to measure the growth of critical thinking is a practical question which concerns the degree to which the social commitment to the satisfaction of life-interests is advanced by the solution to pressing social problems. Universities can contribute to this advance to the extent that disciplines are allowed to cultivate the desire to pursue the truth free from government and market demands to produce commodifiable research. In order to do this work the real funding problem must be solved: not absence of bureaucratic-generic measures, but a steady decline in public investment in the space and time necessary to inquire into (and teach about) social life, its natural foundations, the problems current social organization poses, and the alternatives that can make life better in the terms defined above.

UNIVERSITIES AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DISCIPLINARY TRADITIONS

Originally Posted January 15, 2016

In “[What is Called Critical Thinking](#)” I promised to provide a comprehensive analysis of [Focus on Outcomes, Centre on Students](#). The document provides an overview of submissions made to the government’s consultations on the future of Ontario’s university funding model. My reading has made it apparent that because it is an overview of positions articulated in the consultations on which it does not itself take a position, it does not lend itself to the sort of analysis I initially promised to provide. A better approach seems to be to identify those sites where it appears that the government is telegraphing its position and examine those as potential trouble spots for academic freedom and institutional independence of centralizing political and economic agendas. Thus, rather than a single overarching analysis and critique, I will develop specific arguments to address areas of concern as I discover them through careful reading of the document. Today I focus on the implications the epigraph to the document might have for the future of discipline-based teaching and research at Ontario universities. The epigraph reads:

The province no longer funds “universities” per se.
It funds quantifiable outcome(s) or achievement(s) it
wants from universities for the betterment of the public
good. The things to be measured and applied to
determining funding shares must be the outcomes that
matter to Ontario. In the past, this has been enrolment
growth. Today, as identified in government policy and
consultation papers, they are measures of “quality”
and “improving the student experience”.

Design Questions: Funding Models for Ontario

(Toronto: Higher

Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2015), p. 2.

The initially puzzling opening line “The province no longer funds universities per se” is HEQCO’s interpretation of the introduction two years ago of “Strategic Mandate Agreements” (SMA) between the province and Ontario universities. The SMA’s detail for the province the institutional strengths of particular universities and explain how provincial finding will be used to support these strengths. The SMAs were launched in response to an [earlier report](#) on the need for Ontario universities to differentiate

themselves from each other. At present, (at least judging from my own institution, the University of Windsor) the SMA's have not had any noticeable effect on teaching and research in departments and disciplines. The real impact will be felt through hiring priorities, as those areas designated an institutional strength will be able to hire, while those which are not will face a more uncertain future. However, at present the real problem is not explicit threats to disciplinary integrity and autonomy, but old fashioned underfunding of everyone, a problem for which current provincial policy bears a great deal of responsibility.

Nevertheless, if we read between the lines of the epigraph, and connect what is implied with what has been made explicit in other documents (like the differentiation strategy paper) we can detect looming threats to the traditional structure of universities as institutions organized around more or less self-governing disciplines. "Outcomes" "student experience" and "quality are codes words, as I have [demonstrated before](#), for "subordinating the acquisition of disciplinary-based knowledge to labour-market demand." Whenever student experience and quality are invoked in these sorts of documents they are never defined, save in terms of providing students with the generic skills that they will need to find paid employment.

The still-growing institutional and governmental push of disciplines towards centrally-managed and imposed learning outcomes is explicitly defended as an attack on archaic, elitist discipline-centred and specific knowledge in favour of generic skills-based approach to education which purportedly better prepares students for the "real world." For example, [a document](#) that my institution's Centre for Teaching and Learning directs faculty to for an explanation of learning outcomes argues that

there is no question that the learning outcomes approach to developing curriculum does not begin with the question "what does my discipline traditionally teach at this level?" Most teachers consider this question as part of their strategy for determining curriculum. They also ask "will this curriculum adequately prepare students for subsequent courses in the discipline?" and faculty in so-called sending institutions must also ask "will this curriculum be acceptable to the receiving institutions?"

The learning outcomes approach does suggest a different leading question: "what do students need to know and be able to do after they graduate (from this course, from this program, from the university...)" In directing our attention to what students will ultimately do with the knowledge and abilities they acquire, the learning outcomes approach does ask us to look beyond the strict boundaries of disciplinary tradition and demands.

The paper does not reject the validity or importance of disciplinary traditions (although when outcomes are discussed in policy papers rather than academic papers the value of the disciplines is typically not recognized). Rather, it cashes out their importance as vehicles for the teaching of these generic skills, whose value in turn is understood as an instrument of life-long-learning and successful job hunting. Harvey Weingarten, the current head of HECQO argues, in this regard, that the priority for Ontario universities has to be the improvement of the teaching of these generic labour market skills:

Learning outcomes assessment is an exercise in continuous quality improvement, not punishment — a way of improving education, a way of identifying what is working and where remediation is needed.

measuring critical learning outcomes, our postsecondary institutions would clearly identify areas for remediation and unambiguously document their value-added impact: the acquisition of these core skills that underlie professional and personal success. The key measure is not the absolute level of these skills; one expects the performance of students in different institutions to vary depending on the institution's admission policies, target populations and other variables. The critical measure is the change in the skill sets of students from the time they enter the institution to the time they leave.

It is distressing to see the head of the Higher Education *Quality Council* reduce the value of education to a series of business press cliches. Worse, he commits a category mistake of the highest order and fails completely to see it, confusing the increase in money value of a non-living commodity with the development of human talent and potentialities. Someone who is supposed to have the best interest of students at heart blithely reduces them to mere things, objects to which (money) value will be added, as cars add money value to the steel and rubber from which they are built.

My position is, unsurprisingly, the opposite. Without in anyway being arrogantly dismissive of students' practical concerns for their future, or reject completely the existence or value of generic intellectual skills (obviously, literacy and numeracy etc., are essential across the board) I want to argue that the life-value of discipline-based knowledge derives from the cultivation of specific "ways of knowing" which then connect in specific ways to the general demands of understand and improving the "real world."

The value for students of discipline-based knowing is the development of specific methods of thinking, interpretation, and criticism which enable them to understand specific aspects of a complex world which, when brought together, contribute to a comprehensive understanding of that world and the ways in which its organization both enables and impedes the realization of human potential.

It is true that this life-value is often hidden because the organization of knowledge along disciplinary lines can be elitist and self-serving as well as overly specialized. The careerist insularity of some defenders of institutional status quo open the door to system-serving critics of the traditional organization of universities. Insularity and specialization is particularly problematic in a discipline like philosophy, whose life must go beyond jargon and technique to always connect with the abiding and universal problems of human life (truth, freedom, value, meaning) understood historically but engaged on the concrete terrain of life as it is lived today. It is true that disciplines can become ways of keeping out the non-expert, distancing knowledge from everyday life, and treating students as submissive apprentices rather than active participants in the transmission and elaboration of knowledge. A [recent intervention](#) by two philosophy professors in the New York Times is right to argue that:

Before its migration to the university, philosophy had never had a central home. Philosophers could be found anywhere — serving as diplomats, living off pensions, grinding lenses, as well as within a university. Afterward, if they were "serious" thinkers, the expectation was that philosophers would inhabit the research university. Against the inclinations of Socrates, philosophers became experts like other disciplinary specialists. This occurred even as they taught their students the virtues of Socratic wisdom, which highlights the role of the philosopher as the non-expert, the questioner, the gadfly.

However, we must be careful before we dismiss completely the importance of disciplinary knowledge, and the university as an institution that provides and protects the time and space necessary for its cultivation, transmission, and further development. Philosophy can be cut off from life when it is institutionalized. On the other hand, its institutionalization protects it (especially its critical expressions) from market forces which it would have to serve completely were there no university institution in which it can be pursued (more or less) without need to justify itself in money-value terms. Without the time and space the university provides, philosophers would have to find a market for their ideas, which means that they would have to be marketed, which would mean that heterodox positions—those for which few would pay— would be far more threatened than they are now.

