THINKINGS 13: COLLECTED INTERVENTIONS, EVOCATIONS, READINGS 2023-2024

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Interventions

Starting From Cioran: A Meditation

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I have made my living as a social philosopher, influenced above all by Marx, Marcuse, and John McMurtry. The thread that connects them and which I have used to stitch my own thoughts together is the unique value of human life. All the arguments that I have directed against the social, economic, political, and cultural structures of capitalist society have been developed from the principle that they are unnecessarily constraining of human sensibility, relationship, and creativity. Where I differ from those three influences is that I have also always been haunted by the existential problem of the consequences of a materialist understanding of human origins. If the universe began from nothing and will eventually decay back into nothing, if all matter and energy will run down in the heat death of the universe and we are matter and energy, then at the end of time human history will have amounted to nothing. Once the last proton decays and Being returns to the absolute silence of empty space from whence it came there will be no one to tally up the score to determine ultimate winners and losers. But if there are no ultimate winners and losers, if there is no cosmic purpose and no divinity to shepherd us to salvation, then does it not follow that our being here is meaningless, absurd, as Camus argued? And if life is meaningless and absurd then does it not follow, as Dostoevsky worried, "that nothing is true and everything is permitted?"

These questions press themselves upon my mind with the same urgency and intensity today as they did as a teenager when I was first struck by the implications of my own mortality. Trying to imagine one's own not-being inspires a "special kind of being afraid," as Philip Larkin says in his unforgettable "Aubade." But one cannot live inside one's own skull: the fear of death is ultimately a spur to living, as Camus also argued. The essence of nihilism is not the belief that life is without meaning or value. Rather, I think that nihilism forces us to value our real life, this *one* we have right now, as ultimate. The universe exploded into being from nothing and will return to nothing, but *at this moment in time* everyone alive is very much something. The honest admission that life is, biologically considered, contingent and finite, can lead to despair, can lead to a flight into comforting illusion, but it can also be the first step towards a re-valuation of life. If this one life is all that anyone has then every other value must serve it rather than, as most political ideologies maintain, life serving it. Nihilism need not lead to the immoralism that Dostoevsky was keen to pin on it. It can equally well expose the immorality at the heart of the religious or political instrumentalization of life-value. If life is a singularity then it is of infinite value. People cannot be substituted for one another: one generation's pain is not made good by a future generation's joy and what one believes does not elevate one's importance over others who believe differently. Everyone is on the same plane: no one is chosen, no one matters to the stars, no one will be saved, but also no one will be damned. All that matters is the quality of this moment.

E.M. Cioran was a Romanian nihilist — what? philosopher?, poet? provocateur *sui generis* like Nietzsche? Whatever one wants to call him, his aphorisms, like Nietzsche's before him, expose the abyss on which human thinking constructs the foundations on which it builds its systems. No one in the twentieth century has tried to actively affirm the nothingness and meaninglessness of our existence with more honesty. Although he extols the courage of the suicide on almost every page, he does not– like Kirilov in Dostoevsky's *The Possessed*, go through with it himself.

Kirilov wanted to prove by his suicide that human beings are absolutely free– that we have the power of the gods over life and death. Dostoevsky presents him as a *reductio ad absurdum* of nihilism: he kills himself, and nothing changes. Cioran's inability to remove himself from the life that he claims is meaningless proves something else– that life does not have to have an ultimate purpose in order to be meaningful and valuable.

Marx said that thinking has to be radical, has to get to the root of the problem, and the root of the problem for human beings are human beings themselves (i.e., we have the power to change our societies). I think the root lies one layer of soil deeper: the problem for human beings is that we can trace the history of being back to non-being, and thus contemplate the contingency and finitude of everything. But once we have confronted ourselves with the reality that we could just as easily not have been as been, and that one day we will no longer be no matter how we organize our societies, we should rejoice that we are here right now. Nihilism could produce despair, but it can equally well spur us to *cherish* life as the precious accident that it is. if we cherish life we must also cherish the material conditions that sustain it. So nihilism would also be a spur towards grounding production and distribution in life-need, not capital accumulation. Everyone is in the same boat, remember, and everyone therefore has the same legitimate claim on the resources that will keep them going. People do not need food because they are Catholics, or Buddhists, or atheist materialists. We need food because our organism requires energy. Start from that precious and fragile nature of *life* and not the specialness of some one form of life and universal sharing follows.

That which is invulnerable does not require care. People do not pray to their gods so that the gods are kept safe; they prey to the gods to keep their communities safe from the dangers that mortals face. But if there are no gods why live? Because this one life is all that we have. If we choose life we might choose to care only for ourselves, or for a subset of human beings. But we might also become capable of valuing everyone equally as a fellow sufferer.

I submit that it is impossible to strictly speaking care only for oneself. Donne is correct: no one is an island, and trying to live as if one were would lead to self-destruction. Plato laid bare the self-undermining logic of the pure egoism of the tyrant who destroys himself because he makes enemies of everyone else. The second possibility structures human history. To this point history has been the story of what happens when we care for only a subset of other human beings: some groups have developed at the expense of others and warfare has been a near constant. Universalist philosophies and religions have arisen to combat this division. Stoicism, Christianity, Islam, and Marxism all stake their claim on the priority of human sameness over difference, but they mediate human identity through the particularity of their singular interpretation. They argue that the world *will be one*, once everyone has become Christian (or the right sect of Christianity), or Muslim (or the right sect of Islam), or after the revolution (led by the right sect of Marxism). What is left but to start from the value of life as an unrepeatable gift of the evolution of matter and energy, equally valuable to everyone lucky enough to be thrown in to being (Heidegger)? Nihilism, calumnied as a license for murder and mayhem, might actually be the disposition best attuned to the real value of life.

The infinite value of human life is implicit in Marx's belief that in a socialist society everyone will be exactly what they reveal themselves to be through their own activity. Money and the

symbolic capital it can purchase will no longer be meaningful: if you want friends you will have to be friendly, if you want resources for your own projects you will have to contribute. And people will contribute, Marx believes because, once they see their efforts realized in the enjoyment of others' lives, work will become "life's primary need." (*Critique of the Gotha Program*). But neither Marx nor subsequent generations of less philosophical Marxists examined politics through the lens of the infinite value of life. Instead, they viewed the infinite value of life through the lens of political struggle, and concluded that life will have infinite value under socialism, but at present has only instrumental value as a resource for the struggle. But once political struggle becomes a matter of redemption it is too easy to adopt violent strategies that are excused by the future dividends that they will eventually pay. As of yet, the account is still outstanding. Does not *critical* theory insist on the need for a radical break with the thinking that has underlined the failed politics of our own and all previous ages?

Nihilism is the most radical break with the structure of thought that underlies the politics of sacrificing the present for the future. Nihilism turns Macbeth's lament against itself. Life "signifies nothing" but the "sound and fury" with which it is filled is the substance of the tale, and we are idiots only if we misunderstand the temporal dynamics of valuation. Life is not a sign of some deeper reality; it does not point beyond itself to some transcendent template that allows us to decode its meaning. It has no meaning in that sense. But the sound and fury is real, it impresses itself on us whether we want it to or not, and it forces us to respond. Transcendent purposes are nothing, they do not exist, but our sensuous relationship to the universe and to each other is real and– so long as we choose life– valuable.

Cioran is unconcerned with the political implications of his arguments, but he is– perhaps despite his intentions– a profound advocate for the supreme value of life as it really is. "It is because it rests on nothing, because it lacks even the shadow of an argument that we preserve life … We cling to days because the desire to die is too logical…. Give life a specific goal and it immediately loses its attraction. The inexactitude of its ends makes life superior to death." (*A Short History of Decay*, 10-11). Every day brings us one step closer to death. But so long as we are stepping we are not dead and because there is no omniscience that already knows where the path we are creating by walking will lead, it is worth staying alive if for no other reason than to see what lies around the bend. The nothingness in which we move is the condition of our freedom, as Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir argued. Would you really want to be a marionette in a divine puppet show with God pulling the strings? If *that* were so, *then* human life would have no value. The same holds true if we replace God with History.

Marx believed that we are the root of our own problem because we only had to recognize our ability to change our societies in order to "solve the riddle of history." Marx was correct. But the means by which subsequent Marxists and other liberation movements have pursued this goal has only ever led to ironic results. Cioran lays bear the irony: "Truths begin by a conflict with the police and end by calling them in, for each absurdity we have suffered for degenerates into a legality, as every martyrdom ends in the paragraphs of the Law." (74) Dogmatism is the slayer of dreams of liberation, because dogmatism is about truth while liberation is about life-activity. Forms of life are not true or false, they are modes of activity. Doctrines are true or false– or their adherents insist that they are true and false. As soon as someone becomes convinced that their doctrine is absolutely true they are not only willing to kill for it, they feel themselves obligated to

kill for it. To allow others to wallow in darkness when one has the truth is sin. Better to be burned in an *auto da fe* than to live as a heretic. So the dogmatist lights the match that sets the stake ablaze. We may posit as a basic condition of the goodness of a form of activity that it does not depend upon the killing of others. As a corollary we may infer that no form of life should be imposed through violence on other people.

Dostoevsky worried that if there were no God everything would be permitted, but (as Camus pointed out) people also conclude that if God is on their side then everything is permitted *to them.* But if we think of truth in human terms only, as a shared resource for *living,* then the question of killing for the truth becomes a contradiction in terms. We need to understand the world so that we can produce and use the resources that we require in a materially rational way. We cannot survive and continually mistake toxins for nutrients, or produce beyond the carrying capacities of the natural world. But taxonomy and ecology are not principles to go to the wall for: only a completely irrational zealot would go to war against scientific generalizations that prove themselves in practice everyday. Joseph Conrad exposes the idiocy of the anarchists at the centre of his novel *The Secret Agent* by having them declare war on geography by trying to blow up the Greenwich observatory.

The human form of truth is an open weave. The dogmatist, the zealot, do not want inquiry but finality. “The mistake of every doctrine of deliverance is to suppress poetry, climate of the incomplete. The poet would betray himself if he aspired to be saved: salvation is the death of song; the negation of art and mind.” (28) To be incomplete is to be open, but also to suffer: “We exist only in so far as we suffer.” (28) But suffering is the world coursing through us every moment. To suffer means to undergo, to be subject to: to suffer is therefore synonymous with receptivity as the origin of all human thinking and action. Suffering as receptivity is thus also, as Feuerbach argued, the mother of poetry (and death the mother of beauty, as Wallace Stevens added). We might therefore think of poetry not as a species of literature but more broadly as as philosophy that invokes rather than argues, suggests, points to, opens up, illuminates self-consciously from one perspective only, deliberately leaving open the possibility of others adopting other perspectives. Nihilism is the supreme life-value of this moment, the invitation to savour the magnificent surface of things.

Is Philosophical Argument Powerless?

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Mainstream political commentators and empirically minded political scientists have been sounding the alarm about growing social polarization within the liberal-democratic world and between the Global North and the Global South. Radical critics of liberal-democratic capitalism should perhaps be pleased: sharpening social contradictions portend an era of fundamental change. It does feel as if we have entered into a period of severe social crisis, but the dominant political signs point to the right and not the left (as narrowly or broadly as one wants to extend the concept of "left") capitalizing on the tensions. Far right parties have been elected in Sweden, Italy, and Slovakia, the atavistic populism of Modi rules the world's largest country, Israel's Netanyahu has just declared war on Hamas (and by extension, the Palestinian people generally). Impossible as it is to believe, there is a 50 50 chance that Donald Trump wins the US Presidency a second time. First time tragedy, second time farce indeed.

The left does not suffer from a lack of ideas but from a lack of credibility. The far left is too concentrated in academia to have a noticeable effect on global political trends or national policy. The social democratic left, it seems, has burned too many bridges to the working class in Europe to function as an effective counter to the right-wing outrage machine. The right has effectively mobilised anxieties about immigration and economic stagnation while the left too often responds with slogans about open borders and unlimited hospitality towards migrants that sound the right notes and are rooted in the correct life-values, but fail to resonate politically and do not address the real pressures on working class living standards that keep people awake at night.

From a philosophical perspective what worries me is that, in the abstract, the left has the better objective arguments. Migrants suffer from structures and dynamics not of their own choosing; erecting barriers that cause them to drawn in the Mediterranean is inhuman. Yet, time and again, abstract invocations of humanitarian concern fail to carry the day, their force dying out as soon as they run into the brick wall of political expediency. The abiding belief of philosophy is that the truth will out and the better argument will eventually carry the day. But where is this power when it comes to the resolution of long standing political problems. Hamas launched the October attacks on Israel because Israeli policy over seventy years have rendered talk useless. But it does not take a strategic genius to see that Hamas' strikes will unify what was becoming a deeply divided Israeli society, give *carte blanche* to settlers to launch even more extreme racist violence against Palestinians, and allow the Israeli defence forces to flatten Gaza and whatever they decide to bomb. Philosophically, in other words, Hamas's decision was understandable,

Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of history will not be surprised that the immediate pressures of political decision-making have once again trumped philosophical argument. When push comes to shove, critical voices without armed backing are easily liquidated. Socrates was executed, Giordano Bruno burned at the stake, and Spinoza sent off to Leiden to grind lenses. Christianity is a philosophy of love and Marx proclaimed that the workers of the world had no

country. But Christians have loved their enemies by destroying them and the workers of the world are rather too easily mobilised to kill each other for the sake of a flag.

That the same general problems seems to repeat itself for thousands of years must be dismaying to anyone who is committed to the principle that fundamental social problems can be solved by rational argument and without violence. I believe that all philosophies, even those which try to explain the historical necessity of violence, are peace-loving at root. Philosophers talk and write and even if what they talk and write about is the reason why war and violence can never be eliminated from history, still they assert that through the tip of a pen and not the barrel of a gun. Such thinkers thus draw a distinction, at least in practice, between their own commitments to peaceful argument and the historical forces that cause wars. But if it is possible to sit quietly and write about historical causes, to understand them in other words, it should be possible to convince the people who make the decisions to understand those causes too, and then avoid them when the pressure that turn conflict towards mass violence increase.

Should philosophers fold their tent and stop arguing that a better means of social change than organized life-destruction is possible? Perhaps, but that would be to admit that philosophy as such has no role. I am not talking about "philosophy" the academic subject, but philosophy as it has always been: open ended inquiry into the human condition. Since we must live together on this planet, open ended inquiry into the human condition cannot but arrive at problems of how we can at least stay out of each other's way and at best how we can organize global life such that our different societies and cultures form harmonious communities that dynamically interact in ways that preserve what is valuable in the existing cultures while constantly engendering novel forms of symbolic life.

Let us assume that philosophers (that is, anyone who engages in these sorts of reflections and makes these sorts of inquiries) achieves some level of understanding of the problems involved. Understanding is not an abstract intellectual achievement; by its very nature it has practical and transformative effects. If one understands what poison is, *one does not ingest it.* If one claims to understand but continues to act in a way contrary to the truth purportedly understood, one has not yet achieved real understanding. So politicians who claim to understand what is good for their own people, or, indeed, the whole of humanity, manifestly do not understand what is good if they mobilise armies to kill for it. All human goods, those that can be realised in time, are experiences or activities. Experiences and activities are functions of living, self-conscious organisms. if human goods are functions of human experience and activity then they are, in general, universal. Different people value different experiences and activities, and, to them, the content matters. However, from a philosophical perspective that tries to understand the good for human beings as such, what matters is the form: all human goods are expressions of our capacity to sense, experience, and interpret the world and to act in it in various ways.

What would be the practical result of understanding this conclusion (assuming that it is true)? No one would be willing to kill– to undermine the conditions of experience and activity, i.e., the basis of all human goods– for the sake of imposing any particular content on other people who have different concrete values. In short, a life-valuable approach to the problem of the good, properly understood, would undercut all justifications for the use of life-destructive violence in the service of particular ends.

Neither national security, nor spiritual truth, nor economic growth is good in and of itself. National security that can only be achieved by making the peoples of the world friends to each other. Pursuing national security by turning others into enemies to be liquidated undermines its aim. As Hamas has just shown, enemies will find ways to strike blows against even the most powerful opponent. Prosyletizing about the one true way to freedom or salvation likewise is self-undermining. People must find their own path to spiritual truth. The fact that there are many spiritual traditions and that atheists find meaning and purpose in their lives is proof enough that there no religion is compulsory for our spiritual health. If, therefore, that which religious believers value in their beliefs is spiritual health, they must agree that if others feel the *same* way about *different* traditions, or no religious tradition at all, then all are valid ways of realizing spiritual health. Killing others in the belief that you are saving their souls is therefore a contradiction. Believers who understand this conclusion will let everyone live in peace and allow God to sort out our souls after a full and free life.

Likewise, economic growth has no value in itself but is good only in relation to its contributions to overall human well-being. Economic growth must both be measured and governed by life-valuable standards. Growth is good to the extent that it is used to satisfy fundamental natural and socio-cultural needs and that it does not undermine the life-support capacity of nature and depend upon the exploitation of labour. Economic growth of a life-valuable sort would require democratic cooperation and sharing and not, as at present, zero sum conflicts to commodify the world's life-sustaining resources.

The struggle to promote this sort of philosophical understanding is therefore far from useless. However, I do not ask the question of whether it was useful or not, but whether it was powerless or not. And on this question the answer is perhaps more troubling. It seems as though philosophers will never be kings because, in so far as they are philosophers they argue, but kings must be willing to use the sword.

But must they? For obvious reasons social critics point to the violent conflicts roiling one part of the globe or another, but perhaps it is worth pointing out that many, many more conflicts and tensions are resolved without warfare. There have been precious few years over the past 5 millennia free of war somewhere, but with only two exceptions, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945, the whole world has not been at war simultaneously. (And even then, not all nations were direct parties to the fighting, although some, in North Africa and the South Pacific, were victimized by the great powers fighting there). Why should we not see this fact as a hopeful sign, as proof that argument can resolve differences?

The hope is reinforced when we remind ourselves of another historical fact: no movement, no matter how ruthless, has ever been able to kill all of its opponents. Therefore, ultimately, struggles must terminate in the agreement of the parties. Either one side (or some of that side) are won over to their former opponent's position, or they at east agree to some sort of *modus vivendi*. Again, if we actually understand what history teaches (I am not pleading a moral case first of all, but claiming that history teaches the lesson that non-violent conflict resolution is ultimately necessary) different choices can be made as the pressure builds towards war to relieve rather than increase it until armed violence becomes inevitable. The war in Ukraine is a case study in what not to do as tensions increase. .

One must distinguish, I think, mass violence from mass struggle. Philosophical arguments are not spells or incantations that change reality just as soon as they are spoken. If war is politics by other means (von Clausewitz) perhaps we can say that demonstrations, strikes, pickets, boycotts, and the organization of new political movements are argument by other means. Like arguments they attempt to change reality without physically liquidating the opponents. However heroic struggles to the death have been portrayed as in history, the attempt to achieve fundamental social change through violent means never succeeds in fully destroying the enemy and always damages and destroys the democratic values of the movement that chooses the violent path. The historical evidence suggests that people do not normally spontaneously kill other humans, they have to be motivated to do so. The hardening of head and heart which killing requires impairs the subsequent ability to live in democratic peace afterwards.

Understanding is the precondition of our transcending mechanical necessity in history. It is true that conflicts can reach a point where the use of violence becomes necessary. If you know that your opponent is going to strike you must strike first or risk destruction. But if we study the history of past conflicts we can see that there are typically opportunities to defuse tensions that are missed. The US could have sat down with Russia to discuss its security concerns; the Minsk accords could have been enforced. Israel could have allowed for the creation of a territorially integral, fully sovereign Palestinian state. These failures are a tragedy for everyone involved, but they also teach a lesson for the future: one must take the other side’s concerns seriously.

When parties to a conflict start from that principle (not a naive moralistic assumption but fruit of historical inquiry) they can become partners in dialogue. They do not have to love or even care for each other, they just have to respect the fact that the other side has a perspective. Sharing perspectives and finding a compromise is life-preserving: neither side gets everything that they want, but everyone lives to enjoy another day, and as enjoyable days pile up, ancient hatreds fade and new forms of cooperative interaction, new forms of world-creation and life-value become possible.

Can Reason Win the Day?

Originally posted 30 April 30, 2024

The rapid spread of student protests and encampments across the US provokes inevitable comparisons with the student anti-war and anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s. There are solid grounds for comparison. Solidarity with a long-oppressed people infused with youthful enthusiasm and energy has put university administrations and governments on the defensive. They have responded with a confused blend of police repression and negotiations that tracks the fault lines of contemporary America, exposing yet again its *crise de conscience* in the post-George Floyd era: is America still the indispensable country, the shining beacon on the hill, or is it a racist police state, the destroyer of dreams, the graveyard of hopes?

The federal government and Democratic-led states are especially trapped. Their oath of office swears them to uphold the constitution (in which freedom of speech is sacrosanct) and their left-posturing commits them to support "social justice" struggles. On the other hand, worries that the Right wing amplification of particular examples of obnoxious rhetoric will succeed in pushing moderates into the arms of Republicans pushes them towards repressive action. University administrators (for whom I do not generally feel sympathy) are in an even more precarious political situation. Young activists are incautious and say dumb things. In an age where mistakes will be recorded and repeated endlessly, unthinking and overzealous sloganeering ("Zionists don't deserve to live") is immediately weaponized to discredit the entire Palestinian solidarity movement. At the same time, the solidarity movement is a movement, it is not the university, which, as an institution, cannot become a vehicle for any partisan project. Since many Jewish students feel understandably threatened, the administration cannot simply ignore them, because their function is to administer the university as a whole.

Nevertheless, however difficult the situation they face, they must resist calls from the right and wealthy donors to violently dismantle the encampments. Fortunately, the 1960's has not repeated itself in all respects, yet. No one has blown up or burned down ROTC offices and the National Guard have not been called in, as they in fact were against student protesters in 1970 at Kent State, resulting in the killing of four unarmed students and a national student strike that closed hundreds of universities and colleges. University administrators would do well to review the lessons of this dark chapter of the 1960's anti-War movement.

As university administrators, their primary duty is to protect the integrity of the institution, but the integrity of the institution depends upon academic freedom, not police repression or worse. Without academic freedom there is no unconstrained exchange of ideas and arguments, and therefore no chance for the better argument to emerge from a process of intellectual contestation. Academic freedom involves the right to publicly manifest one's ideas, not only in academic papers, but in the popular press, on blogs and social media, and, yes, in an encampment in the quad as well. Arguments are not just verbal; visual manifestations and symbolic representations can express premises and conclusions (as my former Provost and now President of Trent University , Leo Groarke, has long argued). An encampment is a political occupation, but it makes an argument: the situation that we are protesting is so egregious that the public must be directly and daily confronted with opposition to it. If the public cannot ignore the situation they must join the protestors in opposition, or become complicit with the oppressors.

The right will not decode the political argument beneath the visible symbols of occupation. They will not patiently engage but will demand direct repressive action. What about the chants, “From the River to the Sea, Palestine Will be Free” they say? What about the overt support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran? The answer is that chants are chants, they are meant to arouse political passion; in themselves they are not objectively harmful. Maoist students chanted “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh, the NLF is going to win” in the 1960s and entertained hair-raisingly naive positions about what was happening in the Cultural Revolution. What was happening was an anti-intellectual terror campaign– which no one left the safety of American campuses to join. It is easy to entertain illusions when one is not in the thick of the fight. Brandishing a sign about the al-Qassam brigades is different from brandishing an AK-47. Serious people would go and join, but just as no US students signed up to fight for the NLF, none that I know of are signing up for the armed struggle they claim to support.

The conclusion: these are not terrorists in training but excited young people whose tongues sometimes get ahead of their brains. The correct response is to engage in serious political argument. That is one reason why universities are worth supporting. But Jewish students feel threatened, a critic will further rejoin. I can understand that some might, (others have joined the protests). Nevertheless, feeling threatened and being physically threatened are distinct. (A lesson that the campus left must learn as well). Where there is sharp opposition each side will make the other feel uncomfortable: to wish otherwise is to wish away political conflict. But there will be political conflict until its underlying causes have been solved. People have been trying to diagnose those causes since Plato, so …

… they probably will not be resolved anytime soon …

… which is why I am skeptical that the most radical of the protestors will be able to maintain much less build momentum. Protests cannot generate self-sustaining energy but have to be fed by the superogatory commitment of the the protestors. A logic of escalation cannot succeed unless it draws massive numbers of people into the fight, but in a period of relatively low levels of political consciousness, radicals tend to isolate themselves and lose connection with the majority of people who would have to come on board in order to sustain the struggle. Exhortation only goes so far and movements run the risk of succumbing to the law of political entropy, as Black Lives Matters street demonstrations proved a few summers ago.

Unsurprisingly, given the self-absorption of Americans, the actions of a few thousand college students have detracted attention from the real action: on the ground in Israel and Gaza. There, something potentially ground-breaking has happened. Khalil al-Hayya, member of the Hamas politburo, stated that the group would be willing to disarm and transform into a civilian political movement in return for a two state solution, with Israel defined by its 1967 borders and a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. What motivated such an announcement and how sincere it was remain open questions, but even if it were being floated to make Hamas appear more reasonable in Western eyes in order to continue to increase pressure on Israel, it proves that they can be politically reasonable, despite the maximalist demands for the destruction of Israel in their 1988 Covenant. (The 2017 Charter accepts the principle that the 1967 borders will form the basis of a future Palestinian state. Thanks to Ali El-Mokadem for drawing my attention to the difference between the two documents.) The politically rational response would be to seize upon

this opening– thin as it may be– and build from there towards comprehensive negotiations. One can be certain that the present Israeli government– and no doubt harder-line factions in Hamas– will not do the politically rational thing. But the very airing of the suggestion shows that negotiations are always possible, even with groups who start out saying that they will never negotiate.

As always in human history, one is left to lament that political rationality emerges only after the deaths of 35000 in Gaza and 1200 in Israel (and probably more to come). Nevertheless, Hamas opening the door to comprehensive negotiations– fraught as they would be, given the many structural obstacles to a just and lasting peace between Israel and Palestine– proves that history is not only the slaughterhouse of nations (Hegel) but a school from which even the most purportedly irrational and intransigent groups can and do learn. The most important lesson that anyone involved in the struggle against oppression can learn–as I have been arguing in previous posts– is that modes of struggle which leave as many people as possible alive to enjoy the liberated future are superior to heroic military actions which salve the desire for revenge on one side but stoke it on the other. Peace is not so much a moral as it is a practical imperative, the most fundamental social condition of universal life-protection and life-enjoyment.

The Moral Irrationality of Fundamentalism

Originally posted 16 April, 2024

It is easy enough to dismiss the response of Hamas's political leader, Ismail Haniyeh to Israel's assassination of his three sons as the words of a deranged fanatic. Upon being informed that Israeli missiles had killed them, Haniyeh thanked God that they had been martyred. Whatever one might think about Haniyeh at a personal level, philosophy has to try to understand the logic at work in any expressed position and not indulge in dismissive *ad hominem*. Haniyeh's response is important because it lays bear the moral structure of fundamentalist thinking. Note that I say "fundamentalist" and not "religious fundamentalist." I leave out that qualifier deliberately because I want to focus on the genus and not the species. While Haniyeh's brand of religious fundamentalism situates human history as a minor drama in an unfolding divine narrative, the secret to understanding fundamentalism and its moral irrationality is to tease out the way in which it absolutizes the purposes that orient it.

All political struggles are contests over the way in which institutions organize and govern human social life, determine resource distributions, set the relationship between public and private spheres, legitimize the division of labour, and set general boundaries to the formation and pursuit of individual goals. Fundamentalists, whether religious or secular, abstract the end– their preferred configuration of social institutions– from the well-being of people living here and now. Hence fundamentalism always coincides with maximalist and perfectionist programs that value the purity of the goal over the actual well-being of the people that the goal is supposed to serve. To paraphrase Jesus' critique of the rabbis, the fundamentalist forgets that principles are made for human beings, not human beings for principles.

Because the principle is everything for the fundamentalist, the loss of life in pursuit of the complete realization of the principle is not only a necessary sacrifice, it is a supreme value. Haniyeh gives us a particularly vivid example of this form of thinking, but its is only an example, not an archetype. The real problem is the absolutism of the goal, its elevation above the maintenance and improvement of life–the only ultimately coherent goal of political struggle because life is the material condition of all enjoyment.

The question of whether social institutions are or good or bad can only be answered by examining the quality of life of the people whose lives are shaped by the norms the institutions impose. One cannot abstract the institutions from the practical matter of how people govern or are governed, work, relate, reproduce, and shape their individual life-horizons. The fundamentalist does just that: they abstract the goal– national independence, socialism, the glory of the motherland, whatever– from the lives of the people whose existence is a material presupposition of that goal's goodness. Lying at the root of fundamentalist thought therefore is not god but the abstraction of regulating values as ends in themselves from the lives of human beings that give those values material substance and meaning.

Dying for the cause is never good for the person who dies, because they can never experience the better state of affairs for which they struggled. If individuals have only instrumental value as objects of sacrifice for the cause, then loss of life not only does not equal loss of value, loss of life would be gain of value as the number of martyrs soars. Haniyeh implies as much when he

thanked God for the honour of having his children martyred. But Haniyeh forgets the most important question: what good does their martyrdom do *them?* Their life-value is reduced to a mere instrument of the lives of future people who will enjoy what they can no longer experience. "Their pure blood is for the liberation of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, and we will continue to march on our road, and will not hesitate and will not falter. With their blood, we bring about hope, a future and freedom for our people and our cause." But dead people have no future on earth, which is the stage on which political struggles play out. If real value exists only in the other world– in eternal life with the Divine– then struggle for something as comparatively ephemeral as a nation-state is pointless. Political values can only be realized in secular time frames.

