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The Western political revolutions of the 18th century established the ideals of liberty, patriotism, and democracy the United States government grounds its identity into this day. The motive of these ideals, particularly their visual manifestation in Neoclassical government architecture, remain unquestioned. This study provides a historical analysis of the psychology informing the early American elite's choice to structure the new nation around Roman political and aesthetic standards. Chronicling the subservience inherent in Roman civic religion, as well as the internalizing nature of visual propaganda, the borrowed ancient schematic proves to be a method of de-revolutionizing the American people at the expense of their liberty. These results suggest a trend in the state's use of the built environment to restrain individualism and continue the cycle of aesthetic injustice in the emergent urban space.

Keywords

Neoclassicism, political psychology, propaganda, antiquization

**The Politics and Piety of Neoclassical Architecture: How Early American Elites Practiced
an Old Religion to Subvert the New One**

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12 December 2022

Abstract

The Western political revolutions of the 18th century established the ideals of liberty, patriotism, and democracy the United States government grounds its identity into this day. The motive of these ideals, particularly their visual manifestation in Neoclassical government architecture, remain unquestioned. This study provides a historical analysis of the psychology informing the early American elite's choice to structure the new nation around Roman political and aesthetic standards. Chronicling the subservience inherent in Roman civic religion, as well as the internalizing nature of visual propaganda, the borrowed ancient schematic proves to be a method of de-revolutionizing the American people at the expense of their liberty. These results suggest a trend in the state's use of the built environment to restrain individualism and continue the cycle of aesthetic injustice in the emergent urban space.

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**The Politics and Piety of Neoclassical Architecture: How Early American Elites Practiced
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Eighteenth century Western culture is characterized by the mass subversion of tradition. Secular Enlightenment philosophy challenged the Christian faith. The excess and extravagance of Baroque and Rococo art rebelled against the ordered simplicity of architecture. And, most radically, the institution of democracy denied the divine right of kings. Legitimacy began to crumble until swept away by the modern assertion of the right to self-governance and -determination. The liberty that followed was perceived as one of chaos by those traditionally empowered. The insurgence against established order left nations with no discernible identity or governmental structure for some time. Though political power in the post-Revolutionary age was in the process of redefinition, authority only changed hands from one group of socioeconomic elites to another. In this sense, the reinstatement of political order was undeniably Hegelian: as a new democratic society was formed, so with it two new opposing forces, and once again did the ruling class seek to diminish the threat of disempowerment, the power of the people. To prevent further revolution, burgeoning American political elites needed to de-revolutionize, to reassert the old order under the guise of liberatory new. This was achieved via propaganda that addressed every area of political disorder—a campaign that was religious, civic, and artistic all at once. What aspirational image could politicians project to a people that rebelled for the sake of their right to participate in their governance? The first, perfected republic in Western history: the ancient Romans and their glorious houses of gods and government.

The visual manifestations of this fascist propaganda, the classical canon, and its sustaining State power, did not end in the 18th century. Rather it continues to impose order and domination over the chaos and individualism within the emergent urban space. Antiquization is

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the practice of “giving a city the appearance of ancient Rome or Athens through the introduction of structure organized in the classical mode” (Tzonis, et al., 1986, p.263). Most often, this manifests through the organization of space along polar grids, aligning and inverting old arrangements until they are *enclosing* rather than enclosed (Tzonis, et al., 1986, p.263). These efforts are a response to “the public face of the city taking priority over the private realm,” creating a “collective representation of society against the growing appropriation of space by the individual” (Tzonis, et al., 1986, p.266). But the collectivity of this new urban social fabric as proposed by its enforced spatial arrangement is not anthropocentric or humanist in the same way the Roman-American civic religious goal of attaining public virtue was not truly virtuous. Antiquization is the bourgeoisie fear response to the power of a collective that recognizes their status as liberated individuals and is actively working to make it match their material reality. In these efforts, the lower classes oppose the piety, reverence, and debilitating group consciousness the political elite have enforced to secure their power.