It is not only philosophical thought that would be threatened. Non-commercial, basic research as well as science which exposes the material irrationality of the current model of “economic growth,” (for example, climate science which has proven the link between capitalist industrialism and life-threatening climate change), would be far more exposed to political censure and silencing if it found no home in disciplinary traditions protected by the force of academic freedom (which is not a legal principle but protected only by University by-laws and faculty association collective agreements).

Disciplines did not arise just because of some desire to “discipline” knowledge in the Foucauldian sense of the term (to link knowledge with power over subject matter and human subjects). That form of discipline is real, but knowledge has also become specialized and organized around disciplines because diversity and complexity in the object of knowledge forced the differentiation. In the Middle Ages, natural science was a species of philosophy- natural philosophy— and remained such until the world-shattering discoveries of Galileo and Newton. From the seventeenth century on, natural science has become separated off from philosophy, and particular sciences from one another, because new insights into the forces and elements of the natural world have forced this specialization. If we want a comprehensive understanding of how the natural world works, then the distinct scientific disciplines are essential to building that picture in an open process free (as far as possible) from the exercise of repressive political and economic power.

Of course, understanding how nature works is not the only object of human inquiry. Human beings also have to understand how their own bodies work (hence the need for medicine and nursing as practical arts and sciences of health). Moreover, human beings are not just organisms, but social-organic beings. Hence, there is also the need for social scientific work of all sorts (sociology and allied disciplines, economics, political science, and so forth). We also need to inquire into the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of human life (literature and literary criticism, art history, etc., as well as continue to elaborate them through the arts themselves). Finally, we need a discipline whose province it is to search for unifying principles of meaning and value that make life as a whole worthwhile and good (at least potentially) and which, if uncovered, explain the universal purpose of all the other particular forms of research— not just to produce knowledge for its own sake but to contribute concretely to securing the natural and social conditions of human (and other sentient life) flourishing. In order to make these contributions, philosophy and every other discipline must be free to cultivate their specific methodological procedures and conceptual structures (as well as conduct freely the intra-disciplinary

arguments about the strengths, blind-spots, contradictions, exclusions, etc., of different methodologies and conceptual structures and build organic, inter-disciplinary links and cross-fertilizations). Out of those arguments and interactions come more comprehensive and coherent understanding, and out of more comprehensive and coherent understanding comes the practical contributions to good human lives all the particular disciplines ultimately aspire to make.

If the new funding formula prioritizes generic skills and pushes specific disciplines in the direction of cultivating them, *to the exclusion of transmitting disciplinary traditions and histories for the sake of creating more comprehensive and coherent methods specific to each discipline*, the result will not be better service to “the public good,” but better service to labour markets, with no reflection upon whether the jobs on offer are adequate to students demands not only for a pay cheque, but meaningful, non-alienated, life-valuable labour. Moreover, with no institutional protection of the time and space for discipline specific work, the particular problems current models of social organization will escape scrutiny as everyone is pushed into the manufacture of compliant workers rather than critically minded scientists, philosophers, sociologists; or poets, and artists whose works remind us of the real power and beauty of human creativity, or doctors and nurses capable of understanding the social causes of morbidity and understand how to attend to the ill as human beings.

Of course, it is easy to point out (and it should always be pointed out) that disciplinary knowledge can easily become detached from serving more universal life-values, that departments can be dogmatic and closed and exclusionary and all manner of other problems I leave it to readers to think through. The existence of those problems is not an argument to abolish the teaching of discipline-specific traditions of content and thought, but to criticize these exclusions etc. as barrier to comprehensive and coherent understanding.

TEN THESES IN SUPPORT OF TEACHING AND AGAINST LEARNING OUTCOMES

Originally Posted March 6, 2016

1. Teaching at the university level is not a practice of communicating or transferring information but awakening in students a desire to think by revealing to them the questionability of things. The desire to think is awakened in students if the teacher is able to reveal the importance of the discipline as a way of exposing to question established “solutions” to fundamental problems of human experience, thought, activity, relationship, and organization. Teaching does not instruct or transmit information, it embodies and exemplifies the commitment to thinking.
2. True teaching is thus a practice, a performance of cognitive freedom which awakens in students a sense of their own cognitive freedom. Both are rooted in the most remarkable power of the brain: not to simulate, not to sense, not to tabulate, not to infer, but to co-constitute the objective world of which it is an active part. In thinking we do not just passively register the world, we transform it by making it the object of thought, i.e., an object that can be questioned and changed. To think is thus to cancel the alien objectivity of the world and to become a subject, an active force helping to shape the order of things.
3. All successful teaching therefore results in students who love to think and never stop thinking for the rest of their lives. This result is very different from mastering a certain body of knowledge or learning to apply certain rules to well-defined situations. To love to think is identical to feel and be moved by the need to question: the given structure of knowledge in the discipline, its application to the problem-domain of human life that the discipline ranges over, the overarching structures of human social life within which the discipline or subject matter has its place, and the overall problems of life as a mortal, finite being. To love to think means to remain alive to the questionability of things in all these domains.
4. Thus, the person who loves to think is critically minded. The critically minded person is not an undisciplined skeptic, but one who can detect contradictions between principle and practice, and between principles and the values to which they purportedly lead as means. Critical thinking is not the ability to solve problems within the established parameters of social, economic, political, aesthetic, and intellectual-scientific life. Change is impossible if all that people can do is apply the given rules mindlessly. If the problem lies with the established rules (and fundamental problems in any field always concern the established rules), then confining critical thinking to “problem solving” always serves the *status quo* (i.e., repeats the cause of the problem as the solution).
5. Every class in which the love of thinking is cultivated must be a class in which the interaction between teacher and students lives through the collective effort to open to question a purportedly settled issue, to see how these solutions came to be, what alternatives they excluded, and what alternatives might be better (as well as what constitutes a “better” solution). Of course, learning to love to think is always developed in relation to a specific subject-matter and definite methodologies. However, these elements of learning are always means to the real end: awakening and cultivating the love of thinking. Learning outcomes confuse the ends (thinking) with the means (content and skills) and set out to measure how well the students are mastering the content and the methods.
6. Learning outcomes are justified as proof of a new concern within the university with the quality of teaching and student learning. In reality, they are part of a conservative drift in higher education towards skill-programming and away from cultivation of cognitive freedom and love of thinking. Ironically, the

passive, consumeristic attitude that learning outcomes encourage in students works against students becoming motivated to learn even the skills and the information that the learning outcomes prioritize.

7. While they are often sold to faculty as means to improve teaching and better serve the interests of students, what they in fact achieve is a narrowing of the scope and aims of classroom interaction to skilling and information transfer. (See further, Furedi, Frank. (2012). "[The Unhappiness Principle](#)," Times Literary Supplement, November 29th, 2012; Stefan Collini, [Who Are the Spongers Now?](#) London Review of Books, Vol. 38, No.2, January 21, 2016). Skills and information acquisition (that which the learning outcomes try to specify and enforce) are not, however, ends, but only means of opening up the discipline (and the world) to question. Nothing will kill student engagement faster than drilling them on information or skills. The really valuable learning happens when the dialectic of question and answer, problem, provisional solution, and then deeper problem excites students sufficiently that they start to want to follow the emergent thread of ideas wherever it leads, because they start to feel themselves actively contributing to that direction.