Religious fundamentalist thought is always incoherent as a basis for social criticism and justification for political struggle because it locates true value in the eternal. Secular fundamentalist thought is incoherent as a basis for social criticism and justification for political struggle because it demands the perfect realization of ideals. The absolutization of the value of either version's principles reduces people to tools of the ideals. For the fundamentalist, therefore, not the heavens, but everyone alive may perish unless justice is done. But unwillingness to compromise, refusal to consider the interests of the other side, and insistence on a struggle to death in pursuit of a perfectionist version of a maximalist agenda ensures only on-going sacrifice of life, not the concrete improvements in its lived reality which alone explain the purposes of *political* struggle. Conflicts between two fundamentalist movements such as we see between Israelis and Palestinians today cannot be resolved: either side's maximalist agenda could only be realized through the complete defeat or destruction of the other sides, but the numbers are too evenly matched to allow total victory.

Even if Hamas in its present form is thoroughly routed (which I still think is the most likely scenario, especially now that Iran has undermined the baby steps that Biden had been taking to reign in Israel's onslaught in Gaza) new movements will arise until some form of Palestinian nation state has been created. But that will not be a single secular state encompassing all the lands of historical Palestine, because Jewish Israelis are not going anywhere, international law recognizes the legitimacy of the pre-1967 borders, there is no serious movement within Israel in support of a one-state solution, and there is no scenario concretely politically and militarily imaginable in which such a solution could be forced on them. The only way forward is some sort of compromise.

Compromise is anathema to fundamentalists, tantamount to failure, and thus never willingly entertained. Thus Iran, after committing what seems to me to be a colossal tactical and strategic mistake in attacking Israel in response to Israel's strike on its generals in Syria, warns of an even more "devastating" response if– as is almost certain, given the adolescent posturing that passes for foreign policy today– Israel responds to the response. Immediately after the attack Ben Gvir was arguing that Israel should "go crazy" (exactly what it has been doing in Gaza). A strategically rational reaction would be to use the political capital Iran handed back to an Israel that was politically weakened on the international stage by doing nothing. But such is the nature of the "leaders" of existing nation states that the current Israeli government will most likely mindlessly enact the typical schoolboy script and feel the need to punch back.

On and on and on it goes, people dying, infrastructure destroyed, intellect wasted in the production of weapons systems, everyone chanting death until victory– but no one can win, because winning means concrete improvement in life conditions, a goal which can only be achieved when the value of political principles and goals is interpreted in concrete, life-valuable terms. A principled goal is good to the extent that its realization improves the lives of the people who will live under it, by: a) increasing access to the resources, relationships, and institutions that satisfy fundamental natural and social needs, and b) thereby allowing individuals and self-organizing collectivities to more widely and deeply develop, express, and enjoy their life-capacities for experience, imagination, scientific understanding, productive and creative work, mutualistic relationship, meaningful connection to the wider world, and all-round enjoyment of *our finite time on the planet.*

Since we are all crowded together but still divided into nation-states and would-be nation states, the realization of these generic goals requires mutual understanding and accommodation between *peoples* not just people. Real leadership understands the need for mutual accommodation and compromise, both for the sake of solving immediate conflicts and as a step towards a future world in which, perhaps, the narrow horizons of national identity are transcended.

But in order to take that step we must not abstract our principles from lived time. Our feet must be anchored on the ground where our lives play out, not in a fantasy of eternal life or the unsullied perfection of a mere idea. Religion is the heart of a heartless world, true, and principle can expose the contradictions of practice but value, as Nietzsche knew, must be lived here and now or not at all.

“It gives me a melancholy happiness to live in the midst of this confusion of streets, of necessities, of voices: how much enjoyment, impatience, and desire, how much thirsty life and drunkenness of life here every moment. And yet it will soon be so still for all these shouting, lively, life-loving people … How strange that this sole thing that is certain and common to all, exercises almost no influence on men, and that they are furthest from regarding themselves as the brotherhood of death! It makes me happy to see that men do not want to think at all about the idea of death! I would fain do something to make the idea of life even a hundred times more worthy of their attention.” (The Thought of Death, Book Four, Aphorism 278, *The Gay Science*)

Death Disco

Originally posted 2 April, 2024

God, Asleep at the Switch, Again

Every time that fundamentalist lunatics appeal to their conception of the Divine to justify their very secular slaughters, I call to mind the thunderous poetry of the Book of Job. After listening to Job lament the injustice of the losses that God had inflicted upon him, Jehovah bellows: "Who darkens my design with a cloud of thoughtless words? Confront me like man; come, answer my questions. When I formed the earth, where were you then? … Who measured out the earth … who stretched the builders line?" (Job 38 1-7) I read the Eternal One's diatribe as an object lesson in the radical difference between the understanding of a finite, earth-bound being and a divine omniscience. If there is an unbridgeable gap between the way in which an all-powerful intelligence understands the universe and the ways in which human beings see it, then humility would suggest– I take it that this is the point of the Book of Job– that humans not assume that they can see things as God sees them. If that is so, then they ought not assume that God assigns them divine missions that entail the indiscriminate slaughter of fellow humans.

If you pull the trigger, you and the leaders that ordered the attack are responsible.

Imagine the dismay an Eternal intelligence would feel at being invoked as justification for such a futile, murderous rampage as was unleashed against Russia by the four ISIS-K operatives in March? How is it possible for people to convince themselves that there is some coherent link between unbridled slaughter of the unarmed and advancing the political cause they purport to be serving? It is long past the time that the holy warriors of all sects, denominations, and religions stop appealing to their divinity as justification for their actions. The Divinity in which they claim to so ardently believe might not be interested in the human sacrifices that they offer up in its name.

But the problem is not, as secular critics of religion argue, the irrationality at the core of religious belief as such but a general unwillingness to accept personal responsibility for the pain and death one's decisions cause. Secular politicians are also quick to off-load their responsibility for the blood that their strategies and tactics shed to political or military "necessity," to the intransigence of the enemy, the demands of history, the need to protect the revolution or the homeland. The enemy of peace is not fundamentalism or fanaticism *per se* but the inability to feel the depth of pain that violence causes to *fellow human beings.* The function of an appeal to a necessity beyond individual or collective human control, the reduction of human beings to, on the one side, executors of the demands of cosmic or historical forces and, on the other, obstacles to the fulfillment of the goals of those forces is the ultimate enabling condition of mass homicidal violence.

Being and Feeling Responsible

Camus understood this depth enabling condition which unmatched clarity. Reflecting on Ivan Karamazov's horrified exclamation that if there is no God, "nothing is true and everything is

permitted," Camus notes, calmly, wryly, that everything is permitted whether God exists or not, but that it does not follow that nothing is forbidden (The Myth of Sisyphus, p.50). Believers and unbelievers are criminals and that when it comes to social values, nothing is true save those principles to which we commit ourselves. Genuine commitment to a principle means assuming responsibility for the outcomes of actions undertaken on its basis. People who accept responsibility for their decisions are honest: they are "ready to pay up."(p.50) They do not blame the enemy for their tactics, nor God, nor History: the person who acts is responsible. Therefore, if you order an airstrike that kills babies, you are responsible for their screams before they die and the ailing of their parents forever after. Therefore, if you order an attack that kills teenagers gathered to dance or listen to a concert, you are responsible, not the occupying forces, not the God in whose service you believe you are acting.

Mass killing as a political tactic will never stop until those who order it and those who carry it out stop deflecting, stop treating themselves as mere links in a mechanical causal chain, start thinking of themselves as agents who can think and deliberate about what the best course of action is when action is called for, and *feel* the consequences of their decisions. Those invested with political authority make decisions in a context, but if the decision is really a *decision*, it is part of the causal nexus that produces an event. The Hamas leadership could have decided on a different course of action than October 7th, and Israel could also have responded differently. Putin could have re-assessed his strategy in Ukraine after it became apparent that the West was calling his bluff: you can fold your hand and live to play another round or you can push in all of your chips.

The other side of invoking transcendent or historical necessity in order to deflect blame is the suppression of consciousness of the lived reality of fellow human beings by subsuming them under a category: occupier, terrorist, Nazi. Since categories do not have families, do not laugh or cry, have no goals or hopes, nothing valuable is lost when they are attacked. The members of the set cease to be living beings and become things, mere tokens of a type. But the responsible politician has to see that behind the category are people. And this recognition must be reciprocal. And when one realizes that struggles are conducted against people and not categories, and this recognition is reciprocal, it becomes possible to imagine the people who formerly treated each other as enemies stop and open their ears and listen to each other. And then it becomes possible to imagine that the two sides begin to discover the reasons why the other side acts as it does. And then it becomes possible to imagine that both lay their cards on the table, stop appealing to gods and historical forces and reified values and say: "this is what we need, how can we work it out?"

The belief in dialogical reciprocity would be utopian if there were not always people in the combat zones screaming over the explosions that the other side has a point, that ultimately everyone must sit down and talk, so better to do it sooner rather than later, when the body pile is higher the generation who will demand vengeance is larger as a consequence. They are responsible to a deeper principle, one which can also find religious or secular expression: each living being is a an unrepeatable singularity which, once gone, cannot be replaced. Thou shalt not kill because thou lackest the power to reproduce the life you take. New life does not make up for the loss of old life: we mourn the elderly even as we celebrate the birth of a baby.

Everyone who pauses even for a moment can understand that there is no casual connection between terrorist murder and the solution of deep structural problems, no road that leads from mass homicidal bombing to peace with justice for everyone concerned. While our collective intelligence encompasses the universe that we formerly appealed to gods to explain, politically we remain hostage to the illusion that gods and borders decide whose life is valuable and whose may be sacrificed for a greater good. But the only good worth struggling for is the maximal flourishing of the lives of each and all, and *maximal* flourishing, if one thinks through the logical implications, rules out mass sacrifice of present life for the sake of future life.

We who are not in uniform and watch in dismay also have responsibilities. Those responsibilities are not to cheerlead wars as if we were watching a sporting event, not to mindlessly chant slogans or demonize the other side. Our responsibilities are to understand the causes of the problem, criticise strategies and tactics unlikely to solve it, and, perhaps, above all, to stop putting people in charge who will not accept responsibility for the death and sorrow the execution of their orders cause.

We have a responsibility to expose contradictions between principle and practice. Putin said in response to the terror attack, that "We must never forget that we are a multinational, multi-religious country. We must always treat our brothers, representatives of other faiths with respect, as we always do — Muslims, Jews, everyone." But in the Second Chechen War he ordered this, the complete destruction of the Muslim city of Grozny.

We have to call out the hypocrisy of people who claim to lead a moral army and are fighting for a righteous cause and ordered this, the systematic destruction of the life conditions of 2 million people.

And we have to call out the hypocrisy of people who claim to be fighting for the liberation of their people when they pursue that end by means of adventures like this, that lay waste to the lives of people who are going to be their neighbors in any imaginable future political arrangement:

We can learn from the poetry of religion as we can from the experiments of scientists and the arguments of philosophers. We can learn from books and we can learn from experience, from stories and from formal deductions. What matters is not the source of the truth but the truth itself: we are ultimately responsible for the lives we live. When the practical implications of this truth sinks in– intellectually and emotionally– perhaps we will stop repeating the mistakes of the past over and over and over.

Anti-Imperialism, Multipolarity, and Life-Value

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Amongst the laundry-list of platitudes and promissory notes that was the final communique from the recently completed G-20 Summit in Delhi was this truth:

"The global order has undergone dramatic changes since the Second World War due to economic growth and prosperity, decolonization, demographic dividends, technological achievements, emergence of new economic powers and deeper international cooperation. The United Nations must be responsive to the entire membership, faithful to its founding purposes and principles of its Charter and adapted to carrying out its mandate. In this context, we recall the Declaration on the Commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the United Nations (UNGA 75/1) which reaffirmed that our challenges are inter-connected and can only be addressed through reinvigorated multilateralism, reforms and international cooperation. The need for revitalized multilateralism to adequately address contemporary global challenges of the 21st Century, and to make global governance more representative, effective, transparent and accountable, has been voiced at multiple fora. In this context, a more inclusive and reinvigorated multilateralism and reform aimed at implementing the 2030 agenda is essential."

The text is littered with banalities about "inclusion" and "inclusivity," including hopes for an "inclusive" global financial system and "inclusive" information technology policies. It also dedicates sections at the end to promises of policies that are inclusive of the interests of women. The one concrete measure that the group took that gives some substance to the "inclusion" agenda was to admit the African Union as a permanent member.

"We welcome the African Union as a permanent member of the G20 and strongly believe that inclusion of the African Union into the G20 will significantly contribute to addressing the global challenges of our time. We commend the efforts of all G20 members which paved the way for accession of the African Union as a permanent member during India's Presidency of the G20. Africa plays an important role in the global economy. We commit to strengthen our ties with and support the African Union realise the aspirations under Agenda 2063. We also reiterate strong support to Africa, including through the G20 Compact with Africa and G20 Initiative on supporting industrialization in Africa and LDCs. We are supportive of further discussing the deepening of cooperation between the G20 and other regional partners."

Appropriate as it is to acknowledge the global importance of the countries and regions of the global south on an equal footing with America and Europe, lurking not far beneath the surface were the rather less "moral" motives of international *realpolitik*. The United States and its allies lobbied hard to have the group issue a united condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But as a sign of the reality of the power of the major powers of the Global South who have tried

to stay neutral in the conflict between the Us-EU-NATO-Ukraine and Russia, this demand was resisted in favour of a (predictably) abstract and self-contradictory statement:

"We call on all states to uphold the principles of international law including territorial integrity and sovereignty, international humanitarian law, and the multilateral system that safeguards peace and stability. The peaceful resolution of conflicts, and efforts to address crises as well as diplomacy and dialogue are critical. We will unite in our endeavour to address the adverse impact of the war on the global economy and welcome all relevant and constructive initiatives that support a comprehensive, just, and durable peace in Ukraine that will uphold all the Purposes and Principles of the UN Charter for the promotion of peaceful, friendly, and good neighbourly relations among nations in the spirit of 'One Earth, One Family, One Future'."

The problem still, as it has long been, is that opposing sides have opposed views of what international law demands. All major powers have good reason to insist on international law when they claim that their opponents are violating it, but even more powerful reasons for not insisting too strongly that it be enforced, lest they are hoist on their own petard when they decide that reasons of state outweigh abstract considerations of legality when it comes to dealing with their own problems. As international relations realists have long argued, sovereignty outweighs international law when whatever a major power has deemed a vital interest is at stake. America wants to remain free to roam the world imposing its version of "rules based order" on everyone. China and India both have internal insurgencies and separatist movements that they want a free hand to deal with in any way they see fit, and Russia claims that it is protecting the Russian-speaking minority in Eastern and Southern Ukraine from far-right Ukrainian nationalists.

One might think that multilateralism posited as a goal and value of international relations implies global harmony of interests. However, as one can see, the reality is quite otherwise. Multilateralism actually means the right of each state to pursue its interests free from interference from other states, because none are powerful enough to impose their interests as the global norm. Harmony is impossible, because the goals of the major actors are at odds with each other and the interests of smaller states or movements that find themselves trapped in between. Multilateralism is thus not a solution to major international problems but disguises the real structures of conflict that generate the wars and poverty that the document laments. The opposition between Russia and the US and its allies is obvious, but there were other tensions playing out behind the scenes. China and India are clearly in competition to assume the role of leading spokes-state for the interests of the Global South. While Russia was certainly pushed to war by American policy and the Russian-speaking population of eastern and southern Ukraine have legitimate interests and concerns, Putin's attempt to paint the conflict as an anti-imperialist struggle is laughable. One only need bring to mind Russia's racist treatment of minorities from the Central Asian republics, its absolute destruction of Chechnya in the Second Chechnya War, its arrest of anti-war critics and Marxists, and its attempt to re-conquer the lands first annexed to Russia by Catherine the Great to see that there is nothing more (or less) than classic reasons of state behind the decision to invade. The Putin regime has ruthlessly pursued a centrally-managed capitalist economy that has no place for independent unions but now finds it convenient to invoke the Soviet Union's (quite checkered) history of support for anti-imperialist struggling defence of its definition of Russia's national interest.

My point is: anti-imperialism does not mean just anti-American imperialism and is not a positive political value in its own right. Anti-American imperialism is fully compatible with imperialist ambitions within other countries' self-defined spheres of interest. To the indigenous inhabitants of Tibet the fact that it is the Chinese and not the American state that governs their homelands does not make the situation less oppressive. The women of Iran will likely not be mollified by Iranian President Raisi's railing against the United States in his address to the UN General Assembly. They were not motivated to take to the streets last year because of American interference but because his regime murders women who dare to decide how to wear their hair. Neither Multilateralism nor anti-imperialism have value *save as a contribution to global peace, more comprehensive satisfaction of the natural and social needs of each and all, and the creation of the social, political, and economic conditions for the free and full exploration and development of the creative and experiential capacities of each and all, in forms whose appropriateness is decided by the individuals and not a narrow strata of conservative rulers.* The self-determination of nations is valuable only to the extent that it is a political condition for the self-determination of all the members of those nations. Fanon warned long ago that however justified and necessary anti-imperialist national liberation struggles were, they always ran the risk of putting in power a national ruling class that collapses the interest of the people as a whole into its own interests. The Hindu nationalism of a Modi and the conservative Islam of a Raisi are contemporary analogues of the problem that concerned Fanon.

The rising powers of the world are right to remind everyone of the historical injustice they have faced at the hands of American and European colonisers and imperialists. But the logic of the value of self-determination that they invoke in their legitimate critique of American hegemony is universalizing and does not stop at the boundaries of individual states. If India as a whole has the right to determine its own domestic and international policy, then it must recognize that the same right legitimates the struggles of nationalist movements in Kashmir and Sikh struggles for a homeland. If Iran rejects the legitimacy of interference in its internal affairs, it assumes the duty to govern those affairs in keeping with the demands of its own people, who reveal, by their not infrequent taking to the streets *en masse*, that they are tired of paying the price for a conservative theocracy. America will always try to *exploit* such movements, it does not follow that America creates them. Where there are mass political movements there are problems. To be sure, the groups involved must solve their own problems their own way, but the efforts must be genuine and "anti-imperialist" justifications for internal repression of national and social movements must be rejected on grounds that they contradict the universal human value that the particular demand for self-determination contains. That value is the unrepeatable singularity of the life of each and every social self-conscious human agent. No one is born to be the mere instrument of the World Spirit, American manifest destiny, capitalist market forces, or any other abstract, reified force. People are not born to be sacrificed in wars or murdered because they demand for their nation what other nations already enjoy: independence.

How incompatible demands can be resolved without destruction of one or the other side is the most vexing, challenging, and perhaps impossible question in global politics. The twentieth century has taught us that America and Europe have no solutions; that their professed support for national liberation moments or social movements amongst the oppressed is always hypocritical, cynical, and self-interested. It does not follow that a move from a unipolar to a multipolar world *on its own* will make any difference to the poor and oppressed of the world. Likewise, anti-

imperialism is valuable because it opposes the political and economic domination of smaller nations by larger and more powerful states. The member of the smaller states are reduced to mere tools of the interests of the great power. But imperial, neo-imperial, and quasi-imperial power are functions of size and relative strength, not nationality. Think what one will about Lenin, he at least made it clear that Tsarist Russia was an imperial oppressor of Ukraine, the Baltic states, and Poland. No one was a more vehement critic of European imperialism than he was, but he also fought the enemy of imperialism at home. The Bolsheviks withdrew from World War One and the first Soviet Constitution granted independence to the nations engulfed by the Russian empire. Like all the other liberatory values of the revolution national independence for the lands conquered by the Tsars was never realized, of course, but the early leaders of the revolution at least understood that imperialism, not the imperialism of other nations only, was the problem.

Of course, the assertion of general philosophical principles is much easier than working out concrete political solutions. However, the articulation of general principles is not useless if they can function as agreed upon guidelines for the conduct of political life. In all cases, the life-values that alone justify more particular practices and relationships must be drawn out. Multilateralism and anti-imperialism are not valuable in and of themselves but only to the extent that they serve the deeper general purpose of helping to create the political and social conditions for all-round need-satisfaction and thus enabling each person to explore and develop their life-capacities in their own way. Perhaps it is too much too hope that all political powers and movements recognize and act according to these universal life-values. Nevertheless, if those who understand them stop insisting upon their reality because it seems impossible, then reasons of state will certainly continue to dominate actual politics to the detriment of the vast majority of the world's people whose real shared interests will be ignored.

Love is not the Answer, but It is a Start

Originally posted 9 October, 2023

Ideas always come to me from the world when I need them most. Like every other political philosopher in the world I have been reflecting upon the implications of Hamas' attack on southern Israel. What can one say that has not been said before about this seemingly endless dance of destruction between Hamas and Israel? Palestinians, like all people, have the right to resist the unbearable oppression under which they have been forced to live since 1948. They have the right to elect whatever party they think best serves their interests. Western governments' are hypocrites when they decry the loss of Israeli life while for decades ignoring the murder of Palestinians. All of these well-worn truths circulate every time the Gaza cauldron boils over and they do nothing to change the reality on the ground.

The reality on the ground is going to rapidly get worse even than one's worst imagination about what Israel's response would be. Today is Thanksgiving day in Canada, a day usually marked by drinks that begin mid-afternoon and Turkey dinners. In Gaza, it was the day that Israel announced a an absolute, total blockade of the strip: no electricity, no water, no food, no medicine. The strategy is clear: the population will be starved into breaking with Hamas or dying of lack of food or water or bombardment. One could predict that reprisals for a humiliation as deep as Hamas inflicted on Israel would be severe, but the policy announced today is literally medieval. "We are fighting human animals," the Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant announced, "and we are acting accordingly."

The language comes as no surprise. The Netanyahu government is composed of open racists who have long dreamed of a pretext to crush all Palestinian national liberation struggle if not expel the Arab population of Israel and the occupied territories outright. Shockingly, Hamas has given them this pretext. All oppressed people have the right to resist oppression and to choose the means by which that resistance is pursued. But it is the most lunatic, abject, political stupidity to launch an invasion of a state with vastly superior military means under the assumption that a spectacular assault by a few hundred guerrillas will be a crushing blow.

As Gilbert Achcar wrote:

"And whereas it is not difficult to understand the "enough-is-enough" logic behind Hamas's counter-offensive, it is much more doubtful that it will help advance the Palestinian cause beyond the blow to Israel's self-confidence mentioned above. This would have been achieved at a hugely disproportionate cost for the Palestinians.

The very idea that such an operation, however spectacular it was, could achieve "victory" can only stem from the religious type of magical thinking that is characteristic of a fundamentalist movement like Hamas. The distribution by its information service of a video showing the movement's leadership praying to thank God on the morning of 7 October is a good illustration of this thinking. Unfortunately, no magic can alter the fact of Israel's massive military superiority: the result of Israel's new ongoing war against Gaza is certainly going to be devastating."

Slogans and spectacular symbolic operations are one thing. Military and geo-political reality are another. Israel has the means not only to seal off the Gaza strip but to bomb it for a century if it chose to do so. Hamas has no allies anywhere capable of restraining Israel. The EU has cut off all aid to Palestine. China and India are not going to support Islamist movements in any meaningful sense. Russia will certainly try to exploit the tensions for its own purposes in Ukraine, but given what it did to Islamic Chechnya in the second Chechen war, any support it offers the Palestinians would be cynical at best. Hamas's hopes that Hezbollah will intervene from the North are likely to be dashed. And to put an exclamation point on why such intervention would be a bad idea, the US has just repositioned an aircraft carrier battle group off the coast of Lebanon. Given that there are Americans held in Gaza, American intervention from the air cannot be ruled out. Likewise, Iran is unlikely to get further involved. Iran's leaders are thugs but not stupid. When they take a break from ordering their laughably named "morality police' from beating teenage girls to death for showing their hair, they will realise that any attempt to overtly intervene on the ground would risk a massive Israeli response. Does anyone doubt that that Israel would use nuclear weapons against Iran if it felt seriously threatened?

Achcar is once again astute in his analysis:

"On the other hand, if Hamas's leadership had been betting on Lebanon's Hezbollah—and Iran behind it—to join the war at a level that would really put Israel in jeopardy, this bet would be very risky indeed. For not only it is far from certain that Hezbollah would take the high risk of massively entering a new war with Israel, but such a situation, if it were to happen, would inevitably bring Israel to resort unrestrainedly to its massive destructive power (which includes nuclear weapons), thus bringing about a catastrophe of historic magnitude."

Serious critics must also add that attacking military targets is one thing, gunning down unarmed teenagers attending an all night rave is indeed barbaric. Anyone who believes that such tactics can advance a liberatory cause is both politically deluded and morally bankrupt: ends do not justify any means whatsoever. Liberation and vengeance are distinct. Vengeance is born from hatred, justified or not. Liberation is born from the need to live freely: free to create democratic institutions that give voice to the collective goals of people, but also free from ancient hatreds that imprison the emotions and imaginations of people and poison their relationships with each other.

Dancing in the desert is not a capital offense. Singular individuals are not responsible for historical crimes such that they can be legitimately gunned down in cold blood. No North American or European commentator sitting in the safety of their study with their teenage kids or young adults safely at university or exploring their world should be excusing such self-undermining political insanity. No one but lunatic fundamentalists could convince themselves that a rampage against a rave would not unleash the full murderous fury of the Israeli Defence Force. No one but a crazed fundamentalist could contort the idea of an all-powerful, all-perfect deity into a petty human imbecile who wants one group of humans that It created to kill another group that It also created. As ye sew, so shall ye reap, in Israel and Gaza, round and round it goes, occupation breeds resistance, resistance breeds reprisals, reprisals breed resistance, and on and on it goes.

That is not to say that resistance is not fully justified and that the root cause of the violence is Israeli occupation. As horrific as the civilian costs were, one must not shy away from the truth that the conflict is caused by the refusal of Israel to seriously negotiate the creation of a geographically, economically, and politically viable Palestinian state. The question is: what are the most efficacious means for struggling for that state.

Achcar is again insightful:

"Against an oppressor that is far superior in military means, the only truly efficient way of struggle for the Palestinian people is by choosing the terrain on which they can circumvent that superiority. The peak in Palestinian's struggle effectiveness was reached in the year 1988 during the First Intifada, in which the Palestinians deliberately avoided the use of violent means. This led to a deep moral crisis in Israel's society and polity, including its armed forces, and was a key factor in leading the Israeli Rabin-Peres leadership to negotiate the 1993 Oslo Accords with Yasir Arafat—however flawed these accords were, due to the Palestinian leader's indulging in wishful thinking."

As always, the primary victims of Hamas's "heroic" thinking are the mothers and children of Gaza. When I see their tears all I can think about is that they would rather have their dead child alive, happy, in school , playing with other children, than in heaven with the boble martyrs of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. If they want to martyr themselves so be it. But they should do so by means that do not cause the vast majority of Gazans trying to get on with their lives in impossible circumstances to die with them, vaporized by a bomb dropped from an invulnerable plane.

So what was the idea that found me just when I needed it? I was reading a collection of poems by Adrienne Rich last night, and in her notes on the poems she quoted the eccentric Catholic philosopher Simone Weil. "The love of a fellow creature in all its fullness consists simply in the ability to say to him: "What are you going through?" I would only add: and take their response to heart.

If the Israeli, before they vote for far right racists in the misguided belief that only the most hard-hearted killers can protect them, would ask the mother in Gaza "What are you going through," and really listened, perhaps they would could understand, on a human level, why that mother might support people who want to kill Israeli children.

Ultimately, this dance of death will not cease with a political solution, because a political solution requires trust, and trust requires that people ask each other (and mean it) "What are you going through?" Somehow some people on both sides of this conflict are going to have to find the impossible courage to tell their leaders to stop shooting and ask each other: "What are you going through?" And if the Israeli side listens then they will have to prove that they have listened by ending the occupation and creating the conditions for the construction of a viable, prosperous, free Palestinian state.

It seems impossible that two peoples locked in a seeming battle to the death could ever become neighbors and friends to each other. But between 1939 and 1945 Britain and Germany were

locked into another battle to the death, raining incendiary bombs on each other's cities just as Israel is doing today. Human beings can overcome almost any past, eventually, but only once they risk listening to each other.

The Die Has Been Cast: Against Heroic Political Violence and Exterminatory Vengeance

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Dehumanization is *the* classic means of de-legitimating the struggles of oppressed groups. First, the ruling power makes the movement *personal,* portraying political struggle as an attack on the individual members of the dominant group. Once the opposition movement's political goals have been portrayed as a smokescreen hiding their real goal: to kill the individual members of the dominant group, the opposition can be denounced as subhuman killers. All the while, the violence that the dominant group rains daily down upon the oppressed people is ignored.

This pattern is repeated over and over again. The established powers declaim that the oppressed cannot be granted the freedom they demand because they are not really human beings who just want to live as other humans do, in peace, security, and for the sake of enjoying meaningful lives, but wild murderers who would use their freedom to rampage and destroy.