This paper argues that the early American democratic elite invoked, through Neoclassical government architecture, the civic religion of ancient Rome in order to subvert the Enlightenment philosophy of individual liberty and unify the people under a nationalist identity of pious quiescence. This campaign continues throughout the modern age via antiquization of the urban space and the denial of personal sovereignty outside the enforced sameness of the built environment. Pursuing aesthetic justice in the contemporary era begins with understanding the historical injustice that frames the visible world around us and dismantling the ignorance it constructs within us.

Conflation of Church and State: Civic Religion in Two New Republics

The imposition of civic religion in early America and ancient Rome enforced a public moral order which transfigured the face of divine right into the countenance of democracy, newly illuminated by the false light of liberty and political equality as revolutionary ‘gains’. The disorder and chaos of secularism, separation of church and state, and assertion of the right to self-governance was easily quelled by the perversion of religious and civic ideals of pursuing the public good. These ideals, which were crafted by the elite to enforce public trust and piety, allowed elitists to regain power they had lost in the cultural and political revolutions of the 18th century. Under religious obligations of reverence for the ruling class, and faith in their pursuit of moral political virtues as founders of democracy, the public was unified in ignorance and obedience; becoming easily conquered and quiescent.

The births of Rome and America exhibit parallels in their foundation upon principles of liberty as established by an elite class. Much of early Roman history is unknown outside of popular mythology. Historians believe it most likely followed the typical formation of Greek states: “elite groups invented a new system of communal life and government, founded on the acceptance of decisions reached in common and the guarantee of liberty for all citizens” (Sheid, et al., 2014). Founding Era America matched these aspirations in the establishment of democratic liberty by the most privileged class of their society: wealthy white male property owners in politics. While some cite that there may have been greater diversity in the personal financial portfolios of the Founding Fathers than presumed, there is hardly a more powerful class than those who hold the power of taxation, the regulation of interstate commerce, and the political and economic future of a vulnerable new nation and its people as a whole (Randall, 2022). Whether or not we know precisely who founded Rome or whether the Founders were among the richest in

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the colonies is irrelevant to the dynamics of political power that characterized their respective eras: those who founded the nation controlled the character of the nation. There could be no greater earthly power.

A newly established country suffers from uncertainty surrounding national character in the absence of an ordered political structure. Whether by way of genuine devotion or recognition of its social influence, the deep moral convictions and rote practices of religion were the most effective devices the young nations could employ to maintain elite political power. Roman religion was one of ‘orthopraxis’, or “the correct performance of prescribed rituals (Scheid & Lloyd, 1985, p.17).” These rituals were required by virtue of Roman citizenship; “if one disturbed the correct performance of a ritual...the city could inflict on him [punishments] for having violated public law and *sanctitas*” (Scheid & Lloyd, 1985, p.19-27). Roman religion was so intertwined with civic obligation that “every public act was religious, and every religious act was public” (Scheid & Lloyd, 1985, p.130). Even the gods themselves were considered “citizen gods,” whose ultimate aspiration was “the earthly wellbeing of the community” (Scheid & Lloyd, 1985, p.19). With little distinction between allegiance to the gods and allegiance to government, and the demonstration of this faith being works, public behavior was successfully regulated by a culture of civil religious piety.

The residual obligation of reverence worked in favor of the political elite in two critical ways: rebellion against the gods became rebellion against government, and rebellion against government became rebellion against the gods. Initially, the Roman relationship with the gods was not one of fear but of reason (Scheid & Lloyd, 1985, p.21). In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero defines piety as ‘due justice’ to the gods; a ‘correct’ social relationship maintained through

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ritual.¹ However, as the Roman ideal of the city developed, this relationship, which became increasingly tainted by political intrigue, devolved into one of fear and “absolute submission to some authority and to a master” (116.21) Over one hundred years after Cicero’s publication in 45 BC, Seneca the Younger compares the relationship between gods and devotees to slaves, who “ought to respect rather than fear” their masters (p.47). Seneca’s view, similar to Cicero’s, demands respect. However, this respect is not merited by mutually beneficial social relations, it is required by their power differential. Thus, the worshiper exists in a state of bondage to the will of the gods as opposed to their previous fellowship of civil servanthood. It becomes clear during this era that those in positions of power are interested in instituting a civic religion. The right to question this new political system was negated by the moral obligation to undoubtedly submit to it as one must the gods. Therefore, a slave to the gods was a slave to the government, and a slave is granted but one self-determining political choice: to die or to obey.