8. As metrics, they are either redundant (doing nothing but state the obvious, i.e., that a class on Greek philosophy will cover Greek philosophy, and a class that involves essay writing will enable students to learn how to write essays), or useless (if what they aim to measure is something like love of thinking, which is an inner disposition and not subject to quantitative measure). In their belief that only that which measurable is real, defenders of learning outcomes show themselves to be another example of a society-wide cognitive derangement that confuses the value of practices and relationships and activities with their measurable aspects (the "externalist fallacy," John McMurtry, "What Is Good, What is Bad, The Value of All Values Across Time, Places, and Theories," Philosophy and World Problems, Volume 1, EOLSS Publishers, 2011, p. 269).

9. That which can be measured is "customer satisfaction." Even if they are never explicitly justified in these terms, it is clear that when thought within the context of society-wide changes to public institutions and attacks on public sector workers (which include professors in Canada), learning outcomes presuppose and reinforce a consumeristic attitude towards education. They present the purpose of pursuing a course of study as the purchase of a defined set of skills and circumscribed body of information which can then be used as a marketing pitch to future employers. Learning outcomes submerge the love of thinking in bureaucratic objectification of the learner as a customer, a passive recipient of closed and pre-packaged material.

10. Hence, there is no clear pedagogical value to learning outcomes. If there is no pedagogical value how are we to understand the current fad? As part of the attack on the professional autonomy of professors because it constitutes a barrier to the imposition of market discipline on universities. (See, for example, Jonker, Linda, and Hicks, Martin. (2014). [Teaching Loads and Research Outputs of Ontario University Faculty Members: Implications for Productivity and Differentiation](#). Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario; Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services (2012). "[Post-secondary Education](#)," Deem, Rosemary, Hilyard, Sam, Reed, Mike. (2007). Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Bruneau, William. (2000). "Shall We Perform or Shall We Be Free? The Corporate Campus: Commercialization and the Dangers To Canada's Colleges and Universities. James L. Turk, ed., Toronto: Lorimer; Massy, William F, and Zemsky, Robert. "[Using Information Technology to Enhance Academic Productivity](#)." If professors are

allowed to define their own terms of work (legitimated by appeal to academic freedom and professional autonomy) they escape the discipline of market forces to which other workers are subjected. This allows them to extract rents in the form of higher wages, and it also constitutes a barrier to “higher productivity” (more graduates produced per unit input of academic labour). Learning outcomes are only one aspect of this broader political-economic assault on academic labour, but the motivation behind them—whatever their institutional supporters might say—cannot be understood outside of this context.

TEN THESES: A CODA

Originally Posted March 12, 2016

In the past five days more than 17 000 people have read my Ten Theses. This number of readers is two orders of magnitude greater than my previously best read posts. If anyone still thinks that the contemporary university does not take teaching seriously, the scope of interest in the piece and the seriousness of the debate which followed is evidence that it does. I do not expect my position or the criticism it aroused to be the final word. I have been making these arguments for a decade (without much practical success at the institutional level) and, while I am always open to counter-argument and to developing my own pedagogy in light of others’ good ideas, I remain committed to a more open practice of teaching which I do not think is well-served by learning outcomes. For those who in good faith disagree and argue that without clear objectives students’ interests are compromised, I ask you to look at the debate here. It was not framed by any extrinsic outcomes, was not steered or conducted by any extrinsic goals, but developed spontaneously through the considered interventions of the participants, but a coherence evolved that enabled all of us to learn a great deal, just by virtue of our participation and not because we gave each other assignments to assess. I prefer the higher intensity of face to face argument to the flatness of electronic communication, but even so, the argument as it evolved here is an excellent illustration of what I meant in the post where I identified the dialectic of problem-question-reposing of the problem as the life of a well-taught class. I do not mean that I assumed the role of teacher here, but rather that this spontaneous energy of idea development is analogous to what happens in a class when it is doing what it should: stimulate in the students the desire to think and contribute and see where the argument leads. Thanks to everyone for their contributions. The conversation can of course continue and I will respond as best I can to subsequent comments and criticisms, but other projects call.

Readings



READINGS: CARLO FANELLI: MEGACITY MALAISE: NEOLIBERALISM, PUBLIC SERVICES, AND LABOUR IN TORONTO

Originally Posted June 5, 2016

Carlo Fanelli, *Megacity Malaise: Neoliberalism, Public Services, and Labour in Toronto*, Fernwood Books, 2016.

Although the basic driver of capitalist society is easy enough to understand, its system-need to turn money-capital into more money-capital manifests itself as a series of intersecting contradictions: political, economic, social, and cultural. These contradictions affect different regions of the globe and different groups of people differently. In Guangzhou, China, the destruction of the industrial working class of Southern Ontario and the US mid-West is experienced as the birth of an industrial working class, with all the pain and promise that process entailed in the West one hundred and fifty years ago. In the world's ever larger megacities, the loss of manufacturing has been off-set by the explosion of finance and cultural industries as the main drivers of capital accumulation. Cities too small to act as a magnet for finance capital and cultural industry monster-spectacle are left desperate and dependent.

The contradictions of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalist urbanization provide the socio-economic frame for Carlo Fanelli's political analysis of labour struggles against austerity in Toronto. While a mid-sized city by global standards, Toronto is by far the dominant city of Canada, with a metropolitan population bigger than Montreal and Vancouver combined. As the mass culture and financial centre of Canada, Toronto is a global city which sees itself (and not incorrectly) as a key competitor with New York and London. In the contemporary world, inter-national capitalist competition increasingly plays out as competition between major cities. Finance capitalists and the captains of the culture industries are the winners, peripheral cities and workers across sectors are the losers. Yet, as Fanelli shows, despite being obviously the victims, workers, and especially unionized workers, are blamed as the cause of their own demise.

Fanelli is uniquely positioned to both explain the socio-economic context of labour struggles against austerity and critique the limitations of their existing forms. As a working class child and adolescent growing up in Rexdale he learned first hand the range and the importance of the public services the city offered. After having benefited from those services growing up, he later helped to provide them, working for many years for the City of Toronto in different capacities. During his career he was also an activist member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79– the largest union of municipal workers in the country. He is also a political economist with a gift– due to his not having forgotten his working class background– for bringing complex economic problems down to their real world implications for working people. Although the book focuses on Toronto, the lessons he draws are of general significance to Canadian public sector workers.

The book is admirably concise, managing in 100 pages to provide a brief constitutional history of the status of cities in Canada, the global socio-economic causes of neo-liberalism and the austerity agenda, the local contours of those causes as they have shaped the political agenda of Ontario and Toronto over the past twenty years, an ethnography of two pivotal CUPE strikes in Toronto, a critique of the political limitations of the CUPE Toronto leadership, an affirmation of the public sector as a counter-weight to

capitalist market forces, and general ideas about how that counter-weight can be used as a platform for the development of renewed union radicalism and anti-capitalist mobilisation. Despite the number of foci, the book reads as a unified whole. Theoretical claims are empirically substantiated. There is no extraneous detail, but the reader wanting more fine-grained content is always pointed to the primary sources. The book needs to be part of any conversation around the political re-birth of the union movement and the re-invention of the Canadian left. In that regard it could usefully be read alongside of Alan Sear's *The Next New Left*.

Fanelli begins with a cogent explanation of the causes of the austerity agenda in Toronto. These causes are both general and specific. The general cause is the global reign of neo-liberal orthodoxy, according to which unions and the public sector have undermined the competitive dynamism of capitalism and slowed economic growth. Hence the goal of neo-liberal policy has been to weaken unions and privatize public services. The tactic is the same everywhere: first tax cuts create a revenue crisis, which leads to service cuts, which are blamed on workers high salaries and secure pensions, which are used to demonize workers, eroding public support for job security and living wages at the same time as it increases popular support for state-led attacks on public sector workers. "This is a recurring feature of neo-liberal administration in which tax cuts are first used to degrade the quality and breadth of the service provided, which governments then invoke as justification for "tightening spending." When this fails ... this manipulative strategy is then used to justify privatization." (p. 41) Fanelli explains the logic of manufactured crisis clearly, substantiates his analysis with concrete examples from Toronto, and avoids repeating at length the historical development of neo-liberalism already well-analysed in works like Harvey's *Neo-Liberalism: A Brief History*.