The oppressing power can always point to specific events to bolster their case. If oppression goes on long enough, some groups will be driven to violence. Their acts, and not the history of oppression, will be seized upon as evidence with which to convict the oppressed of crimes against humanity: the humanity of the oppressor.

But "humanity' is not reserved for some specific groups of human beings. Human beings are social self-conscious centres of experience, activity, and enjoyment. Our capacities for receptive enjoyment of the world, thought, planning, creative activity of all sorts, and mutualistic, peaceful relationships with others and the world at large constitute the basis of everyone's legitimate claim to life-security and the means of life-enjoyment. The other names by which we call ourselves: Israeli, Palestinian, Jew, Muslim, are valuable not as such, but only as concrete instantiations of the underlying humanity that links us all beneath constructed historical differences. Those differences are real and valuable, but they are not ultimately valuable, because they presuppose life. People change religions or become atheists, they move to different countries and they change political ideologies: they do not thereby cease to be human beings.

Human beings also fight. No group of human beings is constitutionally warlike or peaceful: violence is a function of socio-historical structures and forces, not the peculiar traits of one or another culture. De-humanization strategies draw attention away from the structure and point it at a one-sided, caricatured portrait of the purported essence of the culture to which the demonized individuals belong, the secret that explains "what they are really like." But this strategy too is generic and not a tactic unique to any particular ruling group. Wherever a group in power needs to justify *itself,* it does so by de-humanizing the culture of the group to which it is opposed.

In a brilliant short essay "Who Thinks Abstractly?" Hegel exposed the way in which demonizing constructions depend upon adopting an ahistorical, or as he says, abstract point of view. His example will be familiar to us: the criminal. When a terrible crime has been committed the newspaper will trumpet the community's outrage and portray the criminal as some beast without

a life-story. They never ask: how did the human being come to be a criminal? Instead, they fixate on the deed without inquiring into the historical process by which a human being became the sort of person that could commit the ghastly crime.

When we encounter political crimes the same sort of ahistorical thinking tends to prevail. The media focuses on the atrocity and not the historical process– the reasons, as Hegel would say– that led up to it. Hard as it is for people to accept, the militants who commit atrocities are human beings. Only human beings can behave inhumanely. The terrorist who blows up a bus or shoots up a rave, and the pilot who bombs civilians and goes home at night to his family are not space aliens. They are human beings as much as the pacifist. When they were born there was no gene that programmed them for a life of violence. If they were lucky their mother held them tenderly in her arms and whispered all the hopes she harbored for them.

But not everyone is lucky. 50 000 pregnant Palestinian women are currently under bombardment by Israel. What will they whisper to their newborns if they survive the onslaught? But even under those circumstances none of those children are fated to become one thing rather than another. Human beings can change, *if* they recognize the causes of their conflicts, actually address them, exchange one-sided justifications in favour of mutual understanding, and understand differences as the concrete form that humanity takes.

A tall order which often seems impossible. But wars end and former enemies can reconcile.

The task of solving problems and forging different futures is delayed when opponents lock into cycles of ultra violence such as we are currently seeing in Gaza and Israel. The reality of political struggle once it takes a predominantly militarized form is that the lives of non-combatants become instrumentalized. Perverse as it is, in war death can be more important than life. The perverse logic of the moral economy of war is the reason why war should be avoided at all costs by liberation movements. Their goals are peace and life-security, and they should choose means consistent with those ends. Non-state terrorism and state-led terroristic bombing campaigns are political choices that movements and governments make. No strategy or tactic is a function of pure mechanical necessity. Other means than military force are always possible.

One would have to be a complete naif to believe that Hamas did not know exactly how brutal an Israeli response to as audacious an attack as that of October 7th would be. Indeed, they openly crowed about luring Israeli forces into a ground invasion. Therefore, they must hope for even more civilian casualties, because they believe that they can turn those images into propaganda vehicles while at the same time dealing Israel such high casualty levels as to tip the strategic balance in their favour.

Israel is obliging. The bombardment of Gaza is shocking to the sensibilities and sentiments of any human being paying attention, but is entirely predictable when judged within the strategic calculus of means by which conflict is pursued. Enjoying complete air superiority, there is no military reason for Israel to stop bombing. Civilian lives are just part of the cost that must be paid.

One can never say for certain what the outcome of war will be. However, from a strategic perspective Hamas may have seriously miscalculated. Trapped without means of re-supply, their fate lies in the hands of the morale of the Israeli army. If it remains as high as it is now in the face of mounting casualties, then Hamas is almost certainly facing its Tamil Tiger moment. In 2009 the Sri Lankan government decided that the time had come to end the threat from the Tigers once for all. They were destroyed as an effective fighting force, along with tens of thousands of civilians.

Gaza is not the first city to be absolutely flattened in an all out war. The world watched in 1999-2000 when Putin completely levelled Grozny during the 2nd Chechen War. Just last winter the world was treated to another Putin extravaganza, when his forces completely destroyed Bakhmut. Hamas has nowhere to go and cannot win by hiding in tunnels. If Israel remains committed to the task there is no doubt that they will obliterate all of Gaza.

And they will tell the world that they were justified and that the complete liquidation of Hamas was necessary. But they will not ask themselves who the human beings who made up Hamas were or what their mothers hoped for their lives to be when they were born. A relative handful of people will protest in solidarity, but they are thousands of miles from the conflict zone and powerless to stop the forces that have been unleashed. The protests will end and Palestinians will be left to their fate, even more impoverished and desperate than they had been before the war.

Hamas believes itself to be engaged in a heroic struggle to the death with an inhuman enemy. Israel is exacting genocidal revenge for the citizens it has lost. Locked in a death dance, neither can comprehend the other's perspective and instead they are trying for the final victory.

There will not be one. If Hamas is destroyed, a new version will emerge. Militarily, Israel cannot be defeated, but, politically, morally, Israel does enormous damage to itself when its leaders openly declare genocidal aims and- what is worse– execute them. It is beyond the capacity of people outside Gaza to imagine what it would be like to know that water, food, medicine, fuel and power have been cut off, and that the power that could force Israel to turn them back on- the United States- is not only not doing so, but parking aircraft carriers off the coast to ensure that Hezbollah does not open a second front.

As sickening a human tragedy as has been ever been written unfolds before our eyes.

Tragedies are difficult to witness, but they also teach lessons. It is time for the politics of heroic self-assertion and sacrifice to end. Justice is not on any one group's side. Justice– getting what one deserves– is a human right. No one deserves to be killed *as a matter of right.* Meditate on the absurdity of a human right to be killed.

National liberation is a human right and as such a life-value. But when the struggle is pursued using life-destruction as a means it contradicts itself and encourages the cycle of killing and revenge that must now work itself out to its undoubtedly bitter end.

Penny Foolish, Pound Foolish

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Seismic waves continue to radiate outward from the Gaza war epicentre to rattle Syria,Jordan, Iran, the Arabian peninsula, and the Red Sea. The obvious solution to the instability and danger to life is to stop the war. But the contending parties vow to not stop the war until their objectives are met. But if the objectives are mutually incompatible (the destruction of Hamas vs. the survival of Hamas as the legitimate governing power in Gaza, freedom for Israeli hostages vs. freedom for all Palestinian prisoners, Israeli security vs the creation of a Palestinian state) only the complete destruction of the other side can secure the victor's demands. But if neither side can be destroyed, permanent conflict must ensure, unless …

… both sides realize that maximalist positions guarantee conflict, conflict guarantees periodic eruptions of violence, and violence destroys the lives that both sides claim to want to protect and improve. Unfortunately, compromise requires leadership of a sort that is rare at moments of severe crisis. The typical response– on abundant display in the current crisis– is adolescent male chest-thumping, posturing, and head-butting. Israel digs itself into a hole by promising the total destruction of Hamas– a goal that it cannot accomplish because Hamas is not an army, but a political movement deeply embedded in the lives of 2.3 million Gazans. Hamas responds by promising the total destruction of the "Zionist entity," an even more preposterous goal, considering the overwhelming military power of Israel, unflagging US financial and military support, and the legitimacy of the pre-1967 borders of Israel under international law. Peace seems unimaginable under these political conditions.

On the periphery are a host of equally tough-talking actors. Iran and Hezbollah keep threatening unspecified catastrophic consequences for Israel and its supporters if the war continues. The US bombs Iraq, Syria, and Yemen in reprisal for the deaths of three US soldiers. The Houthis vow to respond to the response. Meanwhile, people across the region continue to suffer not only the immediate effects of violence but the economic and social consequences of instability and war. Yemen and Gaza are amongst the poorest places on earth, Iraq and Syria have riven by decades of hot and cold civil war. Iran's highly educated youthful population chafes under the impact of sanctions and a sclerotic theocracy. The racist venting of Israel's far right and the pitiless ferocity of its war alienates elements of even its staunchest allies.

Presumably, the point of this conflict, like any conflict, viewed from the perspective of any of its protagonists, is to improve the lives of the people the contending sides represent. While Hamas must certainly have counted on an Israeli ground invasion in response to October 7th, they probably did not bank on the level of destruction that Israel has inflicted. Beneath the rhetoric of destruction lies the positive value of Palestinian self-determination. And beneath the rhetoric of extermination that the Israelis have voiced lies likewise the positive goal of security and life-protection. The idea that the Israeli state as such is illegitimate has no basis under international law. Thus, those who would invoke international law to criticize Israeli tactics in Gaza as genocidal and decry the on-going denial of Palestinians their right to national self-determination must not ignore international law when it comes to the legitimacy of the pre-1967 borders of Israel.

There is war, there is resistance, there is rhetoric, but there is no security, no life-protection, no self-determination, just war setting the stage for more war, if not *ad infinitum*, then at least as far as the eye can see.

Commentators on the left typically focus on the objective causes of conflict in order to insist- not wrongly– that unless objective causes are addressed, conflict and violence will continue.

This insistence is not wrong but, I would argue, it is one-sided. It matters, I think, how objective causes are addressed. The left favours the language of smashing, liquidating, and destroying, but this language betrays, to my mind, the universal value that underlies its criticisms of capitalism and colonialism: the harmonious development of human capacities in a world no longer riven by class conflict, atavistic nationalisms, and fundamentalist obscurantism. Achieving that goal presupposes the satisfaction of both the objective and *subjective* conditions for the creation of a world of self-determining peoples sharing the wealth and joys of our world. Resistance and struggle are not ends in themselves.

Until leaders that thrive on tough talk and demonization of the enemy are replaced with leaders who can argue, listen, respectfully acknowledge the legitimacy of the interests of the other side, and work out pragmatic but honourable compromises, the realization of that universal value is impossible. Objective conditions matter, but so do subjective conditions. Imagine had Stalin and not Gorbachev been the leader of the Soviet Union in 1989. How many millions more bodies would he have piled up in a doomed attempt to save a dying system? Good leadership does not depend upon superior moral virtue, but on the capacity to discern what the historical moment requires. Gorbachev understood that the Soviet economic model could no longer compete with the West. He also understood, more importantly, that no heroic efforts on his part could save the system. His people were done, fed up, no longer willing to be ruled in the old way, as Lenin said. The people of Eastern Europe were even more disillusioned. Wisely, instead of trying to murder his way to political security, he simply let the empire go.

How different, then, was he from Ben Gvir, or Netanyahu, or Yahya Sinwar. Their main failure as leaders is that they they believe that sheer force of will, determination, courage, and ruthlessness can alter the basic structure of the problem that they face. But the problem that they face is precisely that neither one side nor the other can achieve their goals without compromise from the other side.

The adolescent boy challenged to a fight thinks that backing down is weakness. But refusing to fight a futile battle is not weakness (or strength), it is intelligence. In daily life we do not celebrate the person who responds to an insult by kicking the offender in the head. We do not erect statues to parents who beat their children to death. But political leaders are celebrated as decisive and tough-minded for being willing to pay the price of victory, even if that price runs to millions of lives destroyed.

The world does not need saints. It needs intelligent leaders who can study a conflict dispassionately and see the deep structures that prevent resolution on their terms only. Rational understanding can then furnish the political strength needed to tell one’s own side that the old ways cannot work, that the legitimacy of the interests of the other side must be acknowledged,

and that a workable compromise, one that creates space for new forms of peaceful self-development, is needed. As new forms of peaceful self-development evolve, new forms of peaceful interaction between formerly mortal enemies can evolve. We know they can because they already have, many, many times in the past.

Justice can be the enemy of peace when it is asserted in absolute terms against an opponent who can be expected to also invoke it as *their* justifying value. However, if justice is a universal value, then it demands that all people have access to the natural and social resources that free self-development requires as well as effective political institutions through which that collective control can be organized and managed. No *one* has exclusive right to what we all need, but until leaders are in place who recognize and act on this simple truth in the simplest of ways– through negotiation and comprise– war will continue to destroy the very lives in whose name the violent struggles are justified.

Security, national self-determination, and whatever other political value statespersons invoke to justify *themselves* are only good if there are *people* alive to enjoy them.

If the Argument is Bad, Refute It

Originally posted on 29 October, 2023

Only one day after the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations warned that the Ontario government's threat to start monitoring campus groups who criticise Israel would have a chilling effect on academic freedom, Western University in London Ontario announced that a campus imam had been fired for "divisive" speech. How someone is to take a coherent position *on a war* (i.e. a fundamental political division) without being 'divisive' is a question I would like the Western administration to answer. I would also ask how they convinced themselves that *firing* an imam is *not* divisive. I assume that the Islamic students and faculty might find this move all too familiarly divisive.

This attack on the imam's right to articulate his own position on the war is the latest act in a drama playing out on campuses across North America. Major donors have threatened to pull funding from universities in the US judged insufficiently critical of Hamas and not uncritically supportive enough of Israel. In Florida, the state government has effectively dissolved campus Palestinian solidarity groups, while back in Ontario both Toronto Metropolitan University and York are investigating and threatening to sanction student governments and campus groups because of statements in support of the Hamas attacks.

I have made my position on Hamas' tactics clear in my earlier posts on the war. Anyone who understands the Palestinian struggle as a moment in the broader struggle for human freedom has to condemn attacks on Israeli civilians, for both moral and political reasons. Being a member of a nationality or a citizen of a state is not a capital offence. While contradicting the life-value justification for the struggle for national liberation, the Hamas attacks, as they are now finding out, were also monumentally politically stupid. They seem to have been based on a number of miscalculations: that the Israeli government would be willing to exchange Palestinian prisoners for the hostages, that they would eschew the medieval tactic of imposing a complete siege, and that Iran and Hezbollah would be able to deter the complete destruction of Gaza. Instead of negotiations, Israel has been on an arrest rampage that has doubled the number of Palestinian prisoners. The people of Gaza are literally the targets of genocidal violence, while Iran and Hezbollah talk tough but lack the power to decisively alter the conflict. The recent meeting between Hamas and Hezbollah to discuss their "final victory" over Israel was otherworldly in its failure to understand the political reality in which they find themselves.

The intensity of the violence in a region that is no stranger to war has provoked heated rhetoric on both sides of the conflict. University campuses have been flashpoints for solidarity rallies. As it always does, the Israeli state tries to short-circuit criticism of its policies by attacking anyone with the temerity to question its goals as an anti-Semite. They have been joined this time by the billionaires pulling funding and governments and university administrators threatening student groups. Their combined assault on academic freedom reveals a three-fold problem with the contemporary university.

First of all, it reveals the danger of relying upon private funding. Billionaires giveth and billionaires taketh away. When they give, they give on their terms, so that if the university becomes addicted to those donations they will find themselves, like all junkies, having to sing whatever tune the dealer wants them to sing. Major US institutions are now facing the loss of tens of millions of dollars in donations because some of their donors have decided that the universities' statements about the Hamas attacks and resulting war have not been sufficiently critical of Palestinians. University policy thus finds itself hostage to outside forces who lack any academic standing and should have no input into the intellectual life of the institutions.

The second problem is that universities as corporate bodies feel the need to intervene one way or the other in the first place. Since the murder of George Floyd it has been *de rigeur* for university PR departments to selectively issue saccharine bromides in response to world events. These interventions are as unwelcome as they are ineffective. Universities are complex networks of students and researchers engaged in the difficult, open ended work of trying to understand our world in all of its multiple dimensions (physical, political, etc). University administrators do not speak for the whole, because there is no whole in whose name determinate political positions can be expressed. The active members of the university, faculty and students, necessarily have different perspectives on complex problems, and they all must be free to argue pro or contra on any issue. The role of administrators should be confined to ensuring that the work of research and teaching carries on; they do not speak for the "university community."

The third problem is the most serious. This problem stems from a misunderstanding of the political value of universities. Activist academics and student groups typically mistake academic freedom as *their* academic freedom to be critical of established structures of power. They are jealous in their defence of their right to speak but, over the last decade or so, quite willing to sacrifice opposed groups' academic freedom. As I have argued in a number of earlier posts, academic freedom is not a personal right to say what one wants to say, it is an institutional right necessary for the functioning of the university as an intellectual institution. The university cannot function as a space for free inquiry and argument if billionaires, governments, administrators, or one-sided campus political movements determine what can be said and not said, questioned and not questioned. By its nature inquiry questions, opens up a field of problems for critical scrutiny and debate.

The only legitimate means of "shutting an argument down" is to articulate an opposing argument so powerful that the opponent feels compelled to revise their position. Everyone who works or studies at a university must be committed to this principle on pain of performative contradiction. A performative contradiction (Habermas) is a form of speech that undermines the institutional conditions of its being made. If members of the university owe their ability to speak to the principle of academic freedom, then any attempts to deprive opposed groups of this right contradicts the institutional conditions of their making that argument. Academic freedom presupposes and justifies the university as a site of intellectual exchange of positions and argumentative conflict. Those who cannot bear the argumentative burden of proving their conclusions against opponents are not fit to remain members of an institution of 'higher' education.

Sadly, even though it typically has the most to lose when academic freedom is threatened, elements of the campus left have led the charge against academic freedom. Childish demands to ban speakers, cancel events, and boycott publications because they run afoul of some dogma have become too common. These movements are both intellectually cowardly and politically suicidal. When real conflicts like the Gaza war break out, state and administrative powers exploit the weakened commitment to academic freedom to threaten to ban and fire anyone who does not toe the party line.

Universities are not revolutionary parties. No one is obligated by party discipline to take one position as opposed to another, but to reason their way to their own conclusion and– crucially– to defend it against opponents and revise it if found wanting on grounds of insufficient evidence or self-contradictory reasoning. The job of the revolutionary is to make the revolution, as Che said, but the job of the academic is to prove their argument. No one needs be an academic: if argument seems too thin a practical contribution to the resolution of complex problems, one is free to leave the academy and organize a more kinetic struggle against whatever structure is supposed to be the problem. But if one remains an academic or a student one's duty is first of all to the truth, which is rarely obvious. The truth will out and set us free (one hopes) but only through a process of exchange of arguments.

Bad arguments are exposed by better arguments. Which is better and which is worse cannot be determined if one side is simply banned by state or administrative power or silenced by political movements afraid to defend their position against critics.

Ambivalence, Antipathy, and Historical Materialism

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In his much discussed and sometimes reviled Preface to *The Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx wrote:

"Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation."

The passage brims with the confidence of a humanism infused with the spirit of scientific advance, but it also raises a number of difficult philosophical questions with important political implications.

The most fundamental question that it raises is: What are its truth conditions?

This question breaks down into three more particular questions:

What are the sorts of 'tasks' that Marx has in mind?

Does he believe that human beings inevitably solve those tasks for which they provide themselves with the materials for solution?

Must a solution be permanent in order for it to be declared a success?

I will try to answer the main question about truth conditions by way of answering these three secondary questions.

To begin, one must keep in mind that work is a preface and that Marx is attempting to sum up in a few paragraphs the basic principles of historical materialism. The main argument of the preface is that periods of social revolution arise when the tensions exerted by the contradiction between the forces and relations of production cannot be contained by the existing institutional structure of society. Marx's confidence that human beings do not set impossible tasks for themselves is a function of his understanding of this contradiction as the underlying driver (beneath the consciousness of human beings taken as abstract individuals) of historical *development.*

"No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society."

The qualifier "superior" indicates that Marx believes that there is a direction to historical change. Productive forces (the technical capacity and intellectual know how as well as the concrete labour required to convert raw materials into goods useful for some purpose) grow, Marx believes, until the way in which labour is organized (as well as the justified customary, legal, and ethical justifications for the relations of production), restricts further growth. The constriction of

productive capacity generates social crises which are– eventually–resolved through the revolutionary transformation of the relations of production.

However, the growth of productive forces is not simply a matter of *more*, it is equally a matter of *better.* The development of productive forces is the material condition, Marx thinks, for richer and more comprehensive forms of human individual development. Human problems are ultimately problems of how to organize societies so that people can lead meaningful, satisfying, and enjoyable lives. However, without resources (which must be produced through collective labour) those values are just words. Marx is not indifferent to the philosophical evaluation of different forms of life but only insists that unrealizable ideals are not real values. Values make a difference when they are expressed in forms of life that are actually enjoyable by real people.

Therefore, I think that the tasks that Marx has in mind are not simply technical tasks, but political, social, and existential tasks as well. If Marx were referring to technical tasks only, then the paragraph would simply assert a truism, since it is true by definition that scientific-technical problems cannot be understood as problems unless the concepts in which they are expressed exist. Before one can remove bugs from a computer program, the mathematical logic which underlies programming language must exist and the engineering problems involved in building computational machines must be understood.

The argument is only interesting if Marx means that human beings not only set themselves technical tasks for which they have the means of solution, but also political, social, and existential tasks. But what are the tools that human beings create that can serve as the means to solve those value-laden tasks? Here the problem becomes more complex, since Marx also believes that the solution of social, political, and existential problems requires revolution. Societies break down because, under the pressure of stagnating economies, the old justifications for the existing structure of rule break down. The old gods fall along with the collapse in the production of life-necessities, and new gods must be created to justify new relationships.

That does not mean that the solution to social problems is a function of ideas alone: we solve social problems by transforming our societies. Radical transformation involves ideas and arguments but also the practical means of embodying them in new institutions. Marx thus believes that the tasks that history poses to human beings are on the one hand technical (how to improve the forces through which we produce our means of life), and on the other social (how to organize our societies so that improvements in productive capacity are translated into improved lives). Feudalism's task was to solve the problems left in the wake of the collapse of Rome, and capitalism's problem was to overcome the stagnation that ultimately beset feudalism. Socialism, likewise, faces the problem of solving the problems caused by capitalism.

The second question concerns whether Marx believes that human beings inevitably solve the problems that history sets for them, or only inevitably create the conditions that a solution presupposes. The starting point for charitable interpretation is the words the author uses, so let us be charitable and note that Marx says that human beings inevitably give themselves the means of solving problems. He does not add that they will inevitably use those means.

If that is what Marx intends, then the claim seems difficult to falsify. Failure in any particular instance would not disprove the claim because it could always be explained by a failure to use the means at our disposal to solve the problem at hand.

The cost of choosing the more modest interpretation of the claim is that it undermines the obvious belief in historical progress that colors the Preface as a whole. As Marx said in the final Thesis on Feuerbach, the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it. And not only to change it (making things worse is as much a change as making things better). The point is to solve the problems (injustice, inequality, exploitation, meaninglessness, violence) that philosophers have argued about for millennia. Once people stop thinking about these problems as timeless abstractions and tie them down to concrete social contexts, definite institutions, and human relationships we will see- just as we saw in the case of technical-scientific problems– that the solution has been prepared by past historical development. The solution to the problem of justice– getting what one deserves– is to distribute the collectively produced social product according to need, to give but one example.

Our answer to the third question thus affects our answer to the second. If Marx counts as solutions only practical changes that improve people's lives, then he must believe not only that we give ourselves the tools to solve problems in the historically concrete forms in which they confront us, but also that, eventually, we will figure out how to use those tools properly. Failure of one attempt does not prove that subsequent attempts will succeed, assuming that people learn 'the lessons of history.'

But here is where things become difficult for Marx's position. While there is abundant evidence that science learns from its mistakes because it operates according to a self-correcting method that can be applied by different scientists working anywhere on the same problem, the only way to correct social problems is to build or change existing societies. Is historical change recursively self-correcting like repeated experiments in science, or does the solution of one set of problems improve the lives of some in some dimensions, but create other, unforeseen problems for others in other dimensions? And if the latter answer is the one best supported by historical evidence, does that have political implications for how we set about solving the tasks which history sets for us?

The problem with determining the truth conditions for Marx's statement is now clear. Since the implications of historical change can only be determined in the future, one can never be certain that we have correctly applied the tools that past historical development has furnished us with to solve the problem, because new problems can always arise. Thus, if Marx believes that socialism is the solution to all the fundamental problems of human life, there would be no way of determining the truth of that claim until the moment just before the end of human history. Only at the end of a process can one say definitively what its results have been.

But perhaps those conditions are too stringent and we have to adopt more modest criteria for the evaluation of claims about historical developments. I would be inclined towards relaxing the criteria and conclude that since Marx's claim refers to a dynamic historical landscape and not to timeless realities, we can only assess its truth in definite historical contexts. That is, what Marx is saying is that social changes solve the problems that older societies could not solve, but that does

not mean that new and unforeseen problems may not arise. The history of capitalism and revolutionary socialism both contain examples of very serious unforeseen problems.

Industrialization resolved the problem of absolutely scarcity of life-goods, but it reconfigured an older problem of unequal distribution of those same goods while also creating the entirely unforeseen problem of human-caused climate change. No one in the nineteenth century understood the changes to atmospheric chemistry that burning fossil fuels would have leaving those of us alive now, in the twenty-first century, to solve the problem. The technical means exist– or are being rapidly developed– but whether the political, economic, and social changes required to fully realize the promise of renewable energy sources remains an open question.

The example of climate change thus supports Marx's argument. Even though it was an unforeseen problem of industrialization, we have the scientific and engineering capacity to solve the problem. The social and economic changes required to fully realize the technical potential of green energy lag behind scientific progress, but there is a growing understanding of the need to make those changes. We therefore have the political tools that we need to solve the problem, now we just have to use them.

On the other hand, the history of revolutionary socialism perhaps challenges the optimism that underlies Marx's claim. Neither the Soviet Union nor China were able to solve the economic problem of replacing the use of market forces to allocate resources, direct investment, and distribute income with a planned economy. The Soviet Command economy proved adept at rapid industrialization and made impressive technological and scientific strides, but at monstrous human cost and on the basis of a central planning system that ultimately could not compete with Western capitalism. China, facing the same sorts of problems, addressed them not by moving towards a more decentralized, democratically planned economy but backwards, towards the use of capitalist market forces. While it is true that the state retains significant power to direct investment (a power which it has used to raise hundreds of millions of people out of poverty) it might be better to call the model that has developed since the late 1970's "capitalism with Chinese characteristics" rather than "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Since the Chinese experiment is on-going, perhaps the safest approach is to wait and see what unfolds, and especially how the Communist party responds to what appear to be building structural tensions in their model, but however the future plays out, China, like the Soviet Union, encountered severe difficulties building a non-market based economy.

A charitable reading of Marx must allow that he claims only that we can solve the problems that confront us with the tools that past development makes available, but can his optimism survive apparently backward historical turns? Or is it just the case that Marxists have not yet discovered the right economic model of socialism? While one must not foreclose on the future or ignore the deep structural crises that capitalism generates, at some point one must call "time" on the evaluative frame of reference. How many revolutionary socialist experiments will be sufficient to declare the project a definitive failure? Or is the lesson of the twentieth century that the mistake lay in believing that socialism could only be constructed through the armed, revolutionary overthrow of the old society and the new one created through conscious planning by a relatively small cadre of disciplined experts?

The problems with the later appear immediately, for it is obvious that there cannot be ‘experts” in the creation of the future. How to tear things down is easy enough, but how to build a completely new set of economic institutions cannot be clarified by studying the past, because the past will only contain examples of the system that one is trying to replace. If one group walls itself off from the masses as a set of vanguard experts, the results seem to be that very ancient human problems will quite quickly emerge that spell doom for socialism as a democratic and progressive alternative to capitalism.

Marxists tend not to focus on the dark side of the human personality, chalking up malign psychological dispositions and misanthropic philosophies to alterable social conditions. But if it is true, as Marx says in the Second Thesis on Feuerbach, that the doctrine that maintains that human beings are functions of circumstances forgets that it is human beings that make circumstances, it is also true that the human beings that make those circumstances are not society-building machines. They are, as Nietzsche would say, human, all too human, and can be motivated by ambition, bloodlust, and a zeal to destroy that overawes their desire to create. One can say that the chaos that followed the Russian Civil War created the conditions for a strongman like Stalin to arise, but one also needs to ask themselves how a Stalin is possible. Not everyone is capable of murdering tens of millions of people. Those who are cannot simply be functions of circumstances because if they were, everyone would be able to step into the breech. There are darker drives in us that are more pronounced in some than others. There is little reason to think that those drives will ever be entirely eliminated.

Does that claim imply anything of political importance? I think so. I think that it cautions us to be wary of human beings: we are ambivalent creatures who (as Spinoza, at the beginning of Part Four of *the Ethics*) says “see the better and choose the worse.” Selfishness, dogmatism, and violence are transhistorical phenomena. Are we driven by a death instinct, as Freud believed, or a desire to wreck things just to avoid boredom, as Schopenhauer mused? Perhaps those are over generalizations, but it would be naive for thinkers who claim to form their ideas by studying history to ignore the abundant evidence of the existence of antipathetic and malignant sides of human desire and behaviour.