In a nation born out of revolution, American political elites felt pressured to reestablish order. The Federalist Papers laid out extensive plans to quell what they viewed as the potential tyrannies of pure democracy. These would protect against the power of every political minority except the group to which the authors themselves belonged. Naturally, these philosophies were met with ample backlash from the public. The ‘Anti-Federalists’ of the lower class had more liberty and equality to fight for. Coupled with lingering anxieties surrounding national identity post-Revolution, trust in political elites to guarantee freedom in democracy and trust in the people to submit to a national government was overwhelmingly low (Bennett, 2018, 369-404).

Despite a wavering trust in American government, colonists’ trust in God was unaltered. Christianity was perhaps the only sure order in early American society. Though religion also

¹ Cicero, Marcus Tullius, *De Natura Deorum*. L.116, 23.

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suffered a cultural revolt of its own. Secularism, the separation between church and state, grew due to the rejection of the divine right of kings and the Enlightenment (Noll, et al., 1983). The Founders could loosely be categorized as Christians in the sense that it was the most common moral code of the West, but they developed personal theologies that adapted Christian social morals for civic means; much in the way of the Romans. The Founders held in common a, “public moral philosophy oriented toward the good of society. Life was a duty for them, and the moral duty was to serve society” (Noll, et al., 1983, p.137). This idea was primarily drawn from Roman stoicism. This philosophy placed the Founders in equal position to the ‘citizen gods’ and their stewardship of Roman civil society. Most importantly, it drew upon pre-existing biblical directives to evangelize and display the love of God to others, giving a distinctly civic role to religion. This role conveniently fit into broader democratic demands, where even those in positions of power were directed towards the interests of *all* society rather than an elite few. The question of who determined and interpreted this consensus was never asked. Their trust became a product of blind, coerced faith in the rhetoric of the ‘honorable’ elite.

Roman history has shown that legitimizing government jurisdiction holds more power than achieving public virtue. Institution of civic religion post-Revolution, “... did more to unite religious groups in the United States than any other factor in colonial America” (Noll, et al., 1983, p.147). Concealment of religious pluralism compelled loyalty and drew the people under one civic moral philosophy. Insurgence was punished by “cutting off non-patriot groups from the mainstream of American life” (Noll, et al., 1983, p.147). Though not as overt as the absolute submission and obedience required by the latter Roman master-gods, the Founders were able to compel obedience through a national religious identity of servanthood to the State. Thus, a post-

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political revolutionary citizenry became the State's collective subject rather than liberated individuals with democratic influence over their political destinies.

Orchestrated unification of the people does not, in and of itself, implicate the Founders as power-mongers, but their monopoly over defining and enforcing civic goals as an elite political class does. Especially in an era where the proceedings of Congress were performed behind literal closed doors (Zelizer, 2014, p.508). The pervading culture of bourgeois gentility gave early American citizens a false sense of trust in politicians. These "natural aristocrats" were believed to possess an inherent moral superiority to the poorer public (Zelizer, 2014, p.748-846). The Founders' gentility assumed integrity, fitness for political office, and an imposition of "smoothness, order, and harmony...putting an overlay of beautiful serenity on the harsh, chaotic realities of human life" (Zelizer, 2014, p.748-759). The flowery language of democracy and public virtue prominent throughout Roman and American civic religion obscured the underlying structures of political power. Questioning why *their* order is imposed and for what reason was as foolish as questioning your natural moral-intellectual superiors or the gods themselves. The only distinction between the powers of the gods and the political elite was the gods' ability to transcend nature (supernatural meaning "above the natural") and the elite's ability to perfect it (as natural aristocrats). If the government is composed of gods and godlike men whose goal is to maintain liberty and public wellbeing, what need is there to revolt? Thus, the early American political elite practiced the old Roman civic religion to make it appear the product of the new revolution. By reversing the secular revolution, reinstating the power of divine right that the colonists believed they had been freed from, and transforming individual liberty into collective submission, the American people unknowingly surrendered the power they had gone to war for.