The specific cause of the austerity agenda is the constitutional status of cities in Canada. Fanelli weaves his way through the relevant constitutional arcana to explain the core problem: According to the British North America Act (1867) and the Constitution Act (1982), cities are the creatures of the provinces with very little room for independent fiscal maneuvering. Overwhelmingly, cities rely on property taxes to raise the revenue they need to pay for public services. Property taxes, are, however, regressive: if home value rise property taxes will rise, but there is no guarantee that wages will rise in lockstep with property taxes. In booming real estate markets working people, whose wages have been suppressed over the last three decades, can find themselves with a growing tax bill— and moved by the resentment higher taxes and more or less fixed incomes to set out looking for scapegoats.(p.33) Right-wing politicians are happy to point them in the direction of public sector workers grazing by the side of the road.

These general and specific causes have combined with a series of disastrous (for cities) provincial decisions, beginning with that of the hard-right government of Mike Harris (1995-2003) to download significant new costs to cities (public housing, social assistance ...), without any corresponding increase in their ability to borrow or otherwise raise revenue in new ways. Although a right-wing ideologue of the most objectionable sort, Harris was simply mimicking what his supposedly progressive federal Liberal counterpart, Jean Chretien, through the agency of then-finance Minister Paul Martin, was doing to "solve" the deficit crisis: download costs to the provinces. Martin set in motion a vortex of downloading at the bottom of which is the political unit least able to fiscally cope— cities. Since most of the services that people depend upon for the day to day quality of their lives are delivered and paid for at the municipal level, the overburdening of city budgets by these newly imposed costs was felt in a very real way, especially by the poorest and most vulnerable: fewer services, higher user fees, and more encouragement from politicians for them to take their anger out on the workers who deliver the services.

Toronto city governments from the reign of clown the first Mel “Bad Boy” Lastman to clown the second Rob “Real Bad Boy” Ford have claimed that Toronto faces a spending crisis. But professional audits have revealed that the city is and has been very well-managed from a spending perspective.(p.26) The real problem, as Fanelli demonstrates, is “a revenue crisis rooted in the constitutional constraints of municipal government and public policies of the neo-liberal era.”(p.3) However, failure to recognize the truth of the political economic situation has led the public to support, to various degrees of intensity in different periods, the overall program of “competitive austerity” successive governments have recommended. Fanelli refers to Greg Albo to explain competitive austerity as a set of policies which makes “labour markets more flexible, enhances managerial prerogatives, reduces government services that act as a drain on competition, shedding public assets and weakening labour laws and employment standards, aiming to turn the state into a series of internally competitive markets.” (p. 28) The program of competitive austerity can only be realized through the defeat of organized labour, since the entire point of organized labour is to shield workers from the life-destructive effects that unregulated market forces generate by pushing down real wages. If competitive pressure increases, then the power of unions must proportionally decrease. Hence we would expect a period of competitive austerity to be a period of class struggle in the form of public sector unions trying to preserve past gains against cost cutting municipal governments. That is exactly what we find in Toronto. Its CUPE locals (79 and 416) have been involved in work stoppages in 2000, 2002, 2009, and 2012. The results, as Fanelli explains, have not been catastrophic for CUPE, but they have been defeats.

The most important contribution the book makes is its political analysis of these strikes and the lessons for the future development of the union movement. Fanelli is fair (and not out of loyalty to his CUPE brothers and sisters). The bargaining situation for all unions in the context of competitive austerity is extremely difficult. Anyone who thinks sloganeering or sideline invocations of the need for militancy can overcome these objective barriers to success simply has not been involved in union politics for the past thirty years. There are reasons why concessions have been made: the increased mobility of capital has put workers in competition with each other, internationally, nationally, provincially, and between cities. While public services are not subject to relocation in the same way a car factory is, private sector dynamics, as Albo noted, have been replicated in the public sector, weakening unions’ bargaining strength. At the same time, legislative changes (making the use of scabs easier, declaring more and more workers “essential” in order to strip them of their right to strike) have coalesced with competitive pressures to objectively weaken the labour movement. The objective forces have subjective implications: workers feel beaten down, targeted, worried about job security, and thus defensive. Mobilizing militant action in this context is extremely difficult.

Difficult as it is, it is also necessary (if the competitive austerity agenda and, beyond that, capitalism itself are to be eventually overcome). Fanelli acknowledges the challenges, but he also (hopefully, not naively) teases out the possibilities for union renewal in the unique role public sector work plays in a capitalist economy. As Fanelli notes right at the outset, public sector work satisfies real human needs, and in so doing, improves the lives of those who access those services. These needs run the gamut from basic physical needs like health care when sick to socio-cultural needs like engaging in organized play and education. Thus, the first step in recreating a fighting, progressive, and democratic trade union movement is for public sector workers to connect the life-value of the services to the workers who provide those services: “The public provision of goods and services, well-managed in a way that fosters sustainable development and social justice initiatives, and which is accountable to the community, significantly improves standards of living ... It is necessary to ensure that the public at large understands this through community engagement initiatives led by unions.” (p. 86). “Sustainable development,” “social justice” and “accountability” all need to be more clearly defined, but the general point that Fanelli makes is sound: the public sector constitutes a counter-logic to the money to more

money sequence of value that determines the capitalist economy. Its *principle* is: satisfy human needs regardless of ability to pay because good human lives demand need-satisfaction.

Of course, this principle exists in tension with the driving force of money-capital accumulation in capitalism. Fanelli acknowledges this fact: “Public services address real needs and result from previous rounds of class struggle, but they also address the need of the capitalist state to reproduce class society.”(p. 83). Moreover, public sector workers can often also stand in relations of power over and against the communities they serve, often in racialized and sexist formations (welfare case workers vis-a-vis their clients, for example). Overcoming the later contradiction requires building alliances and coalitions with communities, while the former requires defending, extending, and democratising public services; a reverse process of publicization against the privatizing agenda that has dominated over the past thirty years. That campaign requires militancy, and militancy requires education and member mobilization. “Considering the concerted attacks against labour, should unions wish to regain their once prominent role in the pursuit of social justice and workplace democracy, they will need to take the risks of organizing working class communities and fighting back ... This requires a radicalized perspective that seeks to develop both alternative policies and an alternative politics rooted in class-oriented unionism.”(p. 61) It should be added: it will also take a new layer of younger leadership educated in the history of militant trade unionism while attentive to contemporary realities and open to and capable of inventing creative responses appropriate to the twenty-first century. One worries (or I do anyway) that the culture of expressive virtual individualism works against the emergence of such a leadership layer.

Nevertheless, it would be foolish and ahistorical to simply abandon the union movement as a potentially transformative movement while it still organizes millions of workers (and especially the public sector union movement, where union density is far higher than in the private sector and where the services the workers provide must be fixed in local space). As long as there is a union movement, it needs spurs to reinvention such as Fanelli has written. Still, arguments like Fanelli’s are always subject to the objection that despite their forward-looking rhetoric they are rear-guard actions whose conditions of historical possibility have passed. The only sound response to the objection is practical success, for which the author cannot be held responsible, since success will require contributions from thousands of people acting politically over open-ended time-frames.