People who claim to study and learn from history cannot be selective in the conclusions that they draw from it. I think that Marx is correct: we do only set ourselves problems for which the solution (in principle) exists. But history also teaches, I think, that theory should be translated into practice via modest experiments whose social implications ramify overtime. Perhaps in that way the ambitious and over-zealous can be exposed before they accrue the power necessary to sacrifice the movement (and millions of other people’s lives) to their own ambitions.

In science, there is no experiment of experiments that will prove everything once for all. Most scientists, therefore, prefer incremental progress to a betting it all on a giant leap that might blow up the lab and prevent further research. Stalinism blew up the revolutionary socialist lab, but democratic mobilization and open ended struggles against the structural problems that capitalism generates remain tools bequeathed by past generations to present and future generations who should put them to work intelligently today and tomorrow.

Cynicism Unltd.

Originally posted 16 July 16, 2023

In ancient Greece, to be a cynic was morally estimable. Cynics (exemplified by Diogenes the Cynic) were renowned for their honesty: brutal, but honesty nonetheless. They were regarded as truth tellers who were not afraid of power. Today, the term has come to mean almost the opposite of what it would have signified to the ancient Greeks. Cynicism retains its connection to honesty, but honesty in the pursuit of one's own interests. Contemporary cynics can cut through bullshit, to be sure, but not to subordinate power to truth. The truth for a contemporary cynic is the truth *of* power.

It is in this light that we must examine the results of the recently conclude NATO summit. There is much that sounds like platitudinous hypocrisy, but beneath the platitudes are important political truths asserted cynically. What sound like universal principles are in fact bald expressions of the interests of NATO members, of which the United States is the most important. Below, I cite the most politically important of such passages from the communique issued on first day of its summit, July 11th 2023, and add brief, critical comments that supply what the communique leaves out.

"We, the Heads of State and Government of the North Atlantic Alliance, bound by shared values of individual liberty, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, have gathered in Vilnius as war continues on the European continent, to reaffirm our enduring transatlantic bond, unity, cohesion, and solidarity at a critical time for our security and international peace and stability."

Note that these values remain undefined and hence they cannot be used reflexively, to criticise alliance policy on the same grounds that they use to justify it. When we decode their meaning in the context of this document, liberty, democracy, and human rights are equated to the institutions of the member states. But whether people in NATO countries enjoy the means to live according to their choices, whether the expression of the collective considered judgements of the people as a whole governs policy and law, and whether the fundamental interests of human beings as asserted in key human rights documents are satisfied are not examined. Rhetorically, one is supposed to uncritically accept the claim that NATO defends democracy, etc., because NATO protects countries that call themselves liberal democracies. That those societies might need fundamental changes in order to become liberal, democratic upholders of human rights is not raised as a serious possibility. But this is not just hypocritical rhetoric: there is no reason to think that politicians and statespeople do not actually believe their platitudes. Their convictions are key impediments to change through rational argument (supposedly the primary political virtue of liberal-democracy, as understood by thinkers from Mill to Rawls). They simply cannot see their actual policies as their opponents might see them (undemocratic and coercive), and so could never be persuaded to change course. Opponents' arguments re simply dismissed as propaganda while their own pronouncements assumed to be necessarily true.

"NATO is a defensive Alliance."

It is true that in its origins NATO was formed to contain the Soviet Union and it did not undertake offensive actions during the Cold War. But it did bomb Serbia to help secure the independence of Kosovo (contrary to international law) and it also participated in the Afghan war, when the United States manipulated Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, falsely claiming that the 9/11 attacks were undertaken by the government of Afghanistan. (People forget that the Taliban offered to turn over bin Laden if the United States provided them evidence that he was behind the attacks). Those are two cases of NATO engaged in offensive military operations with an aim to re-define the map and replace governments. I exclude the dozens of solo US interventions of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

"NATO's three core tasks [are] deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security.

NATO played a deterrent role during the Cold War and it should have been disbanded when the Warsaw pact was disbanded. Instead, it carried on because of the inertial force that the past exercises on the future. The problem with anachronistic institutions is that uses must be found for them. Their existence prevents their supporters from seeing that new possibilities open up under new historical conditions. NATO no longer had an objective or historically specific function once the Soviet Union collapsed, but it carried on. Not only did it carry on, it grew. Not only did it grow, it expanded right to the borders of the Russian Federation, provoking the very sort of nationalist security reaction that underlined the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Hence this "defensive" alliance provoked the very thing it was supposed to prevent: war in Europe.

"We reaffirm our commitment to NATO's Open Door policy and to Article 10 of the Washington Treaty. Every nation has the right to choose its own security arrangements."

The policy that created the context for war in Ukraine continues, despite the catastrophe it has brought about. As I noted above, the contemporary cynic equates truth with their own power and cannot rise above to look critically at the objective results of its exercise. Thus, despite the fact that their refusal to negotiate Russian security concerns created the conditions for open warfare, they persist– but ambiguously– with teasing membership for Ukraine. This teasing of offers of admission without actually offering them all the while demanding that Ukraine sacrifice more and more of its men to the killing fields is the height– or perhaps better, the depth, of NATO hypocrisy.

Not only is this position murderous, it is also self-undermining if it is supposed to justify NATO policy and discredit Russia's. It is of course true that every sovereign nation can choose its own security arrangements, but if this principle is the universal that it is asserted to be, it must hold for Russia too. Where there are competing security interests war, can only be prevented if both sides listen to each other and take one another's concerns seriously. That did not happen in this case: Russia presented written proposals to the US that would have helped resolve the conflict. The US did not respond seriously. An agreement to end the fighting was negotiated in the early days of the war; the US and the UK urged Ukraine to reject it. They did, and now there are probably 100 000s of thousands of dead and no sign that the fighting will end soon.

“Peace in the Euro-Atlantic area has been shattered. The Russian Federation has violated the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order.”

In fact, NATO and the US de-stablised this order by failing to change their strategic thinking when the strategic situation in Europe changed after the Cold War. Russia was then in no position to invade Europe but sought deeper integration, which it achieved, as a major supplier of energy and resources to Europe. Russia had no reason to upset those trading relationships. That it did was a function of the Maidan coup (shaped by Washington policy) and later the refusal to implement the principles enshrined in the two Minsk Treaties.

“The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values. We remain open to constructive engagement with the PRC, including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance’s security interests.”

It is unclear how does anything China has done domestically or in its own sphere of interest threatens Europe. European and United States’ capital has benefited tremendously since the 1980’s from off-shoring manufacture to China. In turn, Chinese policy has channeled resources into the biggest poverty elimination scheme in human history. Like every state, China has the sovereign right to organise its internal affairs and “determine its own security arrangements.” No country, including China, is above reproach or criticism, but problems of the Chinese state are for the Chinese people to resolve. Provoking a massive military confrontation will hardly promote the values of individual liberty, democracy, and human rights that NATO asserts that it upholds.

“Russia bears full responsibility for its illegal, unjustifiable, and unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, which has gravely undermined Euro-Atlantic and global security and for which it must be held fully accountable.”

Russia bears responsibility for its decision to invade. That decision was egregiously stupid and has ensured the very encirclement by NATO forces that it was designed to prevent. Sweden and Finland have now joined the alliance, and whether Ukraine gains formal admission or not, there is no scenario in which it emerges outside of the Western security umbrella. The invasion was rash and will most likely end up being one of the major strategic political and economic blunders of the past 100 years. At the same time, those decisions were made in reaction to two decades of provocative NATO expansion. As with the Cold War, the people of a smaller nation are the primary victims of great power competition, made even more tragic because there were no objective economic or ideological causes of this conflict but only the inertia that prevents major power from changing course when the historical situation makes it possible to do so.

“We do not and will never recognise Russia’s illegal and illegitimate annexations, including Crimea.”

That is probably true as regards Donbass, but Crimea will likely have to be formally ceded if there is ever to be peace. Whatever happens, this claim is the height of hypocrisy, given NATO’s

role in cravinf Kosovo off from Serbia. Kosovo's independence was forced by a 78 day NATO bombing mission.

"There can be no impunity for Russian war crimes and other atrocities, such as attacks against civilians and the destruction of civilian infrastructure that deprives millions of Ukrainians of basic human services."

Fair enough, but of course the universalisation of the underlying principle would require the investigation and punishment of war crimes committed across the Middle East, Central Asia, and North and East Africa during the 'War on Terror.' Everyone knows that will not happen. Remember the hundreds of thousands of deaths of Iraqi children that Madeleine Albright said were "worth it?" They died mostly because of the destruction of civilian infrastructure.

"We urge all countries not to provide any kind of assistance to Russia's aggression and condemn all those who are actively facilitating Russia's war."

… while we continue to pump more and more offensive military hardware into the theatre of operations.

"We underline that this cannot be realised without Russia's complete and unconditional withdrawal. While we have called on Russia to engage constructively in credible negotiations with Ukraine, Russia has not shown any genuine openness to a just and lasting peace."

As I noted above and has been extensively documented, this claim is simply untrue. Russia asked for negotiations and was ignored' they had an agreement worked out with Ukraine that the US and UK undid.

"We fully support Ukraine's right to choose its own security arrangements. Ukraine's future is in NATO."

This claim sounds like a naked contradiction. According to whom is Ukraine's future in NATO? The present government of Ukraine, it is true, is demanding NATO membership, but governments change. Is it not possible that Ukrainians, waking up to the way in which they have been sacrificed for US-NATO policy, will come to regard it as a de-stabilizing force and prefer some other security arrangement?

"Ukraine has become increasingly interoperable and politically integrated with the Alliance, and has made substantial progress on its reform path"Ukraine has become increasingly interoperable and politically integrated with the Alliance, and has made substantial progress on its reform path."

Not according to Transparency International, which gave Ukraine a score of 33/100, ranking it 166th out of 180 countries. It has also engaged in a systematic campaign of Russophobic historical revisionism, including the inexcusable removal of Russian language books from the nation's libraries.

“As part of a broader effort to better respond collectively to this threat, we will further develop Allies’ capabilities, and continue to engage with the Global Coalition to Defeat Da’esh and with partner countries in order to support their efforts and to help them build their capacity to counter terrorism. … Our approach to terrorism, and its causes, is in accordance with international law and the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and upholds all relevant United Nations Security Council Resolutions on the fight against terrorism.”

Terrorism will never be defeated save by the elimination of its causes, of which armed invasion of small countries is a primary cause. Terrorism is a malign tactic in support of legitimate causes. Until the US stops interfering in the affairs of other countries there will always be resistance. Unable to match up to the US militarily, guerrilla and terrorist tactics will be adopted. In pursuit of its interests the US has never worried about international law. At this moment the US occupies parts of Syria in open contradiction to international law.

“Russia is fuelling tensions and instability across these regions. Pervasive instability results in violence against civilians, including conflict-related sexual violence, as well as attacks against cultural property and environmental damage.”

Indeed it does, and the US has been the major destabliser of “these regions” (in Africa). In the current conflict no African nation has openly supported the US. They have instead remained neutral and agitated for peace. having suffered from centuries of imperialist domination African nations are well-positioned to cut through NATO’s platitudes. They are certainly mistaken if they think that Putin’s Russia is a consistent opponent of imperialism, but they are correct to identify the US and Europe as the major historical sources of their own oppression.

“The People’s Republic of China’s stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values … he PRC’s malicious hybrid and cyber operations and its confrontational rhetoric and disinformation target Allies and harm Alliance security.”

As above, there is no evidence that China has any ambitions beyond securing its own borders and spehere of interest. It is does not claim the right, as NATO does, to decide policy for the whole world, but only insists on the consistent application of the principle which NATO purportedly believes, that each nation has the right to “decide its own security arrangements.” If African nations prefer Chinese to Western investment, that is again their sovereign right to choose. All the “confrontational rhetoric” blows into China from Europe and America.

“The PRC seeks to control key technological and industrial sectors, critical infrastructure, and strategic materials and supply chains.”

Has Chinese policy sought to embargo key technologies? Has China strong-armed allies to stop trading with the US. This assertion is an inversion of reality. Biden has continued Trump’s policy of economic war against China. He could in fact learn a lesson from the last forty years of Chinese history. The Chinese have used the wealth generated by economic growth to lift hundreds of millions out of poverty. Yes, inequality has increased in relative terms, but no one can deny that there has been world-historical improvement in living standards, an improvements which the US seeks to de-rail.

“The deepening strategic partnership between the PRC and Russia and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to our values and interests.”

As a number of realist commentators in the US have pointed out, the alliance between Russia and China is a direct function of US policy.

“We reiterate our clear determination that Iran must never develop a nuclear weapon. We remain deeply concerned about Iran’s escalation of its nuclear programme.”

Even the US admits that Iran is not actively pursuing nuclear weapons. As with the Russian-Chinese alliance, the escalation referred to here is tactical and a direct response to Trump’s walking away from the agreement that the Obama administration reached, Biden, of course, has not rejoined, so whatever happens, America has only itself to blame.

“The threat to critical undersea infrastructure is real.”

Where better to end than on this astounding assertion. The destruction of Nordstream 2 was either brought about by the US directly, indirectly, or with its silent approval and yet the inclusion of this claim implies that forces other than the US-NATO were involved. Only a group that assumes that it makes reality rather than responds to it could make such a claim. As it is finding out– sadly, at the cost of other people’s lives– NATO’s beliefs do not constitute the world, but they do help make it worse than it might otherwise be.

Another Reason to not Start Wars

Originally posted 24 June, 2023

Just when I had assumed that the Ukraine war was settling into a stalemate in which each would try to bleed the other dry until some sort of negotiated settlement became preferable to lobbing artillery at each other, came news that Wagner PMC founder Evgeny Prigozhin has instigated some sort of coup. I do not have any definitive information about what provoked this extraordinary (and probably suicidal) gambit, but it proves yet again that wars that do not end quickly will take unexpected turns against the power that starts them. It is not fate or karma repaying the aggressor for their crimes but the result of the unique political pressures generated by war.

Wars play out on both the battlefield and civil society. The satisfaction of the need to mobilize the population to support the war physically, with their bodies, and morally, with their minds, requires the war be justified. The typical justification takes the form of the claim that there was no choice but to go to war (necessity) and that the prestige and dignity of the nation is at stake (justice). The longer the conflict goes on, the more of the second plank of the justification becomes dangerous for those who ordered the war.

Putin's playbook has leaned heavily on the anachronistic idea of Russia as a great power. As the whole world can now see, it is a regional power dependent upon an extractive economy, with all the political-economic vulnerabilities to the customers for the products of its forests, wells, and mines that entails. While Russia's economy did not collapse in the way that Western powers had hoped, it is in recession and the longer term effects of technology embargoes will continue to cause damage, possibly for decades. Markets especially dislike uncertainty, and armed insurrections, even if put down fairly quickly, are about as uncertain as societies can become.

I will be interested to see what China's reaction to this coup attempt will be. Russia is uniquely dependent upon the Chinese market after being cut off almost completely from Europe and if there is one value above all that the Chinese leadership cherishes, it is stability. China has adopted a very cautious approach to the war, not condemning it but hardly vocally supporting it. Access to the US and European markets remains essential to China's development (witness the productive talks between China and Blinken last week). This clear split in the Russian political and military leadership will most likely cause China to further distance themselves from the growing debacle.

Whatever the precipitating cause, it seems clear that the stalled war underlies the problem. Putin has staked Russia's reputation on victory, but since the opening month of war has only lost ground (Kharkov and Kherson). His only "victories" since the first month have been, how shall we put this, pyrrich conquests of Melitopol and Bakhmut that required the total destruction of the cities at the cost of tens of thousands of lives on both sides and did not change the strategic balance on the battlefield. Nothing Russia does short of using nuclear weapons will change that strategic balance, because they are not fighting Ukraine, they are fighting the combined

economic, political, and military might of NATO. There is no chance that NATO will abandon Ukraine the way that the US abandoned Afghanistan. There is simply too much, ideologically, at stake in this conflict for them to walk away. Weapons will continue to flow into the war zone until something that they can sell as victory has been achieved.

The coup attempt will also comes as bad news for those who, naively and without historical foundation, believe that Russia's war in Ukraine is some sort of heroic anti-imperialist struggle. Putin has tried to sell it as such, but how reconquest of the lands of the Tsarist *empire* counts as anti-imperialism is beyond me. As the great American realist international relations theorist Hans Morgenthau wryly noted decades ago,the surest sign that a government is pursuing an imperialist policy is their claim to be anti-imperialist. Genuine anti-imperialist struggles are waged by popular forces struggling to free their nation from domination by foreign powers. The Russian speaking population of the Donbass could more plausibly claim to have been engaged in a legitimate national struggle, but Putin largely ignored it until he felt his struggle against NATO forced his hand. What we are witnessing– tragically, for civilians and soldiers on all sides– is an inter-imperialist conflict wasting lives for the sake of expanding or maintaining its sphere of influence.

Until this morning, I had assumed that the conflict would end, grotesquely, with something like a reversion to the status quo ante of 2014. Russia would keep Crimea and claim victory on those grounds and some sort of federal relationship would be established between the Donbass and the Kiev government. Not formally losing those oblasts would allow Ukraine to claim its share of victory. Grotesque because it would have been an outcome that could have been achieved through negotiations now it is anyone's guess how Prighozin's move will affect the war. I cannot think of any possible world in which this fracture helps Russia.

Banal though the conclusion may be but it is nonetheless true: war is the ultimate destabilizer. It may be, as Von Clausewitz argued, politics by different means, but it is a means best avoided.

Class Power

Originally posted 10 July, 2023

While it is true that market forces are always shaped by laws and political regulations, anyone who doubts that there is such a thing as class-based economic power needs to think about what has transpired in Ontario this summer over government subsidies to attract automaker investment in electronic vehicle production. I live in "Canada's Automotive capital," across the Detroit River from the Motor City. Both Windsor and Detroit have faced decades of factory closings. So when Stellantis (the latest permutation of what used to be Chrysler) announced a partnership with LG, a Korean company, to build a new factory to produce lithium batteries for electric vehicles, it seemed to ensure the long term future of Windsor's one remaining assembly plant (Canada's largest factory). Construction began almost as soon as the agreement was announced, but it came to a crashing halt two months ago. The Canadian and Ontario governments had pledged an undisclosed sum to secure the investment, but they had also been negotiating with Volkswagen to build a similar factory in St. Thomas, about 150 kilometers away. Unlike the Windsor deal, the subsidy that Volkswagen would receive came out in the press: 16 billion dollars according to a report from the Parliamentary Budget Officer. No sooner had this deal been announced than work halted on the Windsor plant. Whether Stellantis demanded that an existing deal be re-opened or whether the deal had never been finalized was unclear, but what was clear to the city, the provincial and federal governments, and Unifor, the main auto workers union, was that the biggest industrial investment in Ontario in 30 years was in jeopardy.

Negotiations were re-started and a new deal was reached this week: Stellantis will receive 15 billion dollars in tax concessions. All told, then, two companies will receive 31 billion dollars in subsidies to build two factories that will create 1400 jobs in St. Thomas and 2500 in Windsor.

It is easy to criticize these deals, but they prove that corporations have the power to extract (extort) these concessions from governments. Governments will pay these subsidies regardless of their ideological stripe. The Ontario government is a right-wing conservative party and the federal government a classic example of Liberal centrism, but both scrambled to save the Windsor deal when it became apparent that it was in jeopardy. So important are large-scale manufacturing investments to the appearance that the economy is growing, and so central is the appearance that the economy is growing to the longevity of governments, that it is relatively easy for major corporations to start subsidy bidding wars between cities, regions, and countries. (A complicating factor in the Windsor deal was that the Biden administration passed its own massive subsidy program for green energy and manufacturing as part of its Inflation Reduction Act). In negotiations, one exploits one's advantage to the fullest. Corporations hold the key to the decision as to where manufacturing plants are sited and they used this power to play countries and regions off against each other until they get the best deal for themselves. Even the most powerful government in the world tailors its policies to attract corporate investment. if governments will not pay, their countries or regions will not get investment.

(Whether these investments really do contribute to overall economic growth is more questionable: The Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates that the total aggregate economic benefit of the St. Thomas plant will amount to a .01 % boost to GDP. Mathematically, the

economy is no further ahead than if the government had just kept the money it will pay out in subsidies).

Of course, economies are not mathematical equations but systems of production and distribution upon which workers' lives depend. Workers live in one place rather than another and must concern themselves with the state of economic forces where they live and not in the abstract realm of aggregates and averages. Voters vote for local MPs and they expect that they will deliver the goods, especially if their local MP is a member of the ruling party. The Volkswagen plant might only generate .01% GDP growth in the country as a whole, but in St. Thomas its effects on the local GDP will many orders of magnitude more than .01. One cannot dismiss from on high the efforts of local governments to attract investment (especially in historically industrial towns like Windsor and St. Thomas) unless one has a ready-made better alternative for workers.

The ability of corporate capital to determine political policy proves that class-based economic power is real. While this ability confirms one core criticism of capitalism (that it subverts democratic power by determining government policy) it also undermines a key plank of capitalist ideology. Capitalism's main supporters argue that free competition drives innovation and innovation drives economic growth, better standards of living, and technological progress. Visionaries and bold, risk-taking entrepreneurs constantly sail into the unknown, returning with new ideas, new products, new methods of production: all that governments have to do is stay out of the way. Sure, sometimes a homemade sub will implode while it takes adventure seeking billionaires to the bottom of the Atlantic, but cumulatively, over time, the risks return rewards that pay for the occasional failure.

But what risks are Volkswagen and Stellantis assuming here? None: at least in the case of large-scale investments, public money and not entrepreneurial vision drives "innovation." The ability of corporations to determine public policy by playing jurisdictions off against one another thus proves the reality of class-based economic power at the same time as it undermines the myth of entrepreneurial vision as the driving force of capitalism. The actual marketplace is not a complex order of small competing firms pushing each other to innovate but a network of coercive power controlled by massive corporations able to bend governments across the political spectrum to their will. Syrizia in Greece was effectively destroyed by the power of German banks who threatened to destroy the Greek economy if Syriza heeded the will of the people as expressed in the referendum of July, 2015. In the Windsor case, Stellantis either reneged on an existing agreement or radically changed its demands. Governments scurried back to the table and added untold billions to the subsidy package.

Examples could be multiplied thousands of times, but the point to take away is that capital is not the source of innovation. It is not even the primary source of investment for large scale enterprises: national and regional governments provide the funds (directly and indirectly), engineering and scientific intelligence is the source of the know how involved in the manufacturing, and workers provide the labour power. The corporations risk relatively nothing but extract all the profits. Governments pay the bills because for the majority of working people "the economy" means "jobs" and jobs at large manufacturing plants tend to pay better, provide more stable employment conditions, can be effectively unionized, and provide better benefits. However, if governments provide the capital, engineers and scientists the ideas, and workers the

labour power, the corporation is really an unnecessary middle man appropriating the value created by government and workers.

There is no reason other than ideological attachment to a mythical free market and its magic powers of innovation and wealth creation to prevent governments from actively cutting out the corporate middle man and simply investing in industries that will produce life-valuable products and services. Well, a critic will respond, that is all well and good but we know that "state industries" are not efficient and that governments lack the expertise to run complex systems. That might be true, but it is is equally true about private corporations (which often underperform because of managerial incompetence or greed). Corporate boards do not know anything about the physics of lithium batters. They hire scientists and engineers that do. Nationally owned industries do not need to be run by the cabinet of the government of the day. Competent managers can be hired along with the requisite scientific experts. Few people are so dogmatically attached to an idea of capitalism that they will turn down challenging careers just because their employer is publicly rather than privately owned. Plenty of right-wing economists happily toil for publicly funded universities (and some even participate in their faculty unions).

I conclude on this note because even as capitalism lurches from crisis to crisis people will argue that there is no alternative. Here we see a first systematic step towards an alternative right before our eyes: public control of the industries that public investment and collective labour build.

A Thesaurus of Adjectives

Originally posted 13 March, 2024

In a recent *Jacobin* article, Ben Burgis argued that if Biden somehow loses the Presidential election to Trump, the US Left should blame him for timidity and not voters for stupidity. The article is refreshing on two fronts, but symptomatic of a restricted understanding of political motivation long typical of the Marxist and broader left.

First, the good: the argument is *practical* and free of the academic ultra-leftism that too often characterizes socialist approaches to "bourgeois democracy." For better of for worse, "bourgeois" democracy is all that we have got. It is vastly superior to the known alternatives, because it does not pre-determine how the political space for mobilization that it opens can be used. Different parties can be created, candidates chosen, and policy options pursued that can make real differences in real people's lives.

Second, it avoids the supercilious contempt for working class Trump voters that one sometimes hears from liberals. Burgis reminds readers of the slogan Clinton supporters chanted after Trump's victory" "if Hilary had won, we would all be at brunch right now." But they forgot to add: probably being served by people who voted for Trump because you treated them like shit in the restaurant. Recall Hilary herself and her global dismissal of Trump supporters as a basket of deplorables. Some working class Trump voters might express deplorable positions, but to reduce their politics to some sort of character defect is antithetical to the political engagement with them that the broad left needs to undertake.

Political engagement begins from trying to understand where people are coming from. If one is going to understand where people are coming from, one must inquire of the routes they have traveled to reach their current position. Isn't that what a *historical* materialism should examine? If people adopt anti-immigrant positions, is that because they are inveterate racists? Or is their attitude shaped by the fact that they occupy precarious jobs and are worried that they will lose them to more desperate workers willing to work for even less than the nothing that they are being paid? Or are they are concerned that scare space and meager public services on which they rely, and for which they pay taxes, will be given to newcomers free of charge, and they do not see the fairness in that arrangement? Scolding, hectoring, and lecturing does not address those concerns nor will it change peoples' minds. Quite likely, it will harden their positions and their heart.

Which brings me to a worry that is analogous to the worry I expressed in the previous post. I wondered about the role that ambivalence plays in causing social problems. While I broadly agreed with Marx's confidence that human history creates the conditions for the solution to the problems that it causes, I wondered about why every major social revolution causes new problems. Could part of the explanation be that there will always be people who start out wanting to solve problems and end up wanting to seize power, because the drive for power and dominance is real (although not equally present in everyone). And could that drive for power not itself be an expression of an even deeper drive, a perverse need that some feel to wreck things– not so much Freud's death drive but Schopenhauer's and Spinoza's contention that stability is boring and people sometimes just choose conflict. "Unsettled souls" George Santayana argued (but I cannot remember exactly where) "prefer unhappiness."

Unsettled souls prefer unhappiness and insulted souls prefer spite: could there not be an element of spite at work in the souls of Trump voters? “Think I’m a deplorable, do you? Fuck you and your oat milk latte!” Spite contains an element of the irrational (working class voters who think a megalomanical billionaire is going to protect them from global market forces are not thinking clearly about who will best serve their economic interests), but also affords a degree of emotional satisfaction. When one acts out of spite one might ultimately hurt oneself more than others, but the action feels good because it restores the person’s self-respect. Axel Honneth did not have Trump voters in mind when he argued that political movements cannot be understood in socio-economic terms alone but must also be interpreted as demands for recognition. As self-undermining as it will prove to be on the socio-economic plane, voting for a candidate who speaks the language of the street and who openly skewers arrogant blowhards who do not disguise their contempt for those without Ivy League degrees satisfies a genuine need to be heard.

Systematic disrespect generates legitimate demands for recognition from people who are the objects of disdain. When these demands are made from a position of relative powerlessness against supercilious people who parade their principles as morally mandatory, the spite-effect comes into full force. How else to explain the intense antipathy towards the “Squad” of left-wing Democrats from a large segment of working-class voters whose socio-economic future will ultimately depend upon the implementation of policies like the Green New Deal? Yes, on-line anonymity increases the likelihood of obnoxious verbal abuse, but there has to be something more at work than fear of change, ignorance of one’s real interests, and the opportunity to vent spleen on-line.

Historical materialism has tended to ignore the function of emotions in political choice but it cannot afford to do so. The patrician air of some on the US liberal Left who turn their noses up at working class Trump voters only further the alienation of those voters from the Democratic Party and make it more rather than less likely that Trump will be reelected. This arrogance is noticeably and refreshingly absent from Cornell West’s campaign, but given the structure of the American electoral system he has no chance of winning. No one can accuse of West of ignoring the realities of American racism, but he does not attribute it to some essential character flaw inherent in white Trump voters, but tries to understand it as an effect of the way in which social and economic forces are internalized in a political context where blue collar working class concerns are ignored.

When large sections of the liberal left ignore those concerns or demonize them as a function of some inner essential racism they do not go away. They fester and fuel malign political movements. The January 6th rampage is a case in point. Since when does the Left regard existing state structures as sacrosanct, or extra-parliamentary action illegitimate? The problem was that the mobilization was in the service of a lie. Here is the philosophy professor in me talking: to challenge lies one must be willing to engage, patiently and respectfully. Respect does not mean making concessions to nonsense, but it does mean listening and addressing claim with counterclaim. Arguments go on as long as they need to go on until one side or the other is convinced. But as soon as one’s dialogue partner begins to indulge in *ad hominem* insults about the other person’s intelligence, the conversation will end and spiteful recriminations begin.