Restoration of the Classical Order: Neoclassical Architecture and Associationism

Neoclassicism developed in response to the subversion of classical artistic values of stoicism and order by the Baroque and Rococo movements of the 17th and 18th century. The Baroque period was spurred by the religious politics of the Counter-Reformation, when the Council of Trent took a “propagandistic stance, in which art was to serve as a means of extending and simulating the public’s faith in the church” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018). Its attempts at conveying an individual’s intimate religious experience ironically came to symbolize a rather gauche departure from formal rules by emphatically expressing liberty (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2022). The Rococo movement, which came at the close of the Baroque period, was also a political response to the perceived cultural inadequacy of existing art; its subversion of Classical ideals has been described as “superficial, degenerate, and illogical” (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.). In contrast to Vitruvian principles of strength, utility, and beauty with “inviolable limits and boundaries imposed by a divinely ordained *ordo rerum*,” contemporary art was a pointed affront to established order (Porphyrios, 1992, p.36). In this way, they reflected the growing cultural impulse toward freedom in all human expressions, rebelling against the ordered, Classicist hegemony of Western art and corroborating the political upheaval of monarchy as an impingement upon individual liberty.

The political traditions of Rome were identified as the cure to cultural chaos. After an influx of groundbreaking excavations and the promotion of the Grand Tour for art students and the wealthy during the 1700s, ancients were brought to the forefront of Western cultural consciousness (Roth, 1990, p.55). A notable participant of this trend was Thomas Jefferson, who toured Rome during his architectural studies and is often credited with bringing Neoclassicism to the United States as a result (Pierson, 1966, p.36). What Jefferson and other Western elites

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witnessed in the gradual uncovering of Roman history was its political and intellectual underpinnings, which mirrored their greatest modern need: “social and political orderliness” in an era of uncertainty (Bennett, 2018, p.376). Furthermore, the formation of civil society was a topic of great interest to both Enlightenment thinkers and political elites in need of reinstituting government post-revolution. What greater form could the elites follow than the primitive Roman state, whose innovation was the democratic elitist civil order (Roth, 1990, p.53)? Once more, the old political tradition served a special purpose in establishing an allegedly equitable ‘new’ truly founded in preexisting dynamics of power.

With the elite envisioning America as a new Rome, the houses of government were formed after Classical temples, furthering instilling the obligation of political piety. The Capitol has often been described as “an American temple of democracy,” earning its namesake from the Roman Capitoline Hill, which “symbolized the civil religion of the Roman state” in that it was occupied by a temple built specifically to raise public opinion, much in the way America’s own Capitol was (Brand, 2016, p.121-122). William Thornton’s original design for the Capitol ultimately won because of Jefferson’s penchant for the dome of the Pantheon, and his belief in its didactic potential in the American context. The dome would teach “secular civic principles” through the seemingly contradictory visual markers of Roman religious buildings (Brand, 2016, p.121-125). Even the imagery within the Capitol, such as the *Apotheosis of Washington*, the horns of divine edification on political figures, and the mythological murals of the American founding, precariously blurred the lines between the civic and religious until Americans had citizen-gods of their own among the political elite (Brand, 2016, p.121). The success of Neoclassicism’s maintenance of American civic religion may be found in Senator Rufus Choate’s inscription on the Capitol walls a century later: “We have built no temple but the

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Capitol. We consult no common oracle but the Constitution.” (Architect of the Capitol, n.d.) His words perfectly mirror the relationship between civic religion and Neoclassical government architecture: supposed rejection of the old by what is truly the embrace of it.