At the level of argument, Fanelli’s set of reform principles: coalition building, community engagement, internal democratization, and member education steered by the goal of preserving public services and extending the logic of public provision are sound and what one would expect. There is one blind spot that is worth mentioning. In Fanelli’s version of cities, what makes them great is the range and depth of public services available to citizens. I agree without reservation, but would venture to add that the cultural and intellectual dynamism of great cities needs to be included. Fanelli is largely silent on the cultural wealth of Toronto: its bands, performances, public talks; its eccentrics, artists, and folk heroes, its neighbourhoods, galleries, universities, clubs, restaurants, and book stores; its magnificent cultural, intellectual, and sexual diversity. Unlike David Harvey (whom he cites) Fanelli’s version of the “right to the city” is largely confined to affordable housing, transit and other (vital, vitally important, no doubt) basic human needs.(p.78).

But human beings are creatures of mind and imagination too. The right to the city must also include the right to access the extraordinary cultural (and intercultural) dynamism of the world’s great cities. Often times the barriers here are not financial, but cultural: the snobbery and closed-mindedness of cultural elites who often (although not always) function as gate-keepers to these institutions and events. Working people are often made to feel as though they lack the “symbolic capital” to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu, to take advantage of cutting-edge art and thought that cities incubate and

nurture. And that is wrong, for art and thought are not the preserve of financial and cultural elites but should be open to everyone. The left needs to extend its historical commitment to egalitarianism beyond access to the requisites of life to the requisites of a liberated mind and imagination.

The modern city is certainly a creature of capital, but it is also a creature of human labour and human imagination. Great cities have long been attractors of genius and eccentricity and spaces where difference can be protected from bigotry by force of concentrated numbers of the like-minded and tolerant and experimental. Cities are contradictory spaces just because they concentrate in a relatively small geographical space the most inventive and forward-looking human beings with the most brutal indignities that capital can inflict. The struggle for the city must be a struggle to overcome the structural causes of those dignities, but also a struggle to open the horizons of working people to the creative and intellectual wealth that already exists. Beyond opening up access to what already exists, a re-vivified struggle for the right to the city must also be a struggle to widen and deepen that wealth by enabling people to live as subjects of their own activity and not objects of money-capital. Fanelli has written a short but important intervention into the debate over the shapes that that struggle should take.

READINGS: HENRI LEFEBVRE: THE CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Originally Posted on February 12, 2016

A perennial question for the socialist left has been: if capitalism is so bad, why are mass movements against it so rare (not to mention unsuccessful)? One answer is obvious: the state has a monopoly on the means of violence and has proven willing to use it to enforce capitalist class rule. However important that reason is, it does not sufficiently address the deeper issue: workers are not constantly in a state of near or actual insurrection. Indeed, they are not even in a constant state of overt dissatisfaction, but most often seem content to seek their pleasures and purposes within capitalism. Beginning with Gramsci and developing through the Frankfurt School, early and middle twentieth century Marxists and Critical Theorists looked to the roles that popular culture and the growing purchasing power of workers played as explanations for ruling class “hegemony” (the ability to build and maintain consent without resort to violence). While the names of Gramsci and Marcuse are well-known, that of Henri Lefebvre is less renowned, at least in the English speaking world. And yet, of all the analyses and critiques of consumer society, none matches the detail or temporal scope of Lefebvre’s *The Critique of Everyday Life*. Its three volumes, composed over nearly forty years (1947, 1962, and 1981), trace the changing structure of consumer society from its re-emergence following World War Two to the dawn of the information society in 1981. Without denying that these forty years witnessed profound changes to everyday life: the liberation of women from the home, the sexual revolution of the 1960’s, the growing role of technology, Lefebvre is able to demonstrate that the one constant of everyday life under capitalism is that it alienates us in multiple ways from our needs and from each other.

It is easy to forget that behind alienation lies genuine needs and goals— genuine in the sense that if the needs are not satisfied, harm ensues, and if the goals are not fulfilled, life has in a sense, been wasted in that dimension of being alive. To focus on everyday life as a structure of alienation is thus at one and the same time to assert that certain needs and goals are genuine, and to disclose the ways in which capitalist priorities impede their satisfaction and realization (or permit only partial forms of both). But to focus on everyday life, as opposed to the workplace, as the zone of alienation, is to argue for a different conception of socialism (or, perhaps better said, to widen the scope of the idea of socialism), as not just a structural change in relations at the point of production, but equally a transformation of life-activity and relationships.

In the first volume this argument is deployed against Stalinist orthodoxy and its failures. He maintained that socialism had to involve more than releasing the forces of production from their capitalist fetters: it had to mean transformations of self-understanding that allowed for more satisfying forms of activity and relationship in all zones of life. “What is socialism, exactly? How does it intervene in everyday life? ... the answer is unclear. The elimination of class antagonisms? The supersession of capitalist property and production? These are only negative definitions. We find the picture of a bourgeois society without a bourgeoisie neither reassuring nor satisfying.” (p.69). Lefebvre never fully answers this question, but his aim was not to provide a blueprint for how free people would live, but to insist that freedom must encompass everyday and consciousness.

The main problem with orthodox Marxist politics is that— despite Marx’s own protestation that the emancipation of workers had to be the act of the workers themselves— it tried to reconstruct workers’ consciousness from the outside, and thus proved continually at odds with the majority of

workers. Already becoming clear in 1947, the conclusion that this politics was a dead end could not be avoided in 1981: “So the fate of philosophies of pure knowledge as not spared Marxism: Revolution through positive knowledge, brought to the working class from without, (Lenin)- that revolution has miscarried.”(p.731) While Lefebvre’s purpose is not to reconstruct the politics of the struggle for socialism, his arguments have the general political implication that socialism must be a transformation of everyday life and not just a change in the class identity of the people in charge of major social institutions. As a transformation of everyday life, the struggle for socialism is a long term on going struggle and not a cataclysmic overthrow of bourgeois power. The Soviet Union was undone, according to Lefebvre not because class power was not overthrown, but because the power seized was not used to emancipate everyday life.

What would it mean to emancipate everyday life? To overcome all manner of alienation: not just alienation from the product and process of labour or other people as workers, but in all dimensions of our lives- playing, interacting, loving, building homes, creating. Alienation in everyday life means looking to things to do for us what we can only do for ourselves: make ourselves feel worthy, valued, loved, respected as the means of producing meaning and joy. Everyday life exists between the institutionalized spaces and forces of the economic and political system and the uncontrolled sectors of inner, psychic life. It is “the region where man appropriates not so much external nature, but his own nature—as a zone of demarcation and friction between the uncontrolled sector and the controlled sector of life—and a region where goods come into confrontation with needs which have become more or less desires.”(p.375).” The problem with everyday life under capitalism is that it alienates the desire, i.e, the conscious striving to satisfy needs into to desire to consume commodities. The critique of everyday life is thus the critique of the commodification of desire. “Critique,” he argues, “mounts an attack on gaps and imbalances (between temporalities, between the “basic” and the “superior,” between the historical and the private, the social and the individual). It points out the gaps, the vacuum, the distance yet to be crossed. It criticizes the role of society and the roles society imposes ... It attacks alienation in all its forms, in culture, in ideology, beyond the moral sphere. Critique demands the dissolution and revolutionary metamorphosis of the everyday.”(p.517). The revolutionary metamorphosis of the everyday, in turn, involves the recovery of the spontaneity of self-creation from the unsatisfactory pleasures of capitalist consumer society.