Political change cannot occur unless different people are willing to talk to one another. Just because someone owns a gun, listens to country music, and drives a pick-up does not mean that they are incapable of intelligent argument, *if they are addressed as intelligent beings who have reasons for the lives they lead and the political choices they make.* Likewise, laughing only at politically correct jokes, listening to Beyonce, and being vegan does not mean that you have the solution to all of life's problems. But lecturing other people– who also have problems and face challenges and have to negotiate life day to day– as if one is the only person to have been to the mountaintop and seen the promised land will ensure one's own relative political isolation from the majority in society.

Both the left and the right today share a tendency to grossly exaggerate the power of progressive movements. A Pew Research survey of over 10000 Americans in 2021 found that only 6% identified with the "progressive left" of the Democratic Party. This small group was majority White and well-educated. An earlier Pew Research survey found an unequivocal correlation between level of education and political perspective. While 31% of people surveyed who held a post-graduate degree identified as "consistently liberal" only 5 % of people with only high school degrees so identified. These results are consistent with Thomas Piketty's findings in *Capital and Ideology*) that social democratic parties in Europe (and the left of the Democrats in the US) have lost all organic connection with the blue collar and service industry working class and have become parties of educated urban professionals. This alienation between workers in threatened manufacturing industries and service and precarious employment and the political parties which historically defended their interests is a direct cause of the success of the European far right and Trumpism in the US.

However, the perversity of these results also proves that the correlation between politics and material interests is real, but not mechanical. Working class voters persuaded by the Melonis and Trumps of the world *think* that they are voting their interests because successful far right politicians focus on the here and now, promising immediate solutions. Too much of the left is given to what we might call moralistic "symbolitics," to searching for the magic mix of adjectives, an incantation which will magically arouse the masses to revolt. The symboliticians are too much given to catastrophizing about the future, to admonishing people for paying attention to their own lives when there is so much suffering elsewhere, and to inefficacious and sometimes mad acts of narcissistic self-immolation (literal and figural).

Judging from people's behaviour across centuries, they agree with Oscar Wilde: socialism takes too many evenings. Only a relatively small minority of people have any sustained interest in being political activists (and few of those manifest it sustain it across their lifespan). Many working people cannot afford to worry–in the monetarily literal sense of 'afford' — about what the climate will be like in 2050, or about a ceasefire in Gaza, because they are broke, the rent is due tomorrow, and their kid is failing school. Enthusiasts are moved by one another's slogans, but most people ignore images, slogans, and stunts that concern problems that they do not regard as their own. The right- seems to understand political psychology much more than the left: they recognize that most people simply try to go about their lives, prioritizing the near term over the long term, the local over the global, and the concrete over the abstract. Moreover, they know that those who have been disrespected relish the opportunity to laugh when the ego-balloons of hectoring know-it-alls are publicly burst. *Schadenfreude.*

I think the left ignores these psychological dimensions of political motivation at its considerable peril. If it wants to beat back the latest right-wing surge it should do what it has done when it has made the biggest political strides: propose policies that *demonstrably* serve working people's interests and defend them in clear, everyday terms. A CNBC poll in 2019 showed broad bi-partisan support in the US for progressive policies that used public resources to improve living and working conditions. Obamacare still exists despite Trump's attacks because the left focused their response on the *universal* value of being able to afford to go to the doctor when one is sick. In this case at least the usual tiresome fractal parade of identity-group particularisms was avoided.

Coming back home across the border, two very significant steps were just taken in Canada with the introduction of a national Pharmacare program and a national dental care program. The Liberal government would not have implemented these significant extensions of public health care unless the social democratic NDP pushed them. Their initial shape is inadequate to the full scope of social needs, and comes at a time when the Liberals are also allowing provinces to erode public health care by floating the Canada Health Act. But they are unarguably progressive steps in the right (socialist) direction.

Painful as it is to say, the Left does not need philosophers right now, it needs policy wonks. Concrete, immediately realizable policies that better satisfy shared material needs will be the key to winning and maintaining political power. Workers are not children. Grown adults can decide for themselves what is "appropriate" and what is "problematic.' People will laugh at jokes they find funny and listen to music that moves them and resonates with their experience. People will eat what tastes good to them and take an interest in some people's stories and not so much in others. There is no magic word that will convert people from concern with their own life to concern with the whole future of humanity. In order to achieve their practical goals, earnest activists must stop implying that unless people live their lives 24/7 in commitment to every worthy cause they are morally fallen. To paraphrase Bertolt Brecht from *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, what matters most is not that we were good, but that we leave a good world.

From Each According to their Abilities

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Could there be any less philosophically interesting subject than taxation? The life of the button down accountant seems the purest antithesis to the impractical speculations of the philosopher, but in fact, the numbers and repellent jargon of tax law conceal important philosophical principles. Surprisingly, the most important of these principles is the one which Marx thought would govern production and distribution in a mature communist society: “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” Is this not the very principle which, although unacknowledged, justifies the principle of progressive taxation? And might there not be some sort of unconscious recognition of the hidden radicalism of the practice that fuels its ruling class opponents?

People who fancy themselves revolutionaries in the global north are rarely concerned with the mundane details of how a socialist society would operate. The poetic imagination paints inspiring pictures of a future world as a harmony of harmonies. Clean energy and artificial intelligence will free life from the bounds of material necessity and all people, as individuals and freely self-organizing groups, will simply pursue their interests unencumbered by the prosaic demands of life under capitalism. Far be it from me, philosophical dreamer that I am, to close the poetry book. But before one can transcend the workaday grammar of prose one must first learn its rules. It is easy to imagine a world in which all material problems are overcome. But social life is not a figment of our imagination. If it were, we would have solved all of our problems by now. Alas …

What I am trying to say is: socialism will require accountants, not to help citizens to avoid paying taxes (as at present) but to organize the rules by which the wealth produced by collective labour will be divided between funds for re-investment in plant and equipment, funds for investment in public goods, and appropriation by private individuals for their own self-directed use. *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*— the short work which contains Marx’s famous aphorism– wrestled with these general problems, but in a sketchy and and speculative manner. I do not want to examine that text here (but a new critical edition with an introduction by Peter Hudis is worth exploring). Instead I want to trace out some of the implications of the principle that are most relevant for contemporary public policy.

A principle of reciprocity underlay Marx’s conception. Note that he does not calibrate individual appropriation to the extent of contribution but to need. That is, one does not withdraw from the commonwealth in proportion to one’s contribution but contributes according to talent and interest and takes according to need. As Marx well-understood, both contribution and appropriation pose substantive accounting challenges: how to compare contributions in the first case and how to limit needs in the second. In a capitalist society these problems are settled by money: the ‘value’ of a talent is determined by the income it can command (which means, perversely, that a money-speculator who contributes nothing to the satisfaction of any need appears hundreds of times more ‘valuable’ that a sanitation worker, even though the latter’s work is far more life-valuable than the former’s). So too need: capitalism does not recognise the category of need as a normative term. Instead, it counts only “effective” demand: one needs only

what one can purchase. If one spends one's money on gold jewelry to the point where one cannot afford food, then one in effect says that they need jewelry more than food. From the capitalist perspective the objective harm that such behaviour would cause does not register as harm. The rank order of the purchases is an expression of consumer sovereignty.

But in a developed socialist economy money would no longer serve as a universal equivalent, means of exchange, and measure of value. Much of the *Critique* is devoted to dismantling the German' Social Democratic Party's efforts to work out an alternative means of value-measure and exchange. The details need not detain is here. Instead I want to focus on the implications of the aphorism itself.

The first point that I want to make is that while Marx saw it as applicable only in the distant future of a mature, stable socialist society, it underlies (but not explicitly) actually existing institutions like progressive taxation. The underlying idea behind progressive taxation is that society is a cooperative endeavour. Even if individual freedom is the highest good, people cannot simply will themselves free but require means, and some means are more efficiently procured as public goods. But public goods require public funds, public funds must be funded, and taxation is the method by which those funds are raised. Unlike Marx's version, the principle of progressive taxation adds an element of proportionality (which would be irrelevant in the case of socialism, because there would no longer be class differences), but the more basic and important idea still operates: free citizens want to contribute to collective well-being, and a free society creates opportunities for everyone to contribute.

In a capitalist society, labour markets are not governed by the principle of careers open to talents but demand for labour power. Profitable industries will hire, unprofitable industries will go under, and workers must content themselves with what jobs that they can find. Since the nature of the jobs is also determined by considerations of labour productivity and not talent and interest, labour is doubly alienating: people are compelled to find work and they have to do what they are told while working. Labour thus appears to be an imposed and oppressive burden, when at a deeper level, if we abstract from its capitalist form, it is the practical expression of our world-building, creative capacities. As Marx also says in the *Critique*, once the alienated form of labour have been overcome, it will become our primary need. Freed of the need to work for a living, life will become centred around the free, creative contributions that we make to the common wealth, the fund from which each of us will draw to satisfy our needs. The developed socialist economy will be a virtuous circle: everyone willingly contributes and freely appropriates their share of the wealth that they have helped to create.

The so-called "free-rider problem" (brilliantly solved in the tale of the Little Red Hen), would be overcome because people would be motivated by an inner drive to do the necessary work. In the tale, the little red hen goes around the barnyard asking for help with the various jobs that need doing to bake some bread. One after another the animals tell her to get lost, but once the bread has been baked, they all want to eat. But now she she tells *them* to get lost: since they did not contribute, they have no legitimate claim on the product. They wanted to free ride, she puts a stop to it by refusing to share: If you want to eat you have to work.

Unfortunately, the red hen has to resort to coercive measures because the other animals are lazy. But if we come back to the real world, laziness is not a character flaw but a function of the alienated nature of work: people avoid work because they are under the thumb of the boss, forced into it by material necessity, and unfree to determine how they accomplish the required tasks. Even when work is life-valuable, its organization and pace are not controlled democratically and few individual workers enjoy any freedom of action once they are inside the office or plant.

Passive and active strategies to avoid work are thus met with right wing charges of laziness (the more impoverished and powerless the group, the louder the denunciations). Especially harsh criticism is reserved for addicts and the homeless. The right advocates coercive schemes to deprive people of benefits, force them into workfare programs, or simply remove them to penal institutions. Sometimes these schemes are are justified on the grounds that the addicted and homeless are blights on respectable society. However, one can also sometimes detect an inverted echo of Marx's aphorism. Conservatives will sometimes argue that work is character building and by tying benefits to labour workfare schemes are in effect tough love which will benefit the poor in the long run. The argument reminds me of an ironic prose poem by Baudelaire called "Let's Beat Up the Poor." A man and his partner are dining when outside a beggar peers in hoping to attract the attention of a generous diner. The man notices, gets up, and starts a fight with panhandler. In the poem the man feels like he is affirming the dignity of the beggar by engaging him in honest combat, much in the way that Hegel argues that our freedom depends upon our willingness to fight to death. There is perhaps too fine a point put on physical combat in these stories, but there is an element of truth in both, as there is in the justification of workfare schemes.

No human being should ever be regarded as nothing but a victim or pitied for whatever state they are in. Social democratic forms of public service provision are not rooted in pity, but they do sometimes, wittingly or not, treat those who need benefits as passive consumers. They thus share something in common with their right wing critics: both tend to see impoverished people as incapable of solving their own problems: the right believes that bad character and bad choices lead to bad socio-economic outcomes while the social democratic left tends to see them as victims of greedy people or an unjust system. But neither tries to think of ways in which existing resources could be marshaled to create spaces in which addicts, or the homeless, or other groups in need of public support could work together to change their own social and individual reality.

Marx confronted an argument analogous to contemporary workfare schemes in the 1848 Revolution in France. Louis Blanc, socialist member of the national Assembly , tried to pass legislating that would empower workers to organize their own enterprises. What he ended up with was a pale compromise which in effect forced workers into state organized schemes, "workhouses in the open," as Marx dismissed them. Nevertheless, Marx understood that the principle that motivated Blanc was the correct one: freedom for workers means freedom *to* work in democratically organized, life-valuable industries and service providing institutions. From each according to their abilities was thus an affirmation not only of the dignity of working people, but also the life-value of creative labour, both for society and for the individual. Self-esteem, self-respect, and self-worth are tied up with our being contributing members of society. The difference between Marx's understanding and the right-wing version is that for Marx the

drive to change comes from within workers themselves. Conservatives not only want to impose it from the outside, but they also want forced labour to fuel capitalist profits. Workfare participants are in effect unpaid labour for the capitalist: the state pays their wages and the firm reaps the profits. Socialized labour, by contrast, would be democratically organised for the collective and individual good.

But where does that leave contemporary society's approach to the growing problems of homelessness and addiction? Current policy is bifurcated: there is no willingness to seriously regulate housing markets to bring down house prices and no plans to undertake the construction of genuinely affordable housing at the scale required to provide housing to all who require it. Laws around addiction are changing to allow for safe injection sites and decriminalization of possession. Whether or not those make drug use safer they are not solving the problems that deep addiction causes addicts, not the least of which is that it renders them incapable of doing anything more than satisfying their cravings: a one-dimensional existence that robs them of the opportunity to think, feel, and do more than alternate between being being sick and high. While housing market regulation and national public housing projects are necessary and decriminalization a good first step, none on their own engages the energies and potential of homeless and addicted people as agents. We cannot go from capitalism to democratic socialism in one fell swoop, but was can re-think public service provision in ways that might contribute, even if only in a small way, to building the sort of civic agency longer-term and more fundamental transformations would require.

There are a number of projects that can serve as guides to the transformation of public policy from passive service provision to actively engaging people in self-organised projects of social and self-transformation. The one that I am most familiar with (I wrote about it in my book Democratic Society and Human Needs) was organised by the Parkdale Area Recreation Centre in Toronto. PARC serves the relatively high concentration of former psychiatric patients living in the neighborhood. Instead of simply buying a building, paying to have it renovated, and giving it to those in need of housing, PARC instead engaged the labour and intelligence of the people who would live there. They helped renovate the space and they drew up a constitution that would govern life in the building. Needs were met, not through the initiative of government bureaucrats and social workers, but the collective and individual agency of the future residents. Professionals helped initiate the project and were their to assist and guide but future residents worked to satisfy their own needs. They changed themselves as they created the space in which they would live.

Conservatives err when they lecture people to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps because individual problems typically have social causes that individuals acting on their own cannot solve no matter how hard they try. But even here there is a grain of truth: the only lasting changes are those which engage the agency of the person involved. Victimization is real, but victims are human beings capable of changing themselves by working together to change the reality that victimized them.

The Real Danger of Artificial Intelligence

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ChatGPT has set off a panic, not only amongst some educators, worried that it will encourage plagiarism (or perhaps even call into question the nature of authorship) but amongst media prognosticators and a few maverick tech mandarins (whom I always suspect of raising alarms only in order to raise share prices) that AI is coming not only for academic integrity, but our very humanity. They are not wrong to worry. A long history of science fiction dystopias have painted a picture of uncaring machines turning on their creators. Moreover, people who know a lot more about the science (forget about the fiction) plausibly speculate that an *artificial* intelligence would likely have very different motives than a natural intelligence, motives that we might find malignant but it would find normal. Hans Moravec, a robotics engineer and prophet of the post-human age argues that just as technologically advanced human societies conquered and exploited less technologically advanced societies, so too will an artificial superintelligence likely eliminate the fleshy form of life as inferior and irrelevant. Nick Bostrom, a leading transhumanist philosopher likewise warns his more cheery transhumanists that there is no guarantee that a superintelligent machine would care one whit for the joys and moral principles of human beings. I take these warnings seriously, but I also think that the nightmare scenarios that they paint of coming robot wars tends to distract from a less spectacular but probably more dire (because more probable) threat that the further development of AI poses.

Part of that threat concerns job markets: now that middle class intellectual and professional careers are threatened by AI they are desperately ringing the tocsin. The stoicism that they preached to generations of manual workers faced with technological unemployment is noticeably absent in their pleas to governments to start to regulate and restrain further AI research. Their hypocrisy aside, this side of the danger is real, and twofold.

On the one hand, we still live in a capitalist society where most of life's necessities are commodities. In order to access the goods and services that we need we require an income, and for most of us that income means selling our labour power. That side of the problem could be addressed if the surplus value produced by our labour were collectively controlled rather than privately appropriated as profit. If collectively produced wealth were democratically controlled, we could rationally reduce socially necessary labour time. Surplus wealth would then create the conditions for everyone to enjoy more free time. Needed goods and services would be publicly funded and available on the basis of need. The realm of freedom, as Marx put it, would expand in proportion to the reduction of the realm of necessity (of having to labour for the sake of survival and development).

However, the second side of the problem would not be solved, and might even be exacerbated, if the liberatory promise of technological development were realized. The problem here is existential rather than social or economic. The technotopian dream behind the development of AI is to collapse the difference between freedom and necessity. Ray Kurzweil, the author of *The Singularity is Near*, argues explicitly that the emergence of machine intelligence is a new plateau of evolution. He interprets evolution in teleological terms as tending towards higher levels of integrated complexity and intelligence. The logical end point of this development is

omniscience– God is not a transcendent spiritual reality but the future outcome of the development of life.

In Kurzweil's view, human beings are but a stepping stone on the way to the emergence of omniscience. Artificial Intelligence is the necessary next step. Out of humanistic concern for well-being, he argues, we must have the courage to let our creations unfold along their own evolutionary path. Our transhuman present will become a posthuman future. There will no longer be flesh and blood human beings, but instead, our consciousness will be preserved within the neural networks of the superintelligence– God– that succeeds us.

One might be tempted to dismiss this speculation as utopian theogony and not science, but I think we have to examine carefully the way in which it understands human values and the good for human beings. As I argued in both *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life* and *Embodied Humanism: Towards Solidarity and Sensuous Enjoyment*, the real danger of technotopian arguments is not that they might be true at some distant point in the future, but that they change how we understand human intelligence, human relationships, and the good for human beings in the present. Although Kurzweil and other technotopians claim to be the inheritors of the humanist values of the Enlightenment, they in fact understand human intelligence and the good for human beings in machine terms. Consequently, they fail to understand the essential importance of limitations– another word for necessity- in human life.

Think of the importance for our psychological well-being of feeling needed. One of the signs of serious depression leading to suicidal thoughts is the belief that the world will be better off if one kills oneself because no one needs you. An effective therapeutic intervention involves convincing the person that in fact others do need them. But why does anyone need anyone else? Because we are limited beings; we cannot procure everything that we need to live through our own efforts; we cannot endlessly amuse ourselves but need to talk to others; the objects of our knowledge lie outside of ourselves and we must work to understand them. So too the objects of our creative projects: they must be built from materials with their own integrity which might not be receptive to our designs. We must therefore work to realise our ideas and have to have the strength to bear failure and the humility to change plans. The good for human beings emerges within this matrix of material necessity. The difference between having a real and an imaginary friend is that we have to work on ourselves to convince other people to like us.

Kurzweil wants, in effect, to abolish this difference. Once material reality has been absorbed by virtual reality there will no longer be a meaningful difference between real and imaginary friends. In a real and not metaphorical sense all friends– in fact, all of reality– will be a function of the imagination of the superintelligence. Since for Kurzweil everything, including inanimate matter, is information, nothing essential would be lost once the material is replaced by the digital simulation. We only hang on to this metaphysical distinction because our minds– our information processing capacity– remains attached to a needy body that depends upon connection to nature and other people. But that archaic metaphysics is maintained by fear: as the Singluarity approaches we must have the courage to die in our fleshy body to be reborn– as St. Paul said– in our (digitized) spirit body.

Just as love of one's neighbor can easily be converted into a divine command to destroy the enemy, so too transhumanist philanthropy can become a war against what is most deeply and fully human. That is the real danger: that artificial intelligence will re-code the way that we understand our evolved and social intelligence and cause us to prefer the former to the (much more subtle, rich, and complex) later.

Science has long generated metaphorical ways of understanding life. Aristotelian science understood living things as active souls shaping passive matter; in the Enlightenment this conception gave way to a mechanistic understanding of life (as, for example, notoriously expressed in La Mettrie's epochal *Man a Machine* (1748). Today that metaphor is giving way to the metaphor of life as information and intelligence as information processing. Since information processing is just what computers do, it is no exaggeration to say that we are coming to understand ourselves as a reflection of the machines that we have built. Whether or not they turn on us, Terminator like or not, they will kill something essential in us if that metaphor takes hold to the extent that we start to think that our intelligence is solely in our brain and our brain is an information processor.

I am not denying that the advances made by AI researchers are not real or much of our intelligence can be captured by computational models of neural activity. But that which makes human intelligence distinct from machine functioning is that it is inseparable from caring, meaningful relationships to the environment. We are not brains in vats, (as Hilary Putnam entertained in a famous thought experiment) but *living intelligences* standing in meaningful relationships to the natural world, each other, and the universe as a whole. As Teed Rockwell shows in his brilliant book Neither Brain nor Ghost, we cannot understand what brains do if we abstract their activity from the embodied whole of which they are a part. What we see, feel, etc. are not unique functions of the discrete activity of brains but are shaped by the whole nervous system in complex relationships to the world. And– as Marx argued, presciently in the 1840s– the senses themselves are affected by historical and social development. Would Aristotle hear music or unbearable noise if he were brought back to life and taken to a rock concert?

Thus the real danger of further AI development is that it will cause us to dehumanize ourselves and off- load more and more forms of meaningful activity and relationships to a virtual world. And I have no doubt that barring some global catastrophe that collapses social institutions, this result will come to pass (despite my best efforts in *Embodiment and the Meaning of Life* and *Embodied Humanism*). Talk of regulating AI development is nothing more than hot air. If researchers are forbidden from pursuing their projects in one jurisdiction another will make itself available. The perceived economic and military "benefits" are simple too alluring for governments to seriously pass up. (I say "perceived' because, as economic historian Robert Gordon has shown, the last decade of the computing revolution has not produced the expected rise in labour productivity).

Whatever the real or imagined benefits, as the technologies become more ubiquitous they will reshape our social relationships. Hartmut Rosa shows (in *Social Acceleration*) how a technology that is disruptive to one generation becomes the new normal for a later generation. Opposition to technologically driven social change quite literally dies out.

Old school humanists like me might fret at the loss of spontaneity and risk in social life, but a person born today will not understand the value of spontaneity and risk if they grow up in world where they expect all uncertainty to have been programmed out of existence. And that leaves me with a question that I cannot answer (well, perhaps I can, but do not like what I think that the answer might be): are the values of embodied social existence really universal and ultimate (as I have argued) or are they relative to an undeveloped technological era, perhaps to be admired by future cyborgs in the way we can appreciate the beauty of Aristotle's hylomorphism without believe that it is true?

Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Postsecondary Education Financial Sustainability

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After reading the report of the panel that they assembled to look into the financial sustainability of Ontario's postsecondary institutions, the Ford government probably wished that they had heeded the advice implied in an aphorism from the *1001 Nights*: He who asks what he ought not ask will hear an answer he does not want to hear. Asking the panel to look into the financial health of Ontario's universities and hoping to hear that it could be improved by slimming down faculty fat cats, the government instead heard that their own funding policies are the primary threat to a secure future for Ontario's post-secondary system. Surprisingly and encouragingly, the panel urged the Ford government to increase funding. Unsurprisingly and discouragingly, the government ignored that recommendation and insisted that institutions find more "efficiencies" in the way they use resources.

The panel defines financial sustainability as: "the financial capacity of the public sector to meet its current obligations, to withstand shocks, and to maintain service, debt, and commitment at reasonable levels relative to both national expectations and likely future income, while maintaining public confidence"(15). They boldly concluded that any threats to the financial sustainability of the sector were functions of government policy. Ontario colleges and universities receive the lowest per capita provincial funding in the country. That low level of funding has fallen further in real terms because of inflation. The negative impact of both factors is exacerbated by the on-going tuition freeze in the province. Adding these factors together, the panel found reasons to worry about the financial sustainability of this model. None of the provinces universities are in danger of becoming the next Laurentian, yet, but an over-reliance on international students, especially in smaller and comprehensive schools, jeopardizes their future should international enrollments dip.

Since I work in the university sector and have no direct knowledge of the college system I will limit my comments to the panel's analysis of universities. I find myself in broad agreement with the panel's recommendations on the need for increased funding, but worry that whatever good increased funding might do will be compromised by the committee's assumption that changing labour market needs should guide university program development.

Before I fuss about the potential bad, I will discuss the good. The report begins with a frank acknowledgement that provincial policy and not wasteful spending is the root cause of the 'challenges' that universities and colleges are facing: "The province's colleges and universities have faced significant challenges to their financial sustainability in recent years. In 2017, as part of the Strategic Mandate Agreement process, direct provincial funding to support domestic enrollment at colleges and universities was effectively frozen. The number of funded domestic students a college or university could enroll was fixed, as was the finding per student.. Two years later, the finances of Ontario's colleges and universities were further challenged by the province's decision to reduce by 10% the tuition rates paid by students." will continue through 2023-24." (6) While most everyone involved in the sector would agree that the tuition reduction was a good thing, it nevertheless increased the financial strain on universities because it was not

matched by higher government grants. As the report notes, the opposite happened: tuition was frozen and grants reduced (once inflation is factored in, the per capita domestic student grant fell from from $8514 in 2008 to $8350 in 2021)(18).

At the same time as grants and tuition fell, the Province's enrollment corridor system effectively capped the number of domestic students that universities could enroll (17). One might wonder why the government would impose an upper limit on the number of domestic students an institution can enroll. Aren't higher enrollments the key to sustainability? Yes, and no. The government has not imposed enrollment limits, but only enrollment limits on domestic students, because government grants to institutions must increase as enrollment increases. By limiting the number of domestic students it will fund, the government thus limits its costs. (The corridor model also indirectly serves the interests of smaller schools outside the Greater Toronto Area, by preventing the three big Toronto schools from throwing open their doors and enrolling everyone they can. The limits mean that it is at least possible for schools outside the GTA in regions with stagnant population growth to attract students who cannot get into U of T, York, and Toronto Metropolitan).

The government attains cost certainty but the institutions have no way to earn additional revenue, *unless* they can recruit international students. The provincial government does not fund international students. Institutions are free to recruit as many international students as they can, and charge them whatever tuition the market will bear, and they have. The intense recruitment of international students is not an act of multicultural solidarity but pure financial necessity. The report notes, in sombre tones with dire implications that "many colleges and universities are past the point where they could survive financially with only domestic students. They are financially sustainable only because of international students."(38)

The dramatic increase in the number of international students and the creation of programs tailor made to attract them (and the much higher tuition that they pay) prompts the question of whose interests are being served? The panel addresses the question and answers that, in principle, increasing numbers of international students are good for institutions, the country, and the students. The panel notes that international students are a "source of needed talent and desired population growth. They also bring a number of benefits to the on-campus experience for all students."(37) The federal government seems more concerned that a tipping point has been reached. A new policy will double the financial requirements applicants must meet in order to obtain a student visa in an effort to put a stop to unscrupulous recruiters exploiting prospective students, put "degree mills" out of business, and reduce pressure on local housing markets unable to cope with the influx of international students.

But there are also critics in the home countries of these students. The report notes that international students bring a needed supply of talent to Canada, but that means that those talents will be realised here and not in their home country. He was speaking to a domestic audience, but the point that Indian Marxist political economist Prabhat Patnaik was making should inform Canadian thinking on the matter of international students as well. "If using tax payers money to subsidise students who go on to have lucrative careers is ethically questionable, using tax payers' money to subsidise students with lucrative careers providing services in the advanced countries is even more so. It constitutes both private appropriation of public resources and a 'drain of

wealth' overseas … The existing system of allowing 'brains' to 'drain' away needs to change."(203, *Re-Envisaging Socialism*) To be fair, the report was not commissioned to work out just political economic international relations, but everyone involved in higher education in Canada needs to think about the consequences of attracting the best students from the Global South for the nations from which they are recruited.

The focus on international students is also having a profound (and mostly negative) impact on the intellectual structure of Ontario universities. The report notes that in 2021-22 63 new University programs were approved, 75% in health and STEM, because those are areas "of high labour market demand. All these programs identified career pathways and strong ties to business and industry." (13) Many of these programs are designed explicitly to attract international students. Getting institutional and government approval is a massive undertaking. Any new program must prove that there will be demand for its graduates and it must be at least cost neutral (bring in as much money as running the program will cost). The implications of these trends are dire for the humanities: undertaking the sorts of innovative pedagogical transformations that I think we need to undertake would require approval of new programming, but proving to the institution and government that labour market demand exists for graduates will prove a difficult task.

The problem is not that humanities graduates do not find work, (at the University of Windsor, 83% of Humanities graduates were employed after 1 year, 97% after 2– a higher rate than Sciences, Social Sciences, and Engineering). The problem is that the government wants to see very specific demands for very specific credentials. I have never seen a job add (outside universities) for a philosopher in the way one sees ads for physiotherapists and medical diagnostic experts. Humanities departments, already threatened by low enrollments, could well enter into a death spiral: low enrollments rule out investment, lack of investment impedes the ability to re-think and re-organize how we deliver humanistic education, our faculty ages and retirements are not replaced, course offerings need to be consolidated, consolidations impedes our ability to recruit, until finally the last retiree turns out the lights and the corridors go dark, forever.