Due to the elites’ rhetorical distinctions between the secular-civic values of their own nation and the civic religion of ancient Rome, a psychological association of democratic legitimacy was made between the pair through the Neoclassical architecture as a contrast to disorder. Forming associations with a building begins with decoding the encoded information of the physical environment (Rapoport, 1990, p.19). Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lafaiivre argue that the various parts of classical architecture defamiliarize commonplace aspects of a building. For example, windows, ceilings, walls, and doors “provide a new frame with which we understand reality,” therefore proving exceedingly useful as a means to achieve a moral or social purpose (1999, p.278). In the American Neoclassicist project, the architectural form of ancient Roman democracy set itself apart from the modern political landscape of the West and the larger pastoral landscape of the young nation. Government buildings were designated as glorious, ordered spaces conquering the chaos of the surrounding natural landscape and, more importantly, the disorder of the post-Revolutionary age. The architecture’s pagan origins were obfuscated for fear that a contrast would be made between a ‘heretical’ religion and the Christian majority (or between the civic and the religious at all) rather than a purely political comparison between the legitimacy of Roman and American democracy. If the religious aspect of civic religion, and the pious obligation to revere and obey the State were made known, faith would no longer be a blinder to the propaganda of Neoclassical architecture. Thus, the political elites had to shape the public’s consciousness and instill a seemingly organic impulse to revere and obey American

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‘democracy,’ directing their thoughts and actions towards piety in the place of a more justified skepticism.

The political ideals and imagery that made up early American Neoclassicist propaganda had a deep psychological bent which depended upon the untraceable cultural schemata for the Roman republic, and the non-questioning of its politics. Respect for classical civilizations emerged out of Western intellectual tradition, in other words, elitism. Due to the constraints of public colonial education, it is unlikely the lower classes had much knowledge of ancient Rome. Instead, Americans relied on the Founders’ intense admiration and advocacy for its political system (Shamir, 2015, p.1-2). Nevertheless, all tradition is, in some way, inherited: it is not something one perceives to be “imposed by censorship and control”, rather we recognize ourselves in it (Porphyrios, 1992, p.92-93). For people to embrace and cultivate tradition—to witness a reference to the Romans and associate it with an honorable rather than virulently unequal democratic system—it must be internalized (Porphyrios, 1992, p.90-93). The schemata tradition instills appears uncited, occurring within the subconscious and seeming to reflect personal rather than imposed moral values. This untraceable, ‘self-originating’ process of schematic development was undoubtedly the most useful tool for obligating political piety to the Roman-American civic model. Through the Founders’ outspoken respect for the Roman regime and the public’s reliance upon them as natural aristocrats with superior education, the public consciousness was altered in favor of an elite political system exceedingly like Rome’s. Ultimately, the people were denied the right to individually think about, let alone scrutinize, the nation their government was making itself in the image of.

The artistic movements of free expression and chaos came under the old order of uniformity, falsely but convincingly advertising itself as the liberating democracy the Americans

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risked everything for in the Revolution. With visual proof that democratic government had been won, that the elites were creating a nation as “free and equal” as that of the Romans, piety for the civic religion of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ created a people without need for further revolution. Satisfaction with the visual signs of democracy in Neoclassical government architecture developed trust in its commissioner-rulers as legitimate seekers of the public good. With that trust the American people easily surrendered their natural powers as free individuals to tyrannical sovereigns with claws deep in the public psyche.

The Internalizing Nature of Propaganda: Subsuming Self into State

Perhaps the most insidious reversal of revolution by the elites in the 18th century was the transformation of individual liberty into unified loyalty to the State. The most powerful undercut to a unified movement striving for liberty is not a sudden, forceful dispersion, but co-opting and redirecting its most fundamental, energizing passions (Piven, et al., 1979, p.387). This is most often achieved through the appearance of “meet[ing] the moral demands of the movement, and thus rob[bing] it of its support without actually yielding much by way of tangible gains” (Piven, et al., 1979, p.387). To establish the appearance of responsive democratic leaders who sought the self-determination the people pressed for in the Revolution, the elite became the figurative and literal architects of democracy. There could be no surer sign of their shared cause than the symbols of the glorious Roman republic within their own American. The subsequent unification of the political elite’s goals with the “goals of the people” restored the regular operations, or order, necessary for a regime to maintain its popular support (Piven, et al., 1979, p.386). In a sense, the democratic symbolism and legitimizing power of Capitol architecture were built *together* by a manipulated, vulnerable people and a cunning elite class.