In the controlled sector of society people are tokens of types: workers, bosses, electricians, politicians, and their lives the execution of more or less programmed routines. Outside of these roles, in everyday life, people are not mere functions of social positions but persons: “In the everyday, when the “human being” confronts within itself the social and the individual through the test of problems and contradictions which have been more or less resolved, it becomes a “person.” What does this mean? In our view, a cloud of possibilities gradually vapourized by choices—by actions—until it is exhausted and comes to an end- until death. It is ... a drama, the drama of participation in society, the drama of ... individualization.”(p.357). Consumer society alienates us from the spontaneity of personality formation by promising to routinize happiness: buy this product or appear in that way, and happiness will follow as a mechanical effect. Even if that effect were achieved (and it clearly is not) the complete loss of spontaneity it would entail would further entail the loss of our humanity. Our humanity is the capacity to write the drama as it unfolds, not to merely follow the script but to be its author too, and to never know exactly how it is going to end. Human freedom is bound up with the responsiveness of the future to choices that we make in the present: the value of our activity is not determined solely by outcomes, but also by effort. When Marx says, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 that under socialism “man will be man and his relationship to the world will be a human one,” he means that socialism, whatever institutionalized forms it takes, will restore spontaneity and truth to everyday

life. We will be the persons that we make ourselves to be, not the people our money can make us appear to be, even though we are the opposite.

Lefebvre (like Marx), is not nostalgic, but he does look to rural society (the ghosts of which still walked the French countryside in 1947) as evidence of the depth sociality of human life that capitalism alienates. This depth sociality is best expressed in the festival, where the fruits of nature and collective labour were shared in a communal celebration enjoyed by each individual. "Rural communities associated nature specifically with human joyfulness ... Thus when the community gathered to carry out this simple action of eating and drinking, the event was attended by a sense of magnificence which intensified the feelings of joy." (p.233) Lefebvre does not posit the feudal festival as a model to be emulated. Indeed, in the third volume he begins to examine urban space as the potential site for modern forms of creative human expression and interaction. His goal is not, therefore, to romanticize the past but to look resolutely to the future, to freeing urban space from its current domination by commercial interests for the sake of opening its cultural dynamism to the contributions of everyone. In this regard he was a primary inspiration to the contemporary "right to the city" movement. (See further, David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*) He does not look backward, but forward, but at the same time, he does not think of a free society as a *creatio ex nihilo*, as the result of foundational needs and desires being satisfied in new ways.

The student and worker rebellions of the late 1960's appeared to have captured some of the spontaneous creativity that underlies Lefebvre's critique of everyday life. Lefebvre was professor of sociology at the University of Paris-Nanterre during the 1968 rebellion. Its failure did not completely disillusion him, but it did cause him to shift political focus and reject once for all the Leninist model of revolution. In the third volume he affirms the unrealized potentials of peaceful democratic struggle and human rights: "Let me end with the example of human rights. The fact that some dangerous forces, even imperialism, have sought to make use of them ... cannot justify abandoning the, ... On the contrary."(p.780). This embrace of human rights might be dismissed as conservatism, but this rejection would be to miss the point (which serves as a political through line connecting all three volumes): practice must be judged pragmatically and historically. The values of socialism are not dependent upon some one means of struggle. What matters is realizing the values, not fetishizing "The Revolution." If the evidence proves that nineteenth and early twentieth century forms of struggle have failed, but the values remain unrealized but essential to human well-being, then we honour the history by changing the tactics, not slavishly repeating them, a move that will only ensure more failure.

The political value of the book follows from its clear understanding that the essence of *historical* materialism is the principle that because society changes the methods appropriate to understanding society have to develop along with it. In the case of *The Critique of Everyday Life* these changes take the form not only of defining a new object domain (everyday life) but effecting a new conceptual synthesis between philosophy and sociology. The synthesis involves bringing the normative core of philosophy (its concern with realizing the full value of human potentialities) to bear on the empirical study of the complexities and nuances of the forces that shape everyday life as these forces change historically and pose new threats (and opportunities) for self-realization. His method treads carefully between the twin dangers of structuralism on the one hand (which ignores human agency) and methodological individual and voluntarism on the other (which ignores the ways in which the content and motivations of individuals are socially structured. It is a paradigm instance of dialectical thinking which, sadly, was mostly ignored in the English speaking world in the eighties and nineties when it would have provided an antidote to the one-sided poststructuralist deconstruction of the human subject.

The difficulties of developing a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency are sufficiently challenging that the book still repays reading for its proposed solution to this problem. It also remains vital today for its anticipations of the problems of technological society. Even in 1981, before the internet and smartphones, Lefebvre could already see that the promise of technological society, at least so long as it was bound up with capitalist market forces, would be more advertising hype than actual emancipation. But more than ideological unmasking, he also saw what contemporary technotopians still refuse to acknowledge today, when this truth is so much more in evidence than it was in 1981: the ideal of the technological society is the elimination of the spontaneity of human self-creative activity in favour of programmed pleasures and predictable outcomes: “Assimilation, repetition, equivalence (calculable, predictable, and hence open to rational administration)—such are the characteristics daily life tends towards ... Everyday life managed like an enterprise within an enormous, technocratically administered system—such is the first and last word of the technocratic ethic: every moment anticipated, quantified in money terms, and programmed temporally and spatially.”(p. 731). That is not to say that Lefebvre rejects the value of technology (indeed, in the earlier volumes he often present the problem of the transformation of everyday as the problem of realizing the social value of technology that had been tapped in industry but not everyday life). What his argument makes clear is that there is a difference between technology as a means to social ends, and technology as an end in itself. The latter, fetishized view can only ever be the ally of economic forces that alienate human capacities.

The Critique of Everyday Life is not a book to read with your feet up and mind half elsewhere. It is a difficult, sometimes turgid work in which there is a lot of thinking out loud and searching. It is also one of the great works of twentieth century Marxist philosophy and still well worth the effort that must be expended to understand it.

READINGS: CHRIS HEDGES: THE WAGES OF REBELLION: THE MORAL IMPERATIVE OF REVOLT

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The subtitle of this book sums up the problem with the global Left seven years after the start of a crisis that, from the standpoint of working people, shows no signs of abating. *Revolt* might be a *moral* imperative, but revolution is a matter of political organization. Revolt is immediate, passionate, a response to a specific provocation or an exasperated flailing against structures of oppression that the oppressed can no longer bear. Revolts can become revolutions, but not without democratic political organization. Democratic political organizations alone can transform a righteous fight into a coherent, long term strategy of institutional change. Hedges should not be faulted for not providing what no one else has yet provided: a defensible alternative to the vanguardist Leninist parties that won power through the revolutions of the twentieth century but could not ultimately sustain the democratic energy from which they were born. But he can be faulted for ignoring the question altogether.

In part, the criticisms I am reluctantly forced to make stem from the expectations that I brought to the book. Books should be allowed to speak for themselves, and when the reader does not let them, because he or she has already formed a preconception of what ‘should’ be in the book, disappointment is inevitable. I came to the *The Wages of Rebellion* expecting: a) a clear analysis of the structural crisis of capitalist civilization, in America and globally, b) an argument that demonstrated that the crisis is the cause of growing political mobilizations around the world, c) a systematic explanation of the form of organization needed to transform these mobilizations from spontaneous episodes of resistance and revolt into a cumulative and self-ramifying revolutionary transformation of global capitalist society, and d) a clear explanation of the values, institutions, and social dynamics that characterize the alternative society. The book did not fully satisfy any of those expectations. On the one hand, it did not because its real purpose was to tell stories of individual rebels rather than provide a systematic analysis of the causes of global crisis.(p.18) On the other hand, when it does attempt analysis, it is not systematic, never clearly grounded in any definite political tradition, and, at the crucial moment, substitutes treacle platitudes for a more prosaic, but much more necessary, explanation of institutional alternatives and the concrete political steps needed to mobilize the numbers of people necessary to bring them into being.