The report was not concerned with how Universities spend their revenues, but one cannot disconnect provincial and institutional priorities. In public, administrators and politicians always say the right things about the importance of the student experience and the enduring significance of the humanities, but when push comes to shove, as in the case of Laurentian, the philosophers and literary critics lose their jobs. Institutions cannot simply buck provincial demands: they remain dependent on government grants for a large portion of their revenue and the government has the final say on the creation of new programs. I prefer catastrophising to naive optimism (I am never disappointed when worse comes to worst). Perhaps we humanists will find away out of our precarious state, but simply increasing operating grants will not help us. Other things being equal, those additional resources will be allocated to the "growth centres" in the university, and, with very few exceptions, those disciplines will be in STEM and professional programs.

I do not begrudge my colleagues in those fields the resources that they need, but I do think the universities need to reject the activity-based budgeting models they have adopted in favour of a more whole-institutional approach. Such a model would start from the assumption that the

university is a single institution articulated into faculties and departments. Instead of forcing departments into contrived competition for scarce funds, the administration would treat them all as organic elements of the institutional whole. The first principle of resource allocation would be sufficient funds to ensure consistent delivery of existing programming, with increased funding allocated to growing disciplines and departments. Secure in the knowledge that retirements will be replaced, smaller enrollment disciplines like philosophy will be better positioned to re-imagine themselves and hopefully attract larger numbers of students.

Nevertheless, re-imagination and re-invention of the humanities is a complex problem for another day. I doubt very much whether the Ford government will respond favourably to the recommendations of the the panel to approve a 1 time increase of 10% to the grant and then index future grants to the Consumer Price Index in subsequent years following.(20) Change will probably not come unless the federal government's policy changes cause a crisis, and the last time an institution was forced to change because of a crisis– Laurentian– the result was disastrous for academics, staff, and students.

Rufo and “The New Right”

Originally posted 14 January, 2024

Chuffed by his role in forcing former Harvard president Claudine Gay to resign, Christopher Rufo has just penned a call to arms to “new right activists” to “win back the language, recapture institutions, and reorient the state toward rightful ends.” He does not tell us what “rightful ends” the state should serve or what those who disagree with them whatever they turn out to be should do. As a manifesto, it lacks the poetry of Marx and Engels. Its fussing over the capture of American institutions by the “far left” is derivative of the anxieties of late 60s and early 1970’s conservatives worried about the anti-war, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist youth. And its plea that the right emulate the political left’s strategy of capturing the leadership of major social institutions is ironic, given that many leftists (Srnicek and Williams, for example) have argued that leftists need to take a page from the way the right recovered from their defeats in the 1960 to dominate the 70s and 80s.

In short, the content and tone is predictable and superficial, but Rufo does raise important questions about the purpose of public institutions that are worth thinking through.

Rufo’s screed begins by telling his fellow travellers that both the old (nineteenth century) liberalism and conservatism are dead. Warming the right-wing heart with memories of Reagan will not work; the new right needs a new action plan for new times. He does not mention Trump and I do not know what his position is on MAGA Republicans (they certainly have organizing power, but Rufo is perhaps too much of an intellectual to go in for their manifold absurdities). Rufo focuses on stopping “establishment conservatives” from retreating any further from the core values of the “political tradition of the west– republican self-government, shared moral standards, and the pursuit of eudaimonia.”

I found the inclusion of eudaimonia next to ‘shared moral standards’ in a conservative argument odd. Without saying anything more about what ‘shared moral standards’ he has in mind (Judeo-Christian morality, I presume) the value of flourishing (eudaimonia) pulls in the direction of individual difference and self-creation, not shared substantive values. Aristotle could assume shared moral principles, but in a pluralist country like the United States, shared moral standards are the problem, not the solution. Individual flourishing presupposes access to resources and, therefore, (if you ask me) any society that prioritises flourishing must institutionalise the principle (common to socialism and egalitarian liberalism but foreign to the classical liberalism or libertarianism) that everyone should be able to access the basic resources, relationships, and institutions that the flourishing of their lives requires. But as for religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and the content of the lives people choose to pursue, those would necessarily differ. Without further unpacking his thought, Rufo leaves his position open to questions about its normative and political coherence.

However, as I noted, the essay is a short call to arms and not a political philosophy paper. “The Right doesn’t need a white paper,” he argues, it needs activists willing to go to battle– as he did

in the Harvard plagiarism scandal– to take back institutions. Unless the right takes back control of schools and statehouses, all talk of 'righteous ends' is just academic hot air.

But a battle against what forces? Rufo provides further support for an argument that I have made for decades concerning the connection between postmodern critiques of objective truth and the right-wing. Rufo argues that "while postmodern theorists who reduced politics to "language games" may have overstated the case, … they were right in one respect: language is the operative element of human culture. To change the language means to change society: in law, arts, rhetoric, and common speech." Rufo (and the postmodernists) are correct that language is the operative element of human society, but they are wrong to infer that political power is a function of control over language. Power does not stem from control over the OED or the barrel of a gun (Mao), but from control over the resources (natural, technological) upon which everyone's lives and livelihood depends. Control over the language is often used in a purely ideological way make it seem as though substantive social changes have been made when in reality the class dimensions of political and economic power have not been changed at all.

Such is the case with the language of 'Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion" that drives Rufo so crazy. Let us confine our attention to the universities for a moment. Rufo believes that the leadership of universities has been seized by a far left cabal bent on destroying academic standards and turning America's halls of academia into madrassas of political correctness. I have worked in universities for thirty years and can assure everyone who is worried that they are *not* led by far left activists and that the biggest threat to academic freedom is the role of private money (as l'affaire Harvard also proved) and the ubiquitous demand made by public funders that university curricula serve the interests of business by producing "job ready" applicants that can be fed into the most dynamic sectors of the economy.

Anyone concerned with academic standards and freedom should be concerned when any extraneous political agenda is imposed upon academics and students, whichever side of the political aisle it claims to serve. Curricula needs to be determined by the state of the art in the field and not preachy administrators hoping to cure the ills of the world through changed reading lists. At the same time– as Rufo's own arguments admit– the world has changed. The most important change– in the humanities at least– is the emergence of long silenced voices that demand– rightly– to be heard. The state of the art in the field should determine the curricula in all disciplines, but certainly in the humanities the state of the art means including the works of historically colonised people, critical race theorists, and others who have been demonstrably oppressed by the dominant structures of power and wealth. Including those voices does not mean that they should dominate the conversation to the exclusion of older perspectives, but it does mean that they have to be heard.

Rufo's intervention does not go into details about how he would reform institutions in general or universities in particular, but the general arguments he does make contradict themselves. He calls out the left for its "euphemistic rule," but then concludes that the new right must "replace contemporary ideological language with new, persuasive language that points towards clear principles." Two points are in order: first, persuasive language need not be true, and second, clear principles can be ideological. Rufo intends his readers to conclude that his feet are planted

in the soil of objective truth, but he himself admits that he is mobilizing power to prosecute a political– ideologically partisan– agenda.

Rufo's penchant for making bald faced contradictions perhaps explains why works for a think tank and not an academic institution. If he worked as an academic, he would have to defend his arguments from critics who would expose his contradictions. As a private researcher, he is free to deal in platitudes about the superiority of passion to reason and re-setting the public agenda on the basis of "clear principles." (He also does not have to fend off charges of plagiarism, which is good for him, because he flat out plagiarises Hume's argument, from *Essay on Human Nature*, that reason is the slave of the passions. Maybe Claudine Gay should expose him).

In any case, the problem with Rufo's criticisms of the "euphemistic left" is that he wants his readers to think that his "clear principles' are objectively true, while at the same time arguing that all principles are political and that public life is really a Nietzschean battle to impose one's own preferred 'truths' on everyone else. He writes that "no institution can be neutral– and any institutional authority aiming only for neutrality will immediately be captured by a faction more committed to imposing ideology." If true, it follows that this argument applies to Rufo as well, and that, consequently, his real agenda is not to protect objective truth from the infamies of the 'far left,' but just to impose his ideology on everyone else.

But institutions can be neutral, in the partisan political sense, and yet passionately commit themselves to fulfilling their purpose. To speak again only of the universities, the belief that they must serve a cliched left or right wing agenda is simply false. Faculty and students have political positions, which they must be free to *defend* (not impose) in the context of academic argument, but the university itself, if it is to function as a space for open, free, intellectual inquiry, criticism, and debate, cannot serve any political master. There have been egregious cases of faculty being hounded out of their positions, not had their contracts renewed, or fired, for running afoul of EDI platitudes. I have criticized these violations of academic freedom and integrity and will continue to do so. But the solution is not a "new right" take over of the universities (as has happened at New College in Florida), but a recommitment of all members of the university institution to the discipline and courage of argument. The purpose of the university is not to spread any particular group's "truth" but to expose every truth-claim to the test of open examination and criticism. The truth will out, but not because one group is more committed to its partisan principles than another. The truth is what survives contestation and criticism. If Rufo is serious about returning institutions to their purposes, he needs to stand on the side of critical engagement and not on the side of forcibly silencing opponents who annoy him.

Endgame?

Originally posted 24 January, 2024

Are Canada's universities heading towards an epochal crisis of relevance? Writing in The Hub, a university administrator in a "senior leadership position" at a "well-respected university" worries that they are. Her concerns are not directed at the rising costs of post-secondary education for students, the funding crisis plaguing the institutions of some provinces (especially Ontario), or budget models that tie resources to enrollments and enrollments to employment. She instead focuses on the purported weakening commitment to scholarly excellence and academic freedom. The culprit: woke obsession with the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion agenda, students who need coddling and are incapable of rising to the challenge of higher education, an expanding cohort of student support functionaries with no background in higher education, and the rule of group unthink amongst senior administrators. I think that she raises legitimate concerns, but also exaggerates the extent to which contentious debate has been suppressed within Canada's universities.

There have been, to be sure, egregious exceptions to the principle of academic freedom. The most serious is the firing of Frances Widdowson from Mount Royal University. According to Widdowson, she was fired because of her criticisms of the school's Indiginization initiatives. Her case is currently being argued in front of an arbitrator in Alberta. She has received the support of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, a group who traces its origins to the struggle for academic freedom. CAUT was also involved in protesting the decision of the administration at the University of Lethbridge to cave into student and faculty pressure to cancel a talk that Widdowson was supposed to give on campus. She had been invited by Philosophy professor (and my former colleague at McMaster University) Paul Viminitz to speak on her case and the surrounding issues of academic freedom.

The concerns that the administrator raises in her essay have some basis in reality. I have argued consistently and will continue to argue that any student or faculty member who is incapable of listening to and responding with cogent argument and criticism to positions that differ from their own because they assume that their position is necessarily true, just, and beyond rational dispute contradict the ethos of free inquiry upon which the university depends. Universities cannot exist without the free exchange and articulation of arguments. As the poet and University of Toronto English Professor George Eliot Clarke wrote in a recent edition of the CAUT Bulletin, the "cancellation" and "gangstalking," i.e., bullying and harassment conducted to censure, censor, or silence academics (and other intellectuals, including writers) … are strictly heinous when backed by other members of the intelligentsia– citizens whose work relies upon free speech guarantees." (CAUT Bulletin, 18 Vo. 70, No. 6, Sept-Oct, 2023, 18).) Clarke is correct to insist that no one group has the right to decide what positions are publicly articulated and defended. As I have said before, the truth will out, if and only if differing positions can be freely analyzed and criticized. There is no higher value in the university than free exchange, analysis, and criticism of ideas and arguments concerning all of the dimensions of human experience: the natural world upon which we depend, the social worlds that we construct, and the systems of thought and expression (science, philosophy, spirituality, artistic sensibility and practice) through which we try to understand and interpretet. The political value of universities is not determined by any party line. Their political value is that they educate people to think clearly and critically, to evaluate and

marshal evidence in support of a position, to rationally convince others or be rationally convinced themselves. Self-righteous posturing and preaching to the choir supports an ethic of indoctrination to which the value and power of human thinking must always oppose itself.

Universities must reject, as Hegel said, “the conceit that refuses to argue.”

The question is: are DEI initiatives necessarily expressions of that conceit.

But are DEI initiatives opposed to academic freedom? Writing in the same issue of the CAUT Bulletin, Executive Director David Robinson acknowledged that there are real tensions between *some interpretations* of DEI initiatives and academic freedom. “We have … seen more prescriptive requirement that ask candidates to submit statements demonstrating how their work aligns with the institution’s specific EDI strategy. This can violate academic freedom.” Where there are grounds to worry about the transgressions of the principle of academic freedom, faculty unions need to do their job and have demands for such statements removed from application requirements. That is not to say, Robinson adds, that the mere existence of DEI requirements violates academic freedom. “CAUT policy has long stated that all hiring and promotion decisions should be based only on considerations relevant to .. effective performance .. Arguably, such professional responsibilities today include the ability to teach an increasingly diverse and inclusive student body.” (CAUT Bulletin, Vol 70, No. 6, 7). Agreed. Therefore, there is no *necessary* contradiction between institutional efforts to more fulsomely include historically marginalized voices and the right of academics to organize their courses according to their expertise and professional judgment.

In a related vein, the president of PEN America Suzanne Nossel argued in a recent essay that the university system in a pluralistic society has a responsibility to ensure that there is space for the expression of all socially relevant perspectives on the problems of human experience and knowledge. Both Robinson and Noessen bring to light what to my mind is the key to resolving the conflict between DEI and academic freedom: academics have a responsibility to teach the state of the art in their disciplines. This responsibility obligates them to revise their own curriculum in light of changes in the field. Academic disciplines cannot be determined solely by political forces outside the academy, but they do not float free of those forces either. Therefore, where pervasive social struggles, such as the renewed struggle against racism in the wake of the George Floyd murder steer academic work in new directions, everyone working in fields so affected have a responsibility to inform themselves of that work and incorporate it, where relevant, into their course designs, not because some bureaucracy, but because good teaching, demands it.

The anonymous administrator invokes the Enlightenment in defence of her position, but the Enlightenment was contradictory, typically (but not always) invoking different standards for the judgement of European and non-European societies. The French Revolution proclaimed the universal rights of “man and citizen,” but executed Olympe de Gouges when she demanded that the rights of women be equally recognized. As great an anti-imperialist as the Marquis de Condorcet could, in the same work (*Sketch for Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*) both denounce the violent racism of slavery-supporting tyrants and argue that the best fate for Indigenous people in the Americas was assimilation.

The political legacy of the Enlightenment is thus highly ambiguous. Methodologically, what was most valuable is the opposite of the good administrator's assumption. The Enlightenment began the process of freeing thought from attachment to eternal natural kinds and fixed moral hierarchies. The key thinkers of the French, Scottish, and German Enlightenments began to ask crucial questions about how societies came to be organized the way that they are, who benefits from that organization, and how people came to be convinced that the way things are now is the way that they naturally should be? When we understand the Enlightenment as the origin of critical-historical thinking, feminism, critical race theory, and the critique of colonialism become continuations of its methodological heritage, not its opposite. "The Enlightenment" was a historical period, contradictory like all historical periods, and not a crystalline structure of truth floating free from social interests.

That said, everyone who teaches or studies at a university must treat their work as an argument and not as gospel truth to be preached and never questioned. Refusal to treat opponent's positions as arguments but as anathema to be banned is a direct violation of academics' and students' duty to treat the institution as a space for open inquiry and free debate. That duty applies equally to everyone: again, the political function of universities is not to promote some undefined and therefore meaningless "social justice agenda" or to combat the deep structural inequalities of the world. Universities educate, that is all, but under the assumption that educated people can weigh evidence, detect contradictions between principle and practice or within principles, develop coherent arguments to justify the claim that there is a contradiction, suggest alternatives, all the while remaining open to counter-argument and to the incorporation of sound criticism into revised thinking.

That is the hope, in any case. And while I agree that there have been egregious examples of cowardly administrators caving in to some students and faculty's misplaced political demands to regulate the free play of argument on campus, I do not see that this problem has reached a point where the very existence of the institution as a space for free inquiry has been threatened. The author of the piece lists a now familiar set of concerns: targeted hiring of historically underrepresented groups, Indigenization initiatives, and students more concerned with mental health support than intellectual growth.

But there is no detailed meat of analysis and evidence put on these bones of critique. She does not prove, for example, that targeted hiring of underrepresented groups compromises the quality of research and teaching or that there is a contradiction between such hiring initiatives and academic excellence and commitment to choosing the most qualified candidate. The author is a woman, and she would know better than me that exactly the same arguments were launched 40 years ago when institutions began making systematic efforts to increase the proportion of women academics. Does she regard herself and her female colleagues hired over the past 3 or 4 decades as as a mere "equity hires? I would guess not. So why does she think that black or Indigenous colleagues hired more recently are not equally fit for their positions? If, as she implies, she thinks that (at least some of them) are, she needs to provide some evidence.

As for students today, well, students today are who they are and they are different from the author and I when we were students 30 or 40 years ago. Her elders told her, I am sure, as mine told me when I was an adolescent, that I would grow old enough to be driven crazy by teenagers

and young adults, and they were correct. The tone of the essay too often sounds like late middle age grousing about “kids these days.’ Now I admit, there is both necessity and pleasure in late middle age grousing about “kids these days’ (if it was so much better in our day, we can reconcile ourselves more easily to getting old) but grousing is not proof that there is a systematic problem. Before one condemns contemporary students, one must look at the social and economic context in which they are trying to study (high tuition, the consequent need for many to work and try to go to school, uncertain job prospects, to name only the most significant).

We oldsters must also remember that those of us who became professors were bookworms and lab rats: a very small proportion of our graduating classes. Now that we teach or administrate we have to keep in mind that the vast majority of students do not want to be scholars and intellectuals. To be effective teachers we have to come down to where most of our students are in order to encourage them to take a few steps up to where the ideas live. We also have to keep in mind that our study habits were forged before the internet, before people held the power of real time instant global communication in the palm of their hands. Our social identities were formed in a vastly different cultural-technological matrix.

As we were different from our parents, so too are today’s students different from us. They are not, I do not think, a catastrophe that will destroy the institution, but they will force the institution to change. As the Gang of Four sang in “I Found that Essence Rare,” “the worst thing in 1954 was the bikini.” I can imagine academics in “senior leadership positions” in the 60s fussing about the complete corruption of the nation’s morals in response to student demands for co-ed dorms.

Again, there are serious concerns raised in this essay and there are examples of institutions abdicating their responsibilities to protect academic freedom. However, I want to suggest– gently, and with respect– that if the problems really are as serious as she argues, she has a perfect duty, as a “senior leader’ to open her mouth in meetings and challenge her colleagues. And a further part of that duty is to sign her name to articles that call into question the academic integrity of the university institutions that have given her a career. If that which we depend upon not only for our paycheque but our existence as intellectuals is threatened, and we believe that the institution’s social value is in jeopardy, then we have a duty to protect it, or resign from a “leadership” position and go back to the faculty ranks. It is not only the communists of the world that should disdain to conceal their views, it is all concerned citizens. If one is afraid to sign one’s name, why should anyone believe what they say? After all, an essential part of the free exchange of ideas that the author claims to value is answering criticism of your arguments. But if one does not put name to paper, one cannot be held to critical account.

Win the Political Argument, not the Court Case

Originally posted 4 January, 2024

The decisions of the Colorado Supreme Court and the Secretary of State of Maine to bar Trump (pending appeals to US Supreme Court) from the Republican primary ballot in those states gives practical urgency to abstract debates about the relationship between constitutional principles, the rule of law, and democratic self-determination. On the surface– whatever one thinks of Trump– having judges and a secretary of state (from an opposing party) take pre-emptive steps to remove a candidate from ballots and thus prevent voters from exercising their right to vote for a candidate of their choice seems rather like the 'election interference' of which Trump has been accused.

On the other hand, elections are governed by rules and– again, whatever one thinks of those rules and whatever one thinks about how democratic 'actually existing democracy' is– there is an argument that Trump has disqualified himself by his actions on January 6th, 2021. The Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine Secretary of State appealed to the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution's ban on "insurrectionists" running for office as justification for their decision to remove Trump from the ballot. At issue, legally, constitutionally, is whether or not Trump's actions on January 6th amounted to insurrection. At present, no court has found him criminally guilty of such a charge, which predictably raises suspicions– and not unjustified, within the rules of the American electoral system– that Democratic justices and officials are trying to disrupt the Trump campaign because- as incredible as it might seem– he has a legitimate chance to beat Biden in the general election.

The US Supreme Court will decide the constitutional issues one way or the other, by either refusing to hear the case (and thus letting the decisions stand) or hearing arguments and rendering judgement. Here too partisanship is almost certain to come into play. The 6-3-conservative-liberal split and the fact that three of those 6 were appointed during Trump's term as President increases the probability that the court would render a verdict favorable to Trump. However, the real issue that these decisions raise is political and goes to the heart of the value that underlies democracy.

The Secretary of State of Maine argued that since "democracy is sacred" she had no choice but to bar Trump from the ballot, for Trump, apparently, is the antithesis of everything democratic. But is he? What makes democracy sacred? And what does "sacred" mean? Setting aside the overtly religious connotations, sacred means, I would argue, something like "not for sale at any price or exchangeable for any superior good." So, if democracy is sacred, office cannot be bought at any price but must be the function of the choice of the citizens. Moreover, it cannot be sacrificed to any higher good, including, presumably, constitutional principles.

Let us set aside the obvious role that money plays in US federal and elections and focus on the substantive political problem. That problem is: do constitutional principles exist for the sake of democracy or does democracy exist for the sake of constitutional principles? The question has haunted American democracy from the beginning, when the question of how to regulate (tame, subordinate?) the popular energies unleashed by revolution was debated in the *Federalist.* The problem that Hamilton, Madison, and other founders of the America state faced was the

unbridled nature of democratic energy. Popular power is unfocused but must be channeled this way or that. They worried that democratic power would be captured by majoritarian movements that would wield state power against opposed minority interests (especially the minority interest defined by class power rooted in control over wealth and resources).

The debate has raged since Madison's critique of popular democratic power between supporters of its subordination to constitutional limits and defenders of its essential vitality. Defenders of democracy argue that by its very nature democracy must leave the question of governing principle open: democratic peoples decide fro themselves who will rule them and by what principles they will be ruled. Sheldon Wolin, criticizing Rawls for the anti-political and undemocratic thrust of his theory of justice, makes the general point clearly: Rawls tries to 'cut democracy to the specifications of constitutionalism" he argued, and "fit 'democracy' into an undemocratic social framework." Rawls' makes these moves, Wolin contends, because his starting point, "is not democracy, but … 'stability."("The Liberal/Democratic Divide" *Fugitive Democracy*, 275.)

For Wolin, one cannot have democracy without struggle and contestation over what is and is not a fit matter for public debate and decision. "The problem of the political is not to clear a space from which society is to be kept out but it is to ground power in commonality while reverencing diversity … Diversity cannot be reverenced by bureaucratic modes of decision-making. Diversity is the nightmare of bureaucracy." ("Democracy and the Political," 249) The problem of diversity– a problem of which Trump is a paradigm example– is that the forms it takes cannot be predicted in advance. It is a nightmare for bureaucratic thinking precisely because the forms it throws up cannot be regulated in advance. When a movement arises which seems to break the established pattern the response of bureaucracy– as exemplified here by the Colorado Supreme Court and the Secretary of State of Maine– is to try to suppress it, eradicate it under cover of legal or constitutional principle. The result– if Wolin is correct, and I believe that he is– must be undemocratic.

Wolin did not live long enough to see Trump, but Trump is not, in fact, a novelty in US politics but the latest in a long line of right-wing populist iconoclasts. None of these figures scared Wolin away from his affirmation of democracy over its constitutional strangulation, so I doubt that Trump would have either. What Trump's opponents forget is that democracy is not first and foremost a substantive moral doctrine but a form of distributing power. In a democracy, different groups and movements struggle for power. One side in this struggle cannot cloak itself in the mantle of "democracy" as justification for banning other players from playing. To do so is obviously to try to stack the deck in one's favour and thus undercut by one's practice the very value of democracy to which one appeals as theoretical justification.

To support unbridled democratic contestation between rival parties and movements does not mean supporting Trump or other demagogic forces or rejecting the existence of genuine, shared, fundamental interests anchored in basic natural and social needs. What it does mean is that commitment to democratic politics elevates the principle of self-determination above expertocratic, top-down forms of enacting policies to meet those needs. In short, a commitment to democratic self-determination requires that democrats accept risk. Unless one want to be ruled by an expertocracy (like Iran's Council of Experts that vets candidates for office, or return to the

days of Enlightened despotism, or- as technotopians urge– turn our public affairs over to an AI system that will mechanically churn out win-win solutions to all problems– one must accept the possibility that majorities will coalesce around demagogic figures like Trump. That is precisely the reason why Plato believed that democracy will always undermine itself. but he did not appeal to constitutional constraints– because he knew they would not work– but to a plan of rigid social order which allowed the majority no say at all in choosing their rulers or determining the laws they would have to obey.

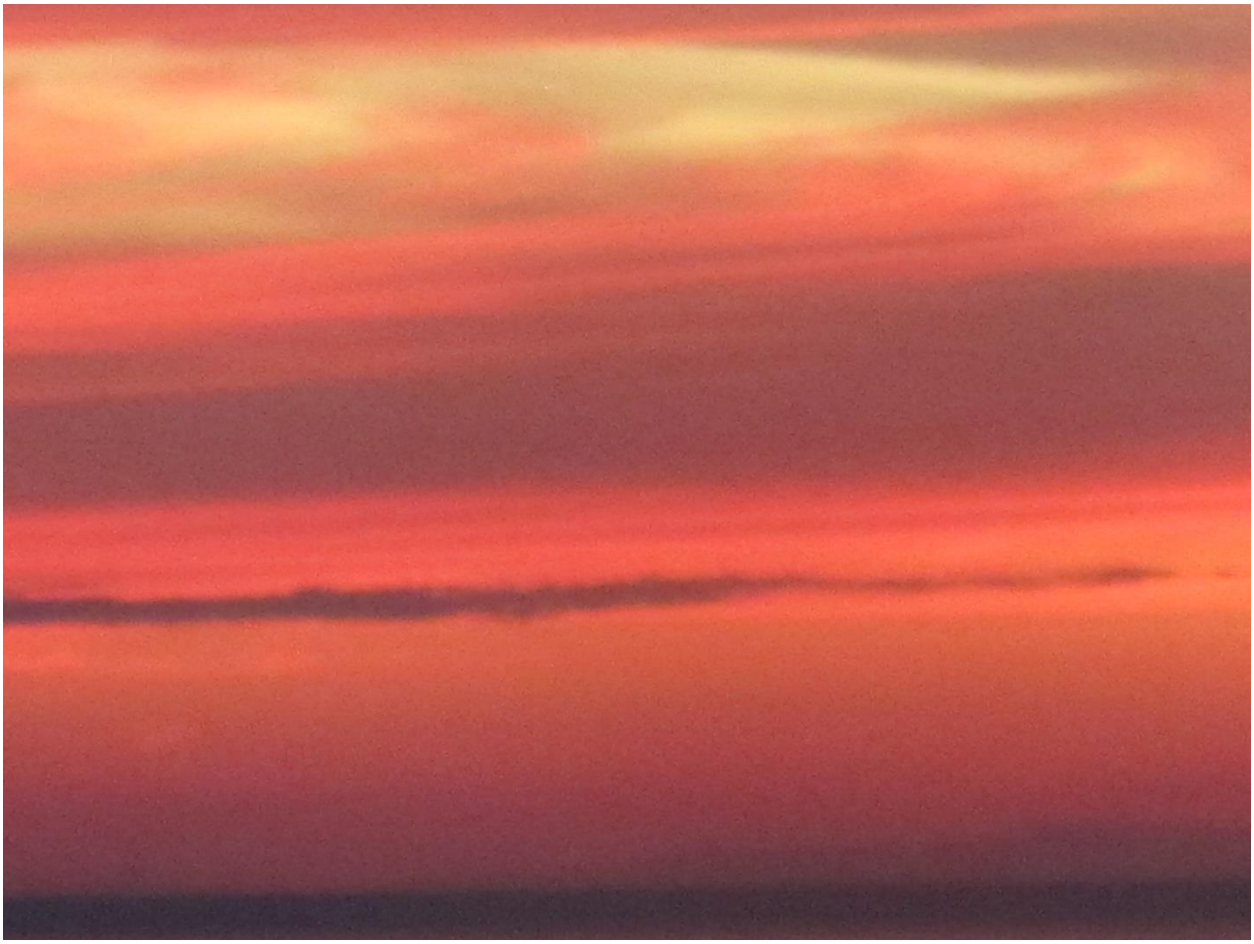
Are Plato and contemporary Platonic-technotopian critics of democracy correct? Are the hoi poloi (or even the whole human race) too stupid to run their own affairs? If the answer is yes and the solution to turn our affairs over to quasi-divine Philosopher-Kings or machines, then I suggest that our time on the planet is up. We should decide–democratically!– that the human experiment has run its course and failed.

If we are not ready to vote for voluntary extinction or to turn political life over to a computer system, then we must assume that we are mature enough to determine our collective life in accordance with democratic principles. Trump's opponents want to use constitutional principles like a computer algorithm to select out Trump in advance of democratic contestation. As I noted above, following Wolin, this cuts into the very heart of democracy: one cannot anticipate in advance what sorts of movements democratic power will create and coalesce around. The only democratic antidote to democratically emergent but substantively undemocratic movements like Trumpism is to defeat them, politically, through the force of better arguments and superior mobilizing power around an agenda more demonstrably in people's shared interests.