American Neoclassicist propaganda functioned to persuade the public that they were the originators of elitist conceptions of representative democracy rather than unknowing, powerless receptors of them. This is a psychological process I have named “the internalizing nature of propaganda,” in which moral-political biases appear to independently and inherently exist within oneself, merely being ‘drawn out’ by responses to visual and psychological stimuli offered by propaganda. One cannot distinguish between personal interpretation and propaganda; or sincere personal values and the schemata installed by tradition. Propaganda *is* interpretation, developed from tradition. Thus, if moral-political values addressed by propaganda appear to stem from the self, there is no cause to question the validity of whatever ideology it espouses—you are not being told to believe something, you already do.

At the heart of the elites’ political campaign against revolution was subsuming the self into the State until the two were indistinguishable—a key quality of fascism. The success of a fascist state “depend[s] on a unified polity that put[s] the group welfare above the individual’s (Soucy, 2019, p.2).” Considering the institution of civic religion, whose ultimate goal was to achieve the public good, the moral impulse of the people had already been directed away from the individualism that characterized the Revolutionary goal of self-determination. This is not to imply that the encouragement of civic virtue is fascist. The prescribed virtues of Roman-American civic religion *were* fascist in that they functioned to deny freedom of individuality in favor of a nationalist group identity enforcing loyalty and submission to the State (Noll, et al., 1983, p.147). The moral-political obligations of Roman-American civic religion likewise echo what would come to be the central philosophies of 19th century fascist leaders. Take, for example, this passage from Benito Mussolini’s *Doctrine of Fascism*:

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Therefore life, as conceived of by the Fascist, is serious, austere, and religious; all its manifestations are poised in a world sustained by moral forces and subject to spiritual responsibilities...man is viewed in his immanent relation to a higher law, endowed with an objective will transcending the individual and raising him to conscious membership of a spiritual society (1938, p.1)

The concept of a higher law directing morality and membership to a spiritual society is so broad an idea that it could hardly be accused of any overt vice, especially in the use of such virtuous language. But the vicious ways of the State made civil society spiritual to compel piety for it, defined the achievement of a “moral life” as submission to an elite political agenda, and used this “higher law” to revoke individual identity and impose instead a group identity of servanthood to “spiritual,” or civic religious society, the State.

The greatest threat to the power of the political elite in both the 18th century and our modern age is the assertion of individual liberty. Bringing the individual into a patriotic, quasi-religious nationalist identity achieved the unification between the liberated self and the State as sole guarantor of said liberty. In a classic social contract, post-Revolutionary Americans surrendered their individual powers for collective security in a republic controlled by the political elite. We gained liberty and justice for all — as a group pious and quiescent enough to never take hold of either.

Conclusion

When we gaze up at the Capitol building and feel a deep, personal sense of its majesty, we are inheritors of an over 2,300-year-old Western political tradition of subservience to oppressive power. In 246 years of United States history, the only whisper of revolution came on January 6th, 2021, finding itself on those same white marble steps, the very temple of American democracy. And yet, its cause was ignorant and vain, serving fascist power and displaying the violent consequences of civic religion—rather than uprooting it, the people fought to defend it. The dialectic nature of history is ineffable: against every revolution rises a counter-revolution and what is gained is lost in the inconstant tides of culture. The only constant is the return to quiescence—and by whose design other than an elite socioeconomic class whose power ebbs and flows yet is never damned. We will witness these struggles between: secularism and religion; expressive and stoic art; political order and disordered chaos again in the future. The interruption of this cycle and reversal of the internalizing nature of propaganda must begin with the individual self and conscious resistance to what is shown by the State. Aesthetic injustice looks like government buildings that remain white and pristine throughout the history of its people's suffering, serving as a beacon of hope instead of changing reality. Aesthetic justice looks like murals and graffiti on old store sides, footprints and drawings in once-wet concrete, government buildings that are designed to be occupied by the modern, progressing living instead of the ancient, inoperative dead. The art of change is disorder. The philosophy of change is disruption. The politics of change is dissolution. To progress, we must exit the sacred, ordered space of State subjection and dwell, for a while, in the urban chaos of liberated individuality, re-learning what it means to live together until we come under the order of freedom in fraternity.

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