The introduction foreshadows the problems from which the whole book suffers. Instead of a clear statement of a) what the real nature of the problem we are facing is, and b) a correspondingly clear statement of what we ought to do about it, we are instead given a tour through a picture gallery of famous revolutionaries. The portraits are engaging but the underlying message is inconsistent. Hedges defines the revolutionary ideal as “the vision of a better world, the belief that resistance is a moral act to protect the weak and the poor.”(p.6) Note the way in which he defines revolution as a moral act “in defense of the weak and poor” rather than as a movement of the weak and poor. The political view of the entire book is coloured by this substitutionist-heroic understanding of revolution. Instead of being understood as the democratic movements they historically have been, Hedges repeatedly reduces revolution to the moral psychology of revolutionaries, which he alternately extols, when they chose the path of non-violent resistance, or dismisses, when they chose the road of armed struggle.

My argument here is not that Leninist vanguard parties or peasant armies should be the preferred means of struggle at this point in the twenty-first century. I agree with Hedges on this point, that anyone who still believes in that politics has not understood the political lessons of the *failure* of twentieth century revolutions. Hedges is thus correct when he argues that “revolutions take time. They are often begun by one generation and completed by the next.”(p.18) Rather, my objection is that, with the notable exception of his discussion of the Zapatista strategy of building the world you want to live in with the available means at your disposal, there is no discussion whatsoever of *political mobilization*.(pp.70-76). The Marxist tradition is invoked periodically for certain insights about the process of revolution, but politically dismissed, with no alternative tradition of mass political mobilization ever being invoked as a superior alternative. This history of feminism, of anti-colonial struggle (with the exception of a few vignettes about Nelson Mandela), and even the civil rights movement are left unexamined as sources of information about how massive numbers of people can be effectively organized to win major social victories.

Thus, the main problem with Hedges’ book, for all its exceptionally clear focus on the profoundly undemocratic and violent and dangerous state of the world, is that it is too much like every other political book published by major publishing houses: it is about personalities, not political and social processes. The body of the book is not a defense of the claim that revolt is a moral imperative, it is a gallery of people who have stood up to power and paid for it: Martin Luther King, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Chelsea Manning, Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Cecily MacMillan, Thomas Paine. The portraits are lovingly drawn, the political lessons of their individual struggles well-taken, the heroism of their personal examples obvious, their courage superogatory. Yet, despite Hedges’ unquestionable commitment to justice and democracy, the majority of people never appear as *agents* of their own liberation in this book. The most important argument Marx ever made about revolution (one that is too often forgotten) is that the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself. One can say the same for women, for racialized minorities, for demonized ethnicities, and any other group facing structural oppression: their freedom must be achieved through their own struggles, and not as the reflex of the heroic acts of a saviour.

Amazingly, that point is never made. Instead, the majority of the people on the planet appear either as passive victims awaiting salvation or as dangerous mob ready to explode. Despite the fact that the book asserts that there is a moral imperative to revolt, Hedges often appears to be as fearful of mass political uprisings as the ruling class he rails against. His is an individualistic view of rebellion: “The person with moral courage defies the crowd, stands up as a solitary individual, shuns the intoxicating embrace of comradeship, and is disobedient to authority, even at the risk of his or her life, for a higher principle.”(p. 59). This view of rebellion is typical of a liberal, great person theory of history.

Indeed, I found myself worrying that Hedges’ preferred audience for this book is not the mass of people, but the very “liberal class” whose death he lamented in the book that first brought him to public prominence. Like Thomas Piketty two years ago, Hedges seems less interested in working out a theory of mass democratic political mobilization than warning the ruling class to begin to address structural inequality, sham democracy, and totalitarian surveillance, or face a violent and incoherent uprising that will destroy everything in its blind fury. He alternates between charges that the public is compromised by an “inability to grasp the pathology of our oligarchic corporate elite” (p. 61) which makes effective resistance difficult and apocalyptic worries that without effective resistance the planet might be doomed.(p.28) At one point, he simply asserts that socialism must replace capitalism, (p.155) without defining what he means by socialism. Yet, throughout the book, he laments the decline of unions and is skeptical about the power of the working class. If socialism is not going to be achieved via the political agency of the working class, how is it going to be achieved? By following, it would seem. At the end,

Hedges asserts that the majority of people must follow those rebels moved by a “sublime madness” to some indeterminate future of emancipated life: “I do not know if we can build a better society. I do not even know if we will survive as a species. But I do know that corporate forces have us by the throat. ... I do not fight fascists because I will win. I fight fascists because they are fascists. And this is a fight that in the face of the overwhelming forces against us requires that we follow those possessed by sublime madness.”(p. 226). Calling the current regime “fascist” sounds like bold iconoclasm, but when thought through in the context of the comment that follows, Hedges actually plays it safe.

That suspicion is bolstered by the complete lack of any discussion of what an alternative will look like, what its economy will be, and what values it will serve. He inveighs against “corporate capitalism,” and details in chilling detail the Kafkesque machinations of surveillance state power, but does not discuss alternative models of democracy, what a democratic socialist and life-valuable economy might look like and how it might run, and what sorts of political parties need to be created in order to advance the agenda. He does not discuss the struggle for twenty-first century socialism in Bolivia and Venezuela, he says nothing about Syriza or the attempt to re-energize parliamentary democracy through the creation of parties to the left of moribund social democracy.

To really challenge the forces of what Hedges calls fascism does not require sublime madness but working through—critically, to be sure—the concrete lessons of past and present efforts at systematic change. To blindly follow the lone rebel is to turn oneself into cannon fodder for a failed revolt. The successful revolutions and mass rebellions of history were not spontaneous uprisings of people led by a charismatic leader, they were meticulously planned and organized. That is not to say that leadership is not important or that almost mystical visions of future harmony and beauty cannot be important motivating ideas. It is to say that the protection and freedom of life that would define a society that manages to solve the problems of capitalism cannot be a virtuoso creation, but a project of long, patient, democratic struggle. If the situation is as bad environmentally, economically, politically, and culturally as Hedges portrays it as being, then we need much better from public intellectuals like Hedges than “rebellion ... requires honoring the sacred. It requires an understanding that, as with the heroes of ancient Greece, one cannot finally overcome fate ... but that we must resist regardless.”(p.225). If, as this claim implies, resistance is doomed to failure, people will be forgiven if they do not even try. Ultimately that message is a message more likely to lead to resignation than resistance, and it is therefore a message the ruling class will not be unhappy to have disseminated.

In the purple glow of “sublime madness” a union meeting or a pro-choice rally or a demonstration against police violence looks grey and uninspiring, particularly if it is small. There seems no way to get from the shabby union office or the wind-swept street to the conquest of the structures that oppress us. Nevertheless, it is in shabby offices, kitchens, and on wind-swept streets that revolutions are made, and made not by those summoning followers to follow their inspired vision, but by leaders mobilizing ordinary people to become agents and leaders themselves. I believe that Hedges would agree with this properly democratic conception of leadership and struggle, but if he does, it does not come through clearly in this powerful, but ultimately politically unsatisfactory, book.

READINGS: FREDERIC GROS: A PHILOSOPHY OF WALKING

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If there is a book in the history of philosophy that I wish I would have written, it is this book, Frederic Gros' *A Philosophy of Walking*. It is humble—“a” philosophy of walking, not *the* philosophy of walking. It does not claim to lay bear the universal principle of Being as the great but now mostly ignored systems of classical and modern philosophy claimed to have accomplished. It does not expose the depth contradictions of our social order, the primary task (I would argue) left to philosophy now that its universe-comprehending efforts have been taken over by natural science. What it does do is draw attention to the beauty of the mundane— a minor function of philosophy (and the major function of poetry?) in such a way that unexpected depths are revealed in the very simplicity of the act of walking. Walking is not treated as metaphor, metonym, or symbol for something grander, but is allowed to reveal the multiple ways in which it is, in its very banality and corporeality, one element of what can make the life of finite embodied beings wonderful.