As Wolin argues, 'The mode of action that is consonant with equality and diversity is deliberation. Deliberation means to think carefully." We must think carefully because what is at stake is the exercise of human power" (249) But Trump is unreasonable! opponents will respond. But is he? He is actually a skilled rhetorician and politician, but in order to understand the logic of his positions, one must think politically and not in abstractly logico-empirical terms. That is, Trump, like all politicians uses speech to moblize power, not to advance truth-claims. Pointing out his "lies' will never defeat him, because his supporters are not following him because of the abstract truth-value of his assertions, but because they think that his agenda serves their interests. They are worried about jobs, their communities, their traditions, and so they can be mobilized around an anti-immigrant, isolationist, protectionist agenda. An effective response has to acknowledge the legitimacy of people's fears in ways that opens their ears to counter-argument.

People cannot deliberate when they are afraid or angry, and many of Trump's supporters– in 2016, 2020, and still today, are afraid and angry. The problem is the social context which makes 77 million people willing to vote for a Trump. I say 'a' Trump and not 'Trump' because unless the *political* fight is won with his supporters another right-wing populist will arise to take Trump's place. Trump is a symbol of unmet social needs: how to channel those who feel those unmet needs in a democratic rather than demagogic direction is the real problem that Trump's opponents face. Hoping the constitution will save democracy is both in vain and undemocratic.

Evocations



Adieu, Big Cat

Originally posted 27 August, 2023

On my trips home to visit my mom in Sudbury, I always stop on the side of the road to collect rocks for the garden. Most of them are Cambrian Shield granite, but I have a few pieces of the nickle ore that still forms the basis of the local economy. The ore was formed in a magma lake created 1.8 billion years ago when a meteorite slammed into the region.

Last week I was sitting in the garden with Josie when I brought her over to a piece of the ore and told her to put her hand on it. I do not remember exactly what we had been discussing, but I wanted to illustrate a point about the relativity of time, about how what seems agonizingly long from a human perspective is nothing from geological point of view. If the ore could sense and think, would it even be able to register the 80 or so years of a human's life? It would be the briefest flash of light, gone before the rock could even concentrate its attention to see if something worth investigating had happened. Even the whole history of the human lineage, a couple million years, would not be to it as an afternoon is to us.

I made a point to find some ore because it reminds me of who I am and how I got here. Had the meteorite not slammed into primeval Sudbury, there would have been no nickle-copper ore, and therefore no mines, no smelter where my father worked, and so maybe no father, no mother, no me. My sitting in the garden with Josie is one act in a cosmic drama billions of years old. And so is your sitting wherever you are sitting. And the causal connections that led to my or your being here and there, and one person's doing one thing and another person another, and people meeting and becoming friends and colleagues are so innumerable, so improbable, that thinking about them sends a shudder through me. Had any one thing been even a little different, I would not have been born, or I would have become something else, and made different friends, or not made any at all, and would have had to sit alone in my garden rather than with Josie.

But however improbable a life is, if you are living it, then the whole 14 billion year history of the universe has worked out in your favour. Whatever you achieve or do not achieve, your life is of singular value. Once you are gone nothing ever, no matter how many trillions of years the universe will last, will be you again. And that is why we feel such pain at the death of our friends.

Although our lives are near miraculous singularities and the rocks will long outlast us, we are conscious of the passing of our days. And yet, how many days do we waste, wishing we were doing something other than we are doing, or fidgeting, restless and bored?

No mortal creature should ever be bored because no one knows for certain which moment will be one's last. As has happened too frequently over the past three years, I was brutally reminded again yesterday of this hard truth– harder even than the ore in my garden– when I learned of the death of my friend and colleague Cate Hundleby. I was working upstairs when Josie called for me to come down, a quiver in her voice told me that something was seriously wrong. A tree had

fallen in our back yard the day before and taken down the power line. I was worried that it had begun to spark or started something on fire.

But the news was far worse.

Our friends Tory and Len were in the yard, telling us that Cate had died earlier that day.

One goes numb, not quite capable of *feeling* the meaning of that news. One's mind immediately goes back to the last time one saw the person, the vividness of the memory resists the thought that one will never see them again.

I called Cate 'Big Cat' because of her Chesire cat-like grin. I gave her the nickname very soon after she came to Windsor. I was on the committee that hired her and we were friends from the moment that she started working and living here. She lived on the same street as Josie and I, only half a block away. We would see her walking her dogs, first Abbie, then Chloe, and now, never again. Like the Chesire Cat, she has disappeared, leaving only the memory of that grin.

Cate was a transformative addition to the department, not the first woman in its history but the first feminist philosopher. When she started working here she had made a name for herself as a feminist philosopher of science. As her worked developed, it turned towards argumentation theory, where she made original contributions to a feminist theory of argumentation. She authored the Standford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy entry on feminism and argumentation, edited an important collection of essays on the work of Trudy Govier, and was instrumental in founding Canada's first PhD Program in Argumentation. She was a loud and effective voice for change within the department, the university, and the philosophical community generally. Her arguments were not always easily received in the department, but we are the better for her efforts and contributions.

These are facts, but people are not just facts. We cannot capture the texture of a life, how they interweave with the lives of others and things, by saying what people did and what they were like. Life is experience and activity; our contributions have helped make things the way they are, but the person cannot be recreated from the traces that they left behind. Only memory can preserve the *Élan vital.*

Josie and I sat somberly in the garden yesterday, remembering our friend and toasting her. As we sat there, a hummingbird began to feed from a flower of a late blooming hosta. Neither of us could remember ever seeing a hummingbird in twenty years of living here.

I am a man of reason and science. I know that rocks do not experience that passage of time and that hummingbirds are just hummingbirds.

But our superiority over the rocks is that we can imagine, and pretend, and project meanings, and act as if.

And so we looked at the hummingbird and said good bye to our friend.

A few seconds later, it rose from the hosta and flew away.

The Hill

Originally posted 23 November, 2023

My winters were spent in unbordered bush n snow drifts

n on The Hill

behind the school

where everyone would

slide.

A city of children, classless, kinda

cause no one had fancier coats

or thought they were better than anyone else

cause they weren’t:

everyone’s dad worked in the mines

n their moms at shops in town

or cut hair in their living rooms

to earn a few extra bucks.

Day n night the Hill would draw us

together on toboggans

or solo on a Krazy Karpet

n if you didn’t have either

you could use some cardboard

or even old

boots whose treads had worn out

(but not a sled: sleds were snow machines

in case ya didn't know).

Maybe some bigger kids would push us smaller ones back down the hill

before we had scrambled back to the top

but ya just had to take it

you couldn't be a suck in those days.

Later, when we had become jaded teenagers

we would still go sliding

drinking rye from the bottle

on the lip of the scary steep slopes of the gravel pit.

It was like falling over a cliff

drunk as hell.

Everyone crashed before the bottom

but that's what made it fun

n the bottle waiting for us

back at the top

promised the illusion of warmth, even when it was wicked cold.

I never thought about it then

but I did the other day, that

probably there are classless cities of children

in the desert

n maybe they go sliding down sand dunes,

(but not in boots, obviously, but Krazy Karpets would work).

It's probably hard to find a 40 pounder of CC

in the desert

but maybe they have other stuff to drink

but whether they do or not

I bet

if they are alone in their city of children

doing whatever kids do in the desert

they smile

cause they feel safe

n together

n even if the bigger kids push the little ones around

its all in fun

n you can’t be a suck

in the desert either, but ya learn to

laugh n take it

just like on our Hill.

I haven’t gone sliding in decades

but I can still feel

the dirty February snow spraying my cheeks

and freezing to my toque.

When I think now about what I have been doing

I guess I’ve mostly read:

philosophers n poets n novelists n historians n economists n political scientists,

I have thought up n down

over, under, n sideways,

in straight lines n spirals n circles,

even dialectically.

I have thought long, and I have thought hard

n me n all the serious people I have read

think we know what's what

but whatever we think we know

it's not been enough

to stop the same shit from happening

over n over n over.

Today I can't say

that I know anything much fer sure,

so I could be wrong

but this much seems clear:

that babies who need to be in incubators

should not have to be wrapped in tin foil

because they had the misfortune

to be born into somebody's war.

I really don't know much for certain anymore,

so I could be wrong

but it seems clear to me

that if the price of whatever

is that tiny creatures

who don’t want anything except to be warm

have to be wrapped in tin foil

to survive the night

then that price is too high

and whatever it is

that caused people to destroy

the cocoon that those babies needed

is not worth it.

One more thing seems clear to me,

but I could be wrong,

still, I think that anybody

who– every cell vibrating with terror-

doesn’t run away

cause babies can’t wrap themselves in tin foil,

those people who stay behind and maybe tell those babies stories

about how they used to go sliding– on icy hills or sandy dunes

or whatever–

who stay close and promise them that they will get through the night

and grow up and go sliding

or whatever the citizens of the city of children will do in the future,

I think maybe those people should be leaders,

cause they don’t read and write about what should be done

in the future

but do what must be done.

right now.

Black Spruce/White Pine

Originally posted 17 August, 2023

… to be a conduit of light and nutrients,

a lens through which the world focuses itself

from one perspective,

for one moment,

gracious and receptive,

living not thinking

the wisdom of silence

of soil and rock and trees.

… to be like the black spruce,

that lets the older branches die,

grey, brittle counter-points

to the green apex,

straining out of this thin acid soil

towards the morning sun.

… to be like the white pine,

unafraid of asymmetry,

its lea-side branches

outreaching their windward brothers,

solemnly unbalanced,

but it does not topple,

clinging precarious,

by knuckle-roots

to the rocks

over which my footfalls

beat unrhythmically

to the lay of the land.

I am no-place,

neither a nor -a,

neither imposing nor yielding,

neither analyzing nor criticizing,

neither leading nor following,

neither wanting nor foregoing,

neither taking nor giving,

neither teaching nor learning,

neither reading nor writing.

neither speaking nor listening.

Freedom is no-place,

moving through without taking,

sensing not proving,

laughing

the emptiness of our self-spun webs of no-things:

slogans, platitudes, whinging-whining-special pleading.

The indifference of the material world

says: Nothing is special.

Worth-less

even than these glacial stones

abandoned on forest floor

by ancient receding ice.

Nothing is special

To the magnificent indifference of the material world.

There is no magic,

no gods,

or spirits, or souls, or minds,

or guiding intelligence,

or true self,

or *telos*.

Entropy+geometry=life:

an exuberance of forms.

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Originally posted 22 March, 2024

Now: Presence/Absence

To be: a receptive surface

accepting, (as gift, not property),

the sand that yields to my foot

and the fugitive mist

that lingers behind and looms before.

I wanted to stop and see myself

as if in a cloud.

But where I am, it is not.

We move in time,

a dance of impress and erasure.

The air is still but

a winter chop

curls and crashes

ashore.

Maybe it’s windy in Sandusky.

The air is clarifying

but too warm for February?

I will not follow

the arc of the land all the way

to the vanishing point.

The waves beat time for my footfalls

until I stop, lingering,

limpid eyes

looking off shore.

The lake: grey slate spackled with occasional sun dazzle,

a cool exhalation

against my unshaven cheek.

Long ago I heard a man, an old country doctor,

say on the CBC

that people want to live forever

but are bored to death on Sunday afternoons.

And Faust: he wanted a moment he could live forever.

But a moment that could be lived forever

would not be a moment,

nor such stasis,

living.

Nature/Culture

The land slides away:

from shore weeds to pebbles to mucky sand

tickled by the foaming water.

Broken zebra mussels and

the last of the Great Lakes clams;

beer cans plastic bottle caps

stones with pleasing shapes

and a rusty old nail, a rampike

in a 2×8 that has washed in from somewhere;

a weathered chestnut shell and ground down brick,

fishing tackle and work gloves,

bird bones fish bones fossilized ferns and an old dead carp;

charcoal briquettes and beach glass,

the footprints of solitary walkers

and an empty bottle of of “Pink Whitney” flavoured gin

smuggled in

by teenage girls from Leamington

for a secret summer party.

It is getting cooler.

I turn and retrace my steps.

Near an old log,

fit for sitting

someone has lost a pen:

a love letter that will not be written.

Windsor Spaces 5: Alleys of Riverwest

Originally posted 20 December, 2023

A few weeks ago I went to have my car fixed and I hung around this old garage while it was being fixed. It's in that kind of punchy village, poorer village. Everything is crumbling and slums and the garage is full or dirt and oil. And you like that stuff, you know, rusty stuff, that kind of atmosphere. You know how one always feels connected with deteriorating things.

Phillip Guston, Conversation with Morton Feldman

Perhaps we feel an affinity with deteriorating things because we are deteriorating things. Life winds down and past a certain point you cannot deny that truth. But it's ok; that's life, as the saying goes. Rust is natural and nothing has a claim on eternal existence.

Or perhaps Guston is simply expressing an eccentric aesthetic position. In any case, I know what he means and feel the same way. I like oily garages and grimy factories and broken machines and the patterns of eroding surfaces. I grew up amidst enormous smelters and giant smokestacks and old cars and junk abandoned to the bush. People who grow up in big cities romanticise the bush as pristine wilderness, but if it is anywhere near a town or city it it is full of the shit people think that they have a human right to discard anywhere they please. The romantics would no doubt see these artifacts of human industry as ugly violations of the integrity of the forest, but the pretty and picturesque are easy and boring. Human beings build things that break: junk is our record of having been.

Where would archaeologists be without the refuse of peoples? And if our junk is a trace of our having been, why should we not look at decaying materiality as beautiful? Comedies are fun, but tragedies are art.

One does not need to walk in the bush to discover decaying structures. Cities are also full of corroding objects and the random interactions of nature and culture. The back streets and alleyways of any city are like the bush: hidden spaces where people dump their old appliances and furniture because they think that no one is looking.

Like other cities, Windsor is Janus-faced: an outward-facing cross-hatch of arterial roads and residential streets and an inward-facing, hidden world of alleys running behind backyards and store fronts. In a less regulated country than Canada the alleys might be a second world of informal-economy workshops and kiosks like one finds in the Medinas of Marrakesh and Fez.

My neighborhood is something like the punchy village where Guston waited while his car was fixed. It is certainly no Fez or Marrakesh but mostly students houses, a little grimy and unkempt. Riverwest- as our neighborhood association re-christened the area a few years ago– has its problems, but also its charms. Most families have left the few blocks near the university where we live and their houses are now filled with mostly international students. There are no kids playing road hockey but there are Indian students playing driveway cricket and setting off fireworks for Diwali. What the neighborhood now lacks in well-manicured middle-class order it makes up for with a genuine urban energy. The main street is lively with pedestrian traffic, we have the best Chinese and Indian restaurants, the river is only a block away, and behind almost every street there is an alley open to the solitary walker.

I feel that it is a duty of those who live in a neighborhood for any length of time to fully immerse themselves in the spaces that might be hidden from the casual passer-by. The long-time resident should know the shortcuts, the hidden gems, the trouble-spots, and alleyways.

I began my mental mapping of the alleys during Covid. Lockdown after lockdown, frustrated, enraged at the ultimate pointlessness of being confined to home, and with nowhere else to go, I would take long walks. I am a creature of habit but also appreciate variations on a theme. The streets got old quickly, but I learned to distinguish driveways from the entrance to alleyways. Languishing under Covid-induced boredom, even the most banal discovery seemed exciting. I felt like a spelunker might feel discovering the new entrance of a cave, but also a little twinge of anxiety as I entered, wondering whether there was an exit or if I would have to turn around. I have passed the age where anyone would suspect me of lurking, waiting to break into a garage, so I was free to explore the backspaces where no one else– I have never encountered another person– treads (not because they don’t dare, there is no danger, they just don’t think of walking up the alleys).

And so I would walk, but not for exercise, but to look. I think of walking as an essay on looking. Most people see the obvious: a lot of garbage, over-grown patches, boring graffiti tags and cartoonish portraits. The challenge is to look again, and then one finds the sort of accidental art and sculpture that I think that Guston was referring to when he felt drawn to the grit and grease of the small town garage.

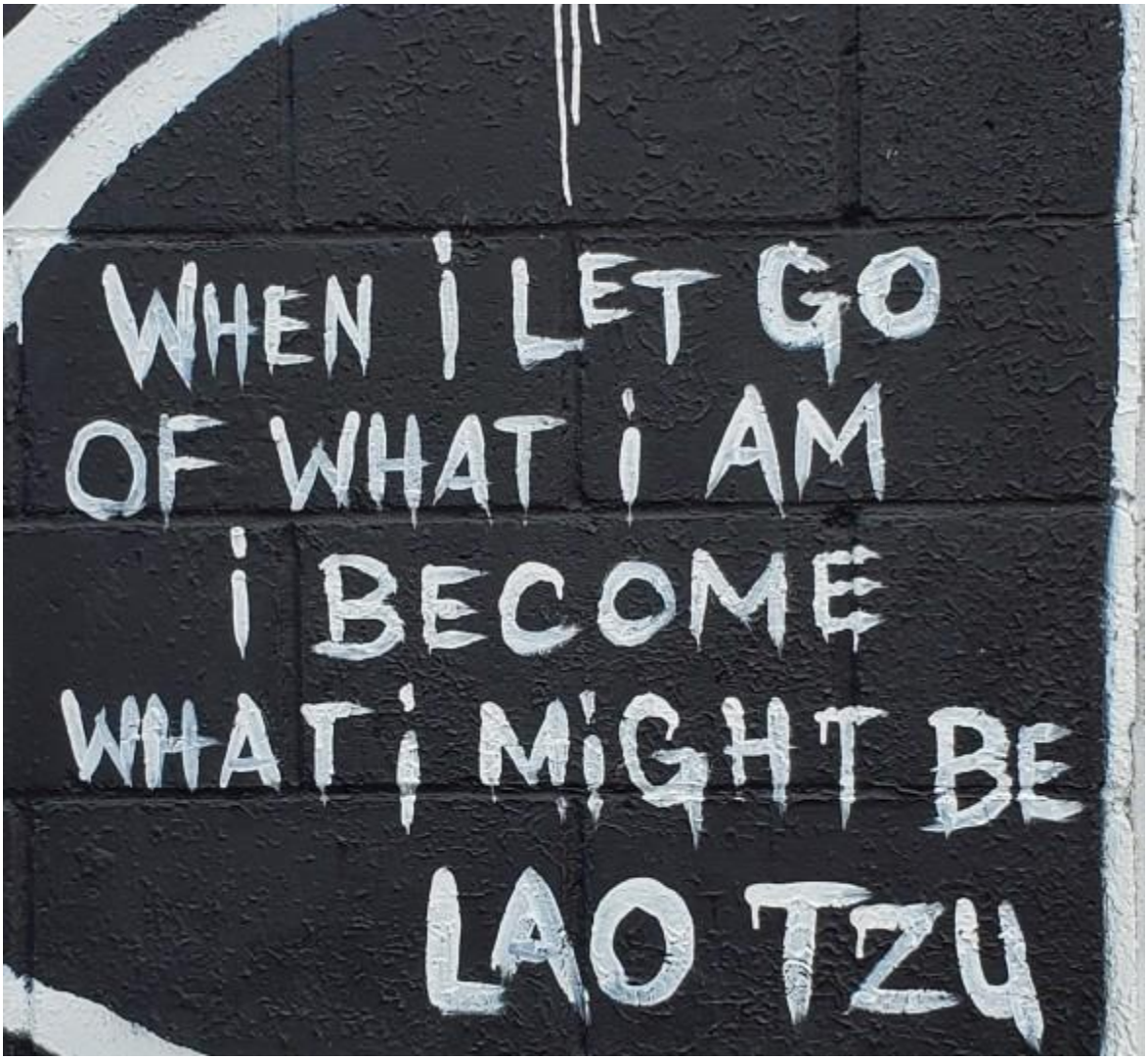
To look at the familiar in an unfamilar way is to frame the visual field in a deliberate way. From a distance, paint peeling off a wall is just paint peeling off a wall, but impose a novel visual frame and it becomes abstract painting as interesting as any you will find in a gallery.

A rusty autopart separated through some violence from the car is just a piece of metal trash, but look at the material form and it becomes an accidental sculpture.

Given how so much contemporary art is derivative of Duchamps' ready-mades, save the thirty bucks major public museums will charge you and go for a walk. Look differently at the things and surfaces that you encounter. Our back spaces are free open air museums of the random deterioration of things which produces material forms far more visually compelling than Duchamps' coat racks and urinals. Decay sculpts and paints: unintentional transformation is still creative, i.e., productive of that which would not be were it not for that process.

Ours is a visual culture, people say, but it is a visual culture once removed from material reality. The screen is the frame through which most people see the world. The smart phone manufacturer and the content creators pre-determine and limit the experience of the virtual world. These photographs are my way of seeing the alleys, others would frame things differently. On-line, one scrolls and swipes and imagines that one is active when in reality that which one experiences has been determined by the engineer and the uploader.

To walk the alleys is to explore, and to look, concentrate, narrow or broaden one's focus is a completely free act (in both senses of the term). That which is there to be seen is given, but *what* one sees when one *looks* is an act of concentration and imagination, a collaboration, even, between the natural and social forces that structure the physical environment and one's conscious, active attention.


WHEN i LET GO
OF WHAT i AM
i BECOME
WHAT i MIGHT BE
LAO TZU

Readings

Readings: Alex Callinicos: The New Age of Catastrophe

Originally posted 1 June, 2024

Alex Callinicos is one of the most important Marxist philosophers and social critics of his age. I have long felt that he does not get enough attention in North America. While the shelves of academic departments groan under graduate theses devoted to prolix obscurantists like Zizek, Badiou, and Hardt and Negri, who have for some reason claimed the mantle of leading radical philosophers, Callinicos's much more incisive and concretely radical historical materialist analyses of the dynamics of the contemporary world is ignored. He is much better known in England where he lives and works, but he should be a central part of the conversation in North America. He perhaps suffers from the academic vice of writing too clearly and worrying about such trivial matters as empirical-historical evidence. Callinicos is more concerned with the substance of social analysis than with pseudo-profundity and anachronistic system-building that shed little concrete light on the social and political-economic dynamics of contemporary capitalism.

Thus, it was with some disappointment that I worked through the arguments of his most recent (2023) book, *The New Age of Catastrophe*. It had a perfunctory air to it, almost like he wrote it because an editor at Polity Press asked him to write it and not because he had something novel to contribute to solving the problems the book examines. Perhaps I am wrong, but the whole exercise struck me as the work of a writer going through the motions, rehearsing/re-hashing the "socialism or barbarism" threat. By the end of the book I was wondering whether or not its formulaic mantra that only revolutionary socialism can solve the fundamental conflicts and challenges of our age speaks more deeply to the exhaustion of revolutionary Marxist politics. I have been thinking along those lines for a few years, and Callinicos' book did little to dissuade me from my worries. Rather than engage with alternative perspectives on the multi-dimensional crises the globe faces and demonstrate, patiently and in detail, why the Marxist approach is superior, Callinicos avoids the crucial question: if revolutionary socialism is the answer, why has no one been able to make it work? And if the last 107 years of socialist revolutions have failed, what concrete, historically grounded reasons are there to believe that another attempt will succeed?

Callinicos would be well-situated to answer this question, having been a leading figure in the Socialist Workers Party for decades. He has thus not only interpreted the world, he has tried to change it. Unfortunately, there is little here to inform readers about what lessons he has drawn that could help revive mass working class struggle for socialism. There are excellent analyses of Trump, the European far right, and tips of the political hat to identity based-movements for trans inclusion and Black Lives Matter, but nothing concrete about how workers can be mobilised *en masse*. Moreover, he fails to confront the hard questions about the impact of the structural fragmentation of the working class will have on the sort of mobilizing that Callinicos' understanding of revolutionary socialism would demand. The book provides a clear and systematic explanation of how environmental, economic, and geo-political crises are interlinked with capitalist growth dynamics and competitive forces, bur offers no structural account of why these interlinked crises have not generated the sort of class consciousness that Marx and early twentieth century revolutionaries expected it to generate. Could it be that Callinicos' silence

speaks loudly in favour of the conclusion that the classical Marxist conception of consciousness formation is wrong?

What I mean by the "classical Marxist conception of consciousness formation" is that escalating social crisis will produce social pressures that push workers, on a global scale, towards a clear understanding of their interests in a socialist alternative to capitalism. I think that the premise from which Callinicos proceeds- that we are in the midst of a unified civilizational crisis– an age of catastrophe- with ecological, economic, and geo-political dimensions. But I see no evidence that this unfolding catastrophe is producing *globally unified* expressions of *working class* consciousness. it produces a wide variety of fightbacks that are shaped by the immediate structure of the problem faced: Black Lives Matter protests erupted against shocking acts of police violence, environmental campaigners mobilize in support of an immediate transition away from fossil fuels. Some within these movements argue that the particular problem cannot be understood in isolation from the underlying dynamics and values of capitalist society– precisely Callinicos' approach– but these voices are: a) always in the minority, and b) have not successfully connected their theoretical argument to a revitalized revolutionary socialist practice led by the working class. If it is true that we are living through an age of catastrophe but the looming disaster has not produced a class conscious revolutionary subject, it is fair to ask: "what will?" And it is fair to worry that the answer might be: "nothing."

Callinicos could respond that pessimism is unwarranted because the future is open and cannot be predicted. True enough. But what then is the value of the totalizing method that he argues one needs to adopt from Marx in order to fully understand the causes of the crisis? "Conceptualizing capitalism as a developing totalization is therefore intimately connected with insisting that the world doesn't have to be the way that it is, that there are other possible worlds."(11) Well, in the abstract, of course there are other possible worlds, but Marxism did not rest its arguments about the future on vague hopes, but on a purportedly dispassionate and objective analysis of dominant global trends that were leading to confrontations in which workers would lead the struggle for socialism. Call it what one will, dialectical, totalizing, what have you, it has repeatedly failed in its global predictions. Those failures should not be surprising, because no social scientific method, totalizing or not, can make predictions because history is not a mechanical system. Astronomers can predict with absolute certainty and to the minute the date, time, and path of the next solar eclipse, because the orbital planes and periods of the sun moon and earth are known quantities. While we can know the value of an arbitrary number of socially relevant variables– the poll numbers of different political parties, the changing structure of the working class, the inflation rate and the level of government indebtedness, the amount of carbon pumped into the atmosphere last year, the number of people killed in on-going conflicts, and so on, there is no way to synthesize all of these variables and predict what the state of class struggle will be one year from now. There is simply no theory– Marxism included– that can determine beforehand what effect the interaction of these variables will have in different countries and regions and on different classes and groups. What Callinicos calls totalization is really on going *ex post facto* integration of knowledge of whatever happens into a theoretical core of claims about how the accumulation of capital is the underlying driver of the relationships between human and nature, economic development, and geo-political conflict. There is much evidence to support that core claim, but on-going integration of new material is not at all the same as practical information about how to build and win a global class struggle.

To be fair, Callinicos does not argue that the totalizing method has predictive power. He admits that its totalizations are always after the fact connections between particular events (say, the war in Ukraine) and systemic forces (the geo-political drive of major powers to control spheres of influence, which in turn derive from the competitive drive of capital to expand). However, even if those connections are real, theoretical explanation of their operation is far to abstract to generate motivating political energy. To say that to end the war in Ukraine or Gaza we need a revolutionary socialist alternative is not a program of action. And if it should turn out that these local problems can be solved through local efforts short of revolution– and save lives and improve living conditions– then does not revolutionary socialism become like a mantra that gurus teach their disciples to chant but which changes nothing of importance in people's day to day lives?

Callinicos' political arguments suffer from a failure to attend to what I am increasingly coming to believe is the central practical contradiction that radical critiques of capitalism face. The demand for radical change is a demand about the future, but human decisions must be made in the present. The pressures of the immediate moment force vulnerable populations to opt for the choice that provides as much security as possible in the present, even if they understand: a) that the security it provides is tenuous, and b) might well perpetuate long term trends that will eventually undermine what little security the immediate choice provides. For example, workers in fossil fuel industries are not trying to destroy the world– they are just trying to make a living. But since the pressure to pay bills never goes away under capitalism, they are hardly going to be persuaded to become revolutionaries because they contribute (in a very small way, as individuals) to the climate crisis. Workers are not going to drop tools because Callinicos states that "the real solution" to climate change "is to get rid of fossil capitalism." (60) Since bills must be paid tomorrow, workers will choose work under capitalist conditions over the mere promise of the benefits of workers' control of production under socialism. Since life is typically more enjoyable with more money, workers will typically choose higher rather than lower paying work. On a global scale, workers in the Global South can hardly be expected to forego the benefits of higher standards of living today for the sake of an environmentally healthy world tomorrow.

Slogans do not pay the pills, and workers are unlikely to be persuaded to leave high paying (often unionized) work in the fossil fuel industry for promises of a socialist future. What might move them are serious just transition programs that allow workers to leave environmentally harmful industries to retrain and find equally well-paying work in a new field. Perhaps Callinicos would respond: but the capitalist state and the fossil fuel industry will never adequately fund just transition programs, because capitalism is not about just transitions but the exploitation of labour in industries where it is profitable to do so, under conditions of labour determined by the competitive dynamics operating at a global scale. Theoretically, he would be correct. But look at how that just throws workers back onto the first horn of the dilemma: unable to afford to leave the environmentally destructive industry they will almost certainly choose to stay if the only other alternative that socialists offer is a promissory note about how good the socialist future will be. And if governments offer something more concrete than a promissory note– an actual reform that can improve their lives right now– then what concrete role does the demand for revolution play?