There is a mystery to the world of ideas. When one's mind is intensely focussed on a problem it draws towards itself the work of previously unknown other minds who give perfect expression to some aspect of the problem one initially thought no one else had ever explored. Rather than professional jealousy (the response of the careerist, not the philosopher) the discovery that someone is thinking as you think produces a sense of intellectual communion: an anticipatory knowledge constantly confirmed of what the book is going to say next. Just as an objection formed in my head— but what about urban walking? is this a philosophy of walking of a philosophy of hiking? my concerns were allayed, and Gros came around to the proper pleasures of walking in cities. The almost exact doubling of one's ideas still leaves room— and this is crucial—for work to deepen one's own thinking and push it in new directions. Ultimately, this space means that there is never any repetition in the field of philosophical ideas, but growth.

A Philosophy of Walking is an elegant book. Its insights are not extolled over sentences as long as paragraphs and paragraphs as long as chapters, but in deceptively simple observations that the readers' mind cannot leave hold of once they have been read: “Walking is a part of active melancholia” (p.151, in commentary upon Gerard de Nerval); “Boredom is immobility of body confronted with emptiness of mind” (in explanation of why walking, though monotonous, cannot be boring); “When you hurry, time is filled to bursting, like a badly arranged drawer in which you have stuffed different things without any attempt at order,” (p. 37, in praise of the slowness of walking). The text alternates between commentary on famous literary and philosophical walkers and the author's reflections on what his own walks have taught him. The commentaries— on Nietzsche, Rimbaud, Rousseau, Thoreau, the Cynics, Gerard de Nerval, Kant, and Ghandi (with shorter discussions of Baudelaire, Benjamin, and Wordsworth) expose the different ways in which walking is essential to philosophical and poetic creation. Gros's reflection on his own peregrinations testify to the simple goodness of being a sentient body in the world.

Considered from the perspective of its philosophical content, three truths are asserted rather than reached through argument. I call them truths in honour of the richness and depth of experience from which they have been drawn by careful reflection. Some truths are learned not by following arguments but by paying attention to the world, (which is a material system not a logical principle). The justification for these truths is not logical but experiential— to confirm them, one must undertake the

experience from which it they have been drawn. If one undertakes the experience but does not derive the same truth, its universality is not thereby refuted. The absence of acceptance only proves that one is closed off to what the experience teaches (the truth is in the object waiting to be drawn out). Before the truth is definitively rejected, one must work harder to open oneself to the object whose truth one resists. In this struggle to open oneself to that to which one is initially closed consists human learning.

The first truth that Gros's reflections disclose is that the slow pace of walking allows us to savour being alive amidst the things of the world. "Slowness means cleaving perfectly to time, so closely that the seconds fall, one by one, drop by drop like the steady dripping of a tap on stone. This stretching of time deepens space. It is one of the secrets of walking: a slow approach to landscapes that gradually renders them familiar. Like the regular encounters that deepen friendship." (p.37). Like friendship, the encounter with the world in walking is an end in itself— we do not walk to learn about the world that which the scientist demands (abstractions, general forces, universal laws), but to allow it to reveal itself to us in its endless variety and specificity. Walking thus returns us, Gros claims, to the "realism" of childhood— the acceptance of material things as they show themselves to be in their concreteness: "It is children who are the true realists: they never proceed from generalities. The adult recognises the general form in a particular example, a representative of the species, dismisses everything else ... The child perceives individuals, personalities. He sees the unique form ... It isn't a triumph of the imagination, but an unprejudiced, total realism. And Nature becomes instantly poetic." (p.162). In becoming poetic, the Nature we encounter in walking is beautiful, sufficient in its mere presence, and ourselves, in response, joyful just to be for those few moments. "When we renounce everything," Gros, quoting Swami Ramdas notes, "everything is given to us, in abundance. Everything: meaning the intensity of presence itself."(p. 9). At root, what is the good of life other than this being here amongst the things of the world (everything, there is nothing outside of the whole world) and knowing that you are *being here*? Everything else is instrumental to some purpose, but beneath the particular purposes there must be goodness in being as such— otherwise, what justification for the struggles to achieve the purposes?

The second truth that Gros reveals is that walking, as the most basic coordinated movement of the body, connects us to our finite materiality and the earth— it teaches us what we really are at base— bodies. Bodies that think, yes, but bodies: "What dominates in walking, away from ostentation and showing off, is the simple joy of feeling your body in the most primitively natural activity ... When you walk, the basso continuo of joy comes from feeling the extent to which your body is made for this movement, the way it finds in each pace the resource for the next." (p. 143) This joy of simple movement simultaneously frees the mind from its mundane concerns, the demands that work and life pile upon it, so that thoughts can come. The real thought, the idea that contains some insight, something previously unthought, in contrast to the explication and the proof, does not come hunched over at one's desk, but when one is not expecting it, when one is not searching deliberately for it. Walking untenses the body and opens the mind: when the mind is open, ideas flood in, uncalled for: "The body's monotonous duty liberates thought. While walking, one is not obliged to think, to think this or that or like this or like that. During that continuous but automatic effort of the body, the mind is placed at one's disposal. It is then that thoughts can arise, surface, or take shape." (p.157). As with the good of sheer being, the letting arise or take shape of ideas is the presupposition and validation of the hard work of putting them to work in arguments. The impoverished content of much of the philosophy of our age is perhaps a consequence of the fact that philosophers are mostly paid academics— too much time indoors, at desks and conferences, arguing about the same old ideas and not enough moving in space letting ideas for which there are as yet no supporting arguments arise.

The third truth can be understood as a synthesis of the first two. Walking allows us to encounter the reality of the things of the world and free our own thoughts from the social forces that weigh them down. It thus constitutes a form of resistance– (Gros calls it “subversion”) of the competitive, technological, money-driven form of social life coming to dominate the planet. (p. 178). The simplicity of walking, the fact that the body is ready-made to walk without any need for technological supplementation (not even shoes, if you choose not to wear any), the fact that everyone teaches him or herself to walk without any need for expensive lessons, that it can only be enjoyed at a measured pace (speed walking is a contradiction in terms), and that it is best done alone, makes it paradigmatically free: it costs nothing and we can undertake a walk anytime we choose. Reflecting on Gandhi’s use of walking in his campaigns, Gros observes that a determined political march requires dignity, discipline, and courage. “Walking is the right speed to understand, to feel close. Apart from that, you depend on yourself alone to advance. Given that you are up to it, your will alone is in charge, and you await only your own injunction... Gandhi promoted through the marching movement a dimension of firmness and endurance: to keep going. That is essential, because walking calls for gentle but continuous effort.” (p.201) Contrast this steadiness of purpose with the panicked fleeing of a riot in retreat from a police charge: the rioters succumb to the superior violence of the state; the calm walkers refuse to engage on the level of state violence, and simply keep going, determinedly, towards their objective.

Techno-capitalism is trying to colonise every second of lifetime and every square centimeter of life space. In the space time it controls, ever-accelerating activity is demanded. Hence the pace of walking (and the refusal to respond to society’s demands which is sleep, as Jonathan Crary argues in his short masterpiece, *24/7*) is a revolt of the human body and a demand to reclaim life:

“These discoveries and joys can only be given to those who stroll with an open mind ... they will come spontaneously to one who, summoned by spring sunshine, joyously abandons his work just to get a little time to himself ... Only thus- with no expectation of a specific profit from the outing, and with all cares and worries firmly left behind in desk drawers– will a stroll become the gratuitous aesthetic moment, that rediscovery of the lightness of being, the sweetness of a soul reconciled to itself and the world.”(p.166).