An analogous concern can be raised with regard to his analysis of and solution to the economic crisis of capitalism. Callinicos's argument proceeds from the premise that "the twenty-first century is exposing what Chris harman calles "the new limits of capital."(61) Drawing on Marxist economist Michael Roberts' argument that the financial crisis of 2007-2008 has never really ended, Callinicos shows that growth in the real economy continued to sputter despite the massive amounts of money pumped into the economy to save the banks and the historically low interest rates designed to foster investment and motivate consumer spending. The 2007-2008 crisis spelled the end of the fiscal policies associated with neo-liberal policy. They were supplanted by what Callinicos calls, following Klooster," "technocratic Keynesianism:" top-down, central bank led fiscal stimulus directed to corporations and private banks, not ordinary people or social programs. (71-2) This trend was amplified by government's economic response to the shut down of large sectors of the global economy during Covid. On the one hand, that governments could step in to save the global economy and working class living standards from total collapse puts paid to the myth that there is no alternative to the market.(80) On the other hand, given the fact that *capitalism* (as opposed to production, distribution, and appropriate of resources– the 'economy' as such) depends upon competitive market relationships, meant that the wholesale government intervention in the economy that Covid made necessary could only ever be a stop gap measure.

Massive government expenditures did allow capitalism to weather the Covid storm, but it did not re-start the engine of growth in the real economy. Instead, it set the stage for inflation and the tighter fiscal policies (higher interest rates) still hammering workers. Callinicos's solution parallels his solution to the climate crisis: neither neo-liberalism, nor technocratic Keynsianism, nor any other policy of *managing* capitalism can solve its structural contradictions nor free it from its dependence on the exploitation of labour. Only "an upsurge from below" he argues, 'will be needed to to break the back of neoliberalism and open the way to a different future." (85). Once again, I agree, in the abstract, but note that Callinicos i silent about the structural impediments to a globally unified "upsurge from below."

He does provide a sketch of what an alternative economic system would look like, referencing the pioneering work Pat Devine I agree that Devine's model of a negotiated coordination economy (see Democracy and Economic Planning) is promising, but Callinicos (perhaps hamstrung by space constraints) simply asserts that it is a workable alternative to capitalist market relations.(165) Of course, there is no way to demonstrate on the pages of a book that an alternative economic reality can work, but I thought that the case for Devine's model could have been strengthened had Callinicos compared it to better known alternatives (such as the model of democratic socialism that Thomas Piketty presents in his most recent book *A Short History of Equality,* or the position of egalitarian liberal American economists like Paul Krugman, Robert Reich, or Joseph Stieglitz) and provided concrete arguments in support of the superiority of Devine's model. Without such a comparison, Callinicos' s economic arguments run the risk of falling victim to the same problem as his solution to climate change: however attractive a negotiated coordination economy might be in theory, it is not yet a reality, and therefore does not address the immediate, day to day dependence of workers' lives on the existing economy. If Piketty's revived social democracy, or the egalitarian Keynesianism of the Americans, produce policies that can be implemented right now, how does one motivate workers to struggle for a

systematic alternative which would take years or decades to develop and which might not work in practice?

A third aspect of this underlying problem arises in regard to his analysis of the geo-political crisis of the post-war capitalist states system. Callinocs divided the geo-political history of the states system since the later 19th century into three phases: the age of classical imperialism and colonialism (1870-1945), the Cold War struggle for hegemony between the US and the Soviet Union (1945-1989) and the contemporary world, shaped by the struggle of the US to defend its status as global hegemon (1989-present). (88-89) As anyone can tell from even the most cursory glance at the news, our period is one of extreme instability and volatility. Callinicos maintains, correctly, I would argue, that the structure of geo-political conflict must be understood in terms of the structural dynamics of capitalism, but the way in which particular conflicts are handled (his main example is the Ukraine war and the rising tensions between the US and China) is not determined in any mechanical way by economic imperatives but allow for better or worse means of solving the conflicts. Once again, Callinicos is correct in the abstract to argue that until capitalist competition over resources, labour, and markets is overcome there will be no solution to military conflicts. At the same time, those being killed in wars, whether in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan, or Ethiopia, need the killing to stop right now.

Both the Ukraine and Gaza wars offer abundant evidence that international law, at least as it is currently institutionalized, cannot stop states from resorting to war when they determine that it is in their interests to do so. First, international law is ambiguous on crucial questions of what constitutes aggression, what the scope of the right to self-defence allows, what the precise weight of "proportional response" means, and so on. Both Russia and Israel have exploited these ambiguities to continue their wars against intense international pressure to stop them. More deeply, the structure of the international states system as a network of sovereign entities arrayed in competition with each other for resources and markets ensures that conflicts will regularly arise. That these states are also organized into trade, political, and military blocs in no way prevents competition from becoming conflict. Callinicos's analyses of the main fault lines of the international system are astute and free from the shocking naivete one finds in some quarters amongst the anti-imperialist left about Putin's war in Ukraine, but he once again leaves unanswered what to my mind is the critical question: what is to be done *today* about the suffering that warfare causes, in Ukraine, in Gaza, but also in forgotten conflicts like Ethiopia, Sudan, or anywhere people are being exterminated by political forces pursuing their agenda by military means.

The contradiction between today and tomorrow, abstract and concrete, returns in its most exigent and heart-rending form. The people being incinerated by bombs cannot wait for the revolution, so what do Marxists say? "Ukrainians, Russians, you are brothers and comrades, throw down your arms, or better yet, turn them against your oppressors!" That was Lenin's argument in World War One, and the Bolsheviks put it into practice by withdrawing Russia from the war. Today, there is no political party or movement that can organize classes across nationalist lines. And in Gaza: do Marxists content themselves with slogans (From the River to the Sea) or demand a ceasefire, the return of hostages, and support for whatever political pressure there is for negotiations towards a two state solution? At whatever point in history one wants to date the start of the conflict the reality of mass life-destruction, right now, for everyone on the ground in

Gaza, makes a cessation of fighting the only imperative. The revolution, the one state solution, the two state solution, whatever the *ultimate* solution of the conflict is, it seems to me, that if Marxists are going to have anything at all meaningful to say, it has to be said not from the standpoint of the dialectics of class struggle, not form the imperious heights with which the global struggle against imperialism is waged, but from the standpoint of suffering humanity. Roberto Duran said it best: "No mas" No more! and he stopped punching and being punched by Sugar Ray Leonard and walked out of the ring.

The book was published before the Gaza conflict and, as I said, Callinicos's reading of international relations is rooted in a structural critique of imperialism but is mercifully free from cheerleading and sloganeering about how Putin's Russia is a bulwark against (rather than an element of) an imperialist system. However, while he argues that there are political as well as economic drivers of imperialism (states define their national interest in historical and cultural and not just economic turns, those interest exert inertial force such that conflicts continue even after the initial historical conditions that caused them change, military power operates according to its own logic, etc), he ignores the positive side of international politics. War is a reality, but so too is diplomacy, negotiations, and arbitrated settlement of disputes. As with climate change and the economy, Marxists have to do better than assert that until the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism humanity will face no end of trouble. That might be true, but the revolution is not going to save the babies of Gaza. War has to stop, negotiations not class struggle are the only way to stop it today, and that principle- weak-kneed and humanistic as it might be– has to be the starting point.

No more!

Callinicos undoubtedly understands these arguments. As I noted, he has been a leading member of the SWP for decades, deeply involved in the unsuccessful attempt to build a revolutionary party in Britain. I admire his fortitude and commitment– I left the Canadian section of the SWP after about a decade. I believe in a socialist future but have no idea how to concretely build a movement to realize that goal, and Callinicos' final chapter did not convince me that he knows either. He provides an excellent analysis of the growth of right wing populist forces across the world, but especially in the United States. He considers, and does not dismiss, the possibility that the US, still the world's leading economic and military power, however much its status as global hegemon has been weakened, is heading towards a low-intensity civil war.(144-148) That likelihood was increased, perhaps dramatically, by Trump's felony conviction in New York. The Republican party is openly de-legitimating the American justice system as a tool of the Democratic party. Think about the implications of that attack: it is in effect to claim that elections are not about the peaceful transition of power between equally legitimate parties within a just democratic structure, but that legitimacy resides only in one party (the Republicans) who must use power the next time that they acquire it to permanently entrench themselves. They Republicans are not the Nazi's that they are sometimes rhetorically portrayed to be, but they are certainly manifesting totalitarian tendencies.

The New York case was widely regarded as the weakest of the cases against him. If– as now seems almost certain– he is convicted in the election tampering, January 6th insurrection, and classified records cases, then jail time seems inevitable. Will the chaos surrounding Trump might

help re-unify the Democratic Party behind Biden? Probably. But will it help turn the Democratic Socialists of America into a mass party? Probably not. Interestingly, Callinicos does not even mention the DSA, even though they contain the remnants of the International Socialist Organization, (ISO), the US member of the SWP tendency. Perhaps more importantly, it also counts sitting members of Congress amongst its members. If that fact is regarded as irrelevant, that tells us a great deal about what Callinicos thinks about the prospects of the US socialist movement.

Instead of the prospects of actual socialists, Callinicos chooses as his examples of mass fightbacks trans and queer resistence ot right wing attacks and the massive protests organzied by Black Lives Matter following the police murder of George Floyd. While the right has successfully exploited anxieties around gender identity to mobilize its forces (especially at the local and state level in the US), Callinicos's response takes a detour through a supportive reading of Judith Butler's influential critique of gender as a natural kind.(152-153) As Callinicos notes, the relationship between biology and social construction in human history is complex, and Butler's work has the merit of bringing out the historical fluidity of gender identity. At the same time, I would argue that, from an *historical materialist* standpoint, Butler errs too much on the side of social construction. Human beings are playful and capable of identifying with and as anything at all: but identification alone does not transform material reality. Thus, while rigid and mechanical linkages between biological sex and gender identity are untenable (and a target of feminist criticism going back to Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges at the time of the French Revolution), the mere expression of an identity is not sufficient to change politically and medically salient biological facts. Callincos understands this point– he spends pages defending lockdowns against Covid on the grounds that they were necessary to save lives, thus proving that mere psychological disposition is not sufficient to transform material reality. One had to get vaccinated, not just identify as a vaccinated person. I thought his treatment of the biology-social construction relation in the final chapter far too breezy (not to mention politically dismissive of the concerns of some feminists, lesbians, and just ordinary women about the implications of some versions of trans ideology on their interests in maintaining hard fought gains of the *women's* movement). Are women no longer oppressed in Callincos' view? Doubtful. But if they are, then the full range of voices needs to be heard and political differences respectfully worked through.

The explosion of quite massive street protests following the George Floyd murder are a much clearer cut case of the power– but also the limits– of mass mobilization *outside the workplace.* Callinicos cites figures that suggest that as many as 26 million Americans (and millions more around the world) came into the streets to protest police violence and structural racism. Huge numbers. But then think (as analysts must): that still means that approximately 326 million Americans did not protest. While these demonstrations, protests and occupations prove that mass mobilization from a very low level of political consciousness are always possible, the BLM demonstrations also remind attentive social critics of the weakness- (remember how Occupy fizzled) — of a tactic that centres on demonstrations. Here we come back to the problem of the temporal contradictions of struggle again– most people cannot protest day after day after day, because they have to work. Even if the boss supports the movement, they still need workers to show up for work. The silent compulsion of having to pay the bills once again appears as the enemy of radicalizing and generalizing the struggle. Callinicos wisely warns against, on the one

hand, coalitions with centrist parties and, on the other, the fetishization of violent struggle, but what he does not offer— perhaps no one can– is a concrete means of dealing with the immediate structural forces that keep workers tied to capitalist employment day after day.

The book thus concludes with unsatisfying generalities. The fault here lies not with Callinicos, but, I think, first with the social forces that have fragmented the working class, and second, with the temporal contradiction between the immediacy of material needs and the idealism (in the colloquial sense) of the future. if the situation is as dire on all fronts as Callinicos maintains, then what real alternative do people have other than to struggle for what they can get today in ways that hopefully open space for more structurally transformative demands tomorrow. If this is the age of catastrophe then the world does not need prophets invoking the name of a future universal revolutionary subject. It needs boring problems solvers, today, right now.

Readings: Terence W. Deacon, Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged From Matter

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Deacon's outstanding but challenging book concerns two of the most intractable scientific questions: how did life arise from non-living molecules, and how did conscious intelligence and agency arise from mechanistic natural forces? Answers to both questions place seemingly impossible demands on established science. Science must assume that there is a uniform causal structure to nature that operates in an unbroken chain linking the smallest subatomic particles to the largest socio-political constructions built by human beings. Since these constructions require human thought (which Deacon examined in his previous book, *The Symbolic Species*) and thought is symbolic and intentional, the human world *appears* to operate on quite different causal principles (teleological rather than mechanical). Natural scientists have most often tried to preserve the causal uniformity of nature at the expense of preserving and explaining the unique texture of the symbolic dimensions of human reality. Since the 17th century, reductionism has ruled natural science. While reductionism has led to spectacular technological achievements, no one has yet successfully provided a reductionist account of consciousness and agency that *convincingly* explains rather than *explains away* the properties that distinguish them *as consciousness and agency.* Deacon titled his book *Incomplete Nature* as a challenge to scientists to acknowledge that living systems and conscious agents are characterised by powers that non-living systems do not have and to meet that challenge by working out a non-question begging explanation of the mediations through which life emerged from non-life and consciousness emerged from unconscious elements.

The books' brilliance is rooted in Deacon's honesty and originality. He accepts the principle of causal uniformity, even thought its operation would seem to to rule out that which he devotes his considerable scientific and philosophical powers to explain: the reality of the teleological powers of self-conscious life. Eliminative materialist reductionism is unsatisfactory because it simply denies the reality of that which a complete natural science must explain: the ability of living beings, and especially self-conscious agents, to initiate action and bring about states of affairs that would not exist without their goal-seeking activities. On the other hand, the best scientific alternative to reductionism, emergentism, tends to bog down in the other direction. If reductionist attempts to save causal uniformity cannot explain the emergence of the unique powers of life and conscious intelligence, the existing emergentist theories cannot square their accounts with the causal uniformity of nature. Existing emergentist theories have not yet adequately explained by the mediations that enable the phase transitions between atomic and molecular structure and functional biological systems, and functional biological systems and intelligent agency. Instead of detailed explanation of these transitions, emergentists tend to invoke exotic and under-explained ideas of "top down causality" and slogans like "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Deacon does not claim to have developed a fully worked out and empirically adequate explanation of these critical transitions, but he does think that he has created a novel approach that solves some methodological problems and opens to door to the empirical work necessary to one day arrive at complete and coherent solutions.

Deacon's approach is materialist– one might even say dialectical, without meaning anything more than "dynamic" by that loaded term. The unique powers of living beings cannot be understood if they are treated as reified wholes greater than the sum of their parts. Instead one must pay attention neither to the whole nor the parts but the interactive dynamics that distinguish living beings from non-living material systems. The distinguishing powers that life-forms display are high level analogues of lower order self-organizing processes that are explicable by reference to the most basic physical forces. Deacon's account preserves causal uniformity but avoids the pitfalls of reductionism. There is no one to one correlation between a thought and a material brain state that would allow the scientist to conclude that the thought is nothing but the brain state. The brain state depends upon thermodynamic work and the thought depends on the brain state, but it instantiates a new form work that Deacon calls "teleodynamic." Teleodynamic systems are defined, paradoxically, by the absent state that they represent to themselves. Thoughts represent absent objects and posit goals about future states that the organism then tries to bring about. These "absential properties" are the key to one day constructing a complete and consistent explanation of how mind emerged from matter.

Deacon's argument is too complex to reconstruct completely and too difficult for me, a non-scientist, to understand in every detail. His account draws on mathematics, physics, information theory, chemistry, bio-chemistry, evolutionary biology, and neuroscience and was built up over a decade working with a team of specialists from these different areas. Even readers with a science background will be challenged to understand every step of the argument; humanist philosophers like me, drawn to the book because of its non-magical explanation of human origins, will often find themselves at sea. However, since Deacon writes as clearly as one might hope about these issues, if they pay attention and are patient, non-scientists can understand the argument well enough to grasp the limits of competing explanations and the merits of Deacon's alternative. Whether it proves correct is for future scientists to decide, but anyone interested in these problems will come away from the book better versed in what a true explanation of these existential as much as scientific problems will have to contain.

Deacon begins by reviewing the well-known limits of reductionist explanations of life and mind. As far back as Aristotle's critique of atomism philosophers have stressed the difference between living and mechanical systems: living entities can initiate action whereas mechanical systems require an impetus from outside. "There is a "discontinuity of causality implicit in human action" that parallels a related discontinuity between living and non-living processes. Ultimately both involve what amounts to a reversal of causal logic: order developing from disorder, the lack of a state of affairs bringing itself into existence, a potential tending to realize itself. But compared to the way things work in the non-living, non-thinking world, it is as though a fundamental phase change has taken place in the dynamical fabric of the world." (21) This difference is the touchstone of all idealisms (and non-reductive materialisms). Criticising reductionism has proven far easier than providing satisfying non-reductionist explanations. Idealist explanations, from ancient Greece to Descartes, simply beg the question: they assume the existence of a non-physical substance with the power to freely initiate actions but do not explain how its existence is possible in a world of matter and energy. Appealing to the eternity of forms (Aristotle) or divine creation (Descartes) is not scientifically satisfying since it does nothing more than assert whatever conclusion the abstract coherence of the theory requires. But theories must be empirically verifiable as well as internally coherent.

In order to advance beyond the impasses of idealism, reductionism, and standard emergentist theories Deacon makes a bold and counter-intuitive move. The problem with idealism is that it is question-begging, and reductionism and emergentism face the same problem from opposed sides: trying to explain consciousness as some *thing*, either "nothing more" than brain states or, from the other side, some unique expression of those states whose properties can be described but whose connection to physical reality remains unexplained. Deacon tries a different tack: consciousness is not a thing at all, but must be understood as an "absential" property. Absential properties are states which can produce effects in the physical world because they seek to correct from an absence of some sort. When you are hungry, you initiate a sequence of actions to find food; the conscious desire for food is a desire for that which is not present. The absence of the food is the cause of one's working out a sequence of actions to attain it. "My counterintuitive hypothesis is that whenever we recognize that a system exhibits ententional properties, it is not because of something added to the physical processes involved, but rather quite literally because it depends on the physical fact of something specifically missing from that object or process."(43) Ententional properties are "all phenomena that are intrinsically incomplete in the sense of being in relationship to, or constituted by, or organized to achieve something non-intrinsic."(27) This counter-intuitive move does not explain how the ententional property (the action-causing absence) emerges from physical functions at more basic material levels, but it helps free the search for an explanation from a search either for the basis of consciousness to which its phenomenological forms can be reduced or the *sui generis* emergent property to which basic physical forces give rise.

Mechanical causality transfers the force of one object with momentum to another object with momentum. The pool player strikes the cue ball with the cue, it hits the 8 ball at a definite angle, and the 8 ball moves along a predictable vector into the pocket. One material substance transfers energy to another material substance causing motion. But the decision of the pool player to strike the cue ball is distinct. They must imagine the shot before they actually make it. There is brain activity involved in the imagination, as we will see, but the idea is of a state which does not yet exist (the 8 ball going into the pocket) and motivated by a desire which can only be understood in relation to a symbolic universe of rules (winning the game). The mechanical sequence of causes is therefore caused by the idea of a future state that does not yest exist. Newtonian mechanics is indifferent to time: we can use Newton's laws to predict future eclipses and we can use them to work out when eclipses must have occurred even in the past before there were human observers. Actions causes by ententional forces are not similarly indifferent to time: they bring about future states which would not have occurred simply by the operation of mechanical forces.

Although conscious life-activity reverses the causal relationship and basic thermodynamic tendencies at work in non-living, unconscious material reality, any acceptable scientific explanation must be compatible with quantum and mechanical physical forces. Unless the mediations that lead from quarks to atoms, atoms to organic molecules, and organic molecules to self-conscious living organisms can be worked out in detail, we will be thrown back on magical (idealist) explanations or quasi-magical substance-emergentist theories. Substance emergentism looks for the special sort of thing that consciousness is. The problem that it runs into is that it maintains without explanation of how that "emergent transitions involve a fundamental discontinuity of physical laws."(159) Deacon takes the leading philosophical critic of this form

of emergentism, Jaegwon Kim's question seriously: "Why is there anything except physics?" (165) Deacon's attempt to provide a non-question-begging, non-magical, non-dualist answer to this question forms the empirical heart of his argument (and also poses the most serious challenge to the limits of the understanding of non-experts).

Deacon argues that all the purportedly irreducible causal powers of life are ententional, but also that each emerges from and is explicable by lower order physical systems operating mechanically. Even at the simplest levels, natural processes display powers of spontaneous structure formation. The most basic natural process is entropy– the running down of energetic systems from highly ordered to disordered states. Deacon's argument is that the roots of the highly organized structures of living systems whose existence depends upon their ability to constrain entropy (at least over short periods) are built up from the second law of thermodynamics. Amazingly (to my scientifically untrained mind) coherent structures emerge even in the simplest thermodynamic systems provided that there is a constant supply of energy.

Deacon gives the example of Benard cells: hexagons that form in a thin layer of liquid constantly heated to a certain uniform temperature. To the chagrin of intelligent design theorists going back to William Paley, Benard cells are geometry without a geometer. They naturally, spontaneously form because it just happens to be the case that hexagons are the most efficient shape through with the heat energy can be dissipated. (252) The law of entropy determines that the heat must be dissipated, so this most basic thermodynamic process is the source of the structure that emerges. Thus, all one needs for the formation of coherent structure is heat, the second law of thermodynamics (which states that the system's energy must run down, its heat be dissipated) and geometry. So long as there is a heat source, these structures will reproduce themselves.

Of course, it is a long way from hexagons formed to dissipate heat to conscious intentional action, but these purely physical processes are the basis of all high-level structures. What they prove is that structure is a function of the most basic processes in nature. Once we have these purely physical structures, other possibilities– which seem magical, if viewed in isolation– become more probably. The shape of a protein is so complex it seems impossible unless an infinite intelligence designed it. But when we understand that nature is a billions years old dynamic energetic system that spontaneously gives rise to coherent but simple structures, we can start to look for mediating processes and not a magician or divine designer. The mediating processes explain how greater complexity is a function of the addition of elements to the basic processes of spontaneous structuring.

At the root of life and consciousness lies the homeodyanmic forces of thermodynamics. Energy naturally runs down into disordered states, unless constrained by a countervailing natural force. The result of the interaction between certain countervailing natural forces and the homeodynamic force of entropy is "morophogenesis." Morphogenesis is the simplest type of structure formation. Benard cells are a purely physical example of morphogenesis, but the more relevant for the explanation of the emergence of life occur when we examine the spontaneous behaviour of more complex chemical systems. Crystal formation could be thought of as a link between the spontaneous geometry of Benard cells and organic chemistry: crystals form spontaneously into regular structures, but they lack the capacity for deliberate self-maintenance that characterises life. Life not only replicates itself, it maintains an environment that allows it to replicate itself

and for this certain organic structures are necessary. Just as in the case of Benard cells and crystals, it turns out the more complex molecular systems can form themselves into useful structures (like tubules and other self-enclosed shapes that create a spaces in which higher-order organic functions can develop). These enclosures, so to speak, are absolutely essential to the emergence of life, but they can be explained by the way in which the molecules involved naturally shape themselves if a constant supply of chemical input is maintained. Deacons calls the structuring activity that creates functional whole morphodynamics: "the dynamical organization of a somewhat diverse class of phenomena which share in common the tendency to become spontaneously more organized and orderly over time due to constraint perturbation but without the extrinsic imposition of influences that specifically impose the regularity."(237) In simpler terms, morophodynamics organize elements into regular, useful structures without the intervention of any outside organizer. Morphodynamics arise from homeodynamics and homeodynamics arise from thermodynamics. The causal uniformity of nature is not violated by the increase in self-organizing complexity.

Whew!

Got that, class?

As I noted, the book is challenging and I cannot say that I fully understand the details, but I do think I have grasped the basic lines of development that Deacon presents. If the most basic laws of physics not only allow for but explain very simple, self-organizing processes, then the emergence of life, the most complex self-organizing, self-maintaining, ententional, system, while still supremely difficult to explain, is at least not mysterious. Life is the most complex example of a natural system that Deacon calls an "autogen." "An autogen is a precisely identifiable source of causal influence because it generates and preserves dynamical constraints — the basis for thermodynamic work." (311) The simplest are not remotely conscious but they organize molecular structures in a self-perpetuating way- they are the physical mediation between life and not-life.

Life is not only self-organizing and self-maintaining but also (above the very simplest life-forms), self-directing. Whereas purely physical homeodynamic systems maintain a steady state, living things maintain a steady state by performing conscious work. Deacon thinks of work not as creative self-externalization (along Hegelian-Marxist lines) but as the imposition of constraints on systems that would otherwise be run down by entropy. Left to itself, a field would become overgrown with weeds. Agricultural work constrains this spontaneous outcome, but on the basis of ententional powers to observe and understand the pattern of weed spread and work out a practical series of steps to prevent that from happening. These powers are the functions of organs that are the products of 3 billion years of evolution. Natural selection preserves life-supporitng functional wholes, but the more basic structures which underlie functional organic wholes developed out of spontaneous morphogenetic patterns that emerge in material nature.

Natural selection explains how the simplest self-maintaining life-forms have developed into socially self-conscious human agents. The real question concerns how that logic of self-complexification got going in the first place. "Although natural selection offers a powerful logic that can account for the way organisms have evolved to fit their surroundings, it leaves out

almost all the mechanistic detail of the process involved in generating organisms, their parts, and their off spring."(422) Deacon does not claim to supply all of the necessary mechanistic detail, but he helps the process along by reinterpreting evolutionary processes according to his "work as constraint" metaphor. "Evolution is not imposed design, but progressive constraint."(427) As he explained in discussion of autogens, spontaneous morophological processes can generate order and structure by purely physical means. Natural selection in essence 'captures' certain morphological structures– organic molecules and the more complex systems they spontaneously formed– and preserves them. Prior to the evolution of DNA, these spontaneous morphologies formed the molecular basis of life: "Evolution in this sense can be thought of as a process of capturing, taming, and integrating diverse morphodynamic processes for the sake of their collective self-preservation." (427) If Deacon's picture is correct, then the precise steps by which life and consciousness emerged are no longer mysterious or require exotic causal powers to explain. "So the first organism wasn't a product of natural evolution. The constellation of processes that we identify with biological evolution ultimately emerged from a kind of proto-evolution, supported by a kind of protolife, that ultimately must trace back to the spontaneous emergence of the first molecular systems capable of some sort of evolutionary dynamic. Earlier it was shown that even a molecular system as simple as an autogen can give rise to a form of natural selection. the emergence of this constellation of properties enabling evolution … marks a fundamental shift in the dynamical organization of the natural world, a shift from thermodynamic and morphodynamic processes to teleodynamic processes.' (430) The key to understanding the entire line of development from the Big Bang to your capacity to interpret this review lies in understanding the key transitional moments where qualitatively new energetic powers emerge.

Deacon applies the same methodological approach to explaining consciousness and agency as he does to explaining morphogenesis. He searches for the mediating term between unconscious morphodynamic systems and conscious life-forms. He zeroes in on sentience. Human beings design all sorts of sensing technologies (like thermostats), but sentience or feeling it is not only functional, it is intentional. The thermostat regulates the temperature in the room, but is not in the least intentional: it functions, but does not act for the sake of maintaining an environment *that it requires to continue functioning.* But sentience is the product of organic systems that evolved and as such have survival value. The higher level capacities of living things are the products of natural selection shaping, sculpting, and honing organic matter over billions of years. The crucial transitions are from self-replicating molecules to self-maintaining simple single cell organisms, from self-maintaining single cell-organisms to sentient life forms aware of their environment and able to work to maintain a life-supporting system state, and then from sentient life-forms to social self-conscious agents capable of building a human, social, symbolic world out of the givenness of natural materials.

With the emergence of sentience the universe crosses the threshold between being a meaningless thermodynamic system running itself down over time to a world of value and meaning. Value for Deacon is, at root, life-supporting material conditions. Sentient life forms feel their environment and therefore suffer (sense life-threatening changes) as well as, on the other side, experience joy– increase in their vital powers, as Spinoza would say. The important point is that Deacon shows how values are fully compatible with a complex materialist ontology (as I also tried to show, but in a much less scientifically rigorous way, in *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value*). The symbolic,

meaningful human world has been created not simply through the manifestation of survival instincts in social life survival but the conscious shaping of the social world to serve and satisfy certain norms.

Human beings do not simply act for the sake of given ends, we are agents, capable of deliberately constructing the ends that we serve. The material of human norms is symbolic, not physical, but the emergence of the capacity for symbolic thought and the creative activity that it directs can be explained, if Deacon is correct, in a way that preserves the causal uniformity of nature. Human freedom is thus not, as Descartes argued, a function of the operation of non-physical, non-mechanical causality, but a function of the power of human beings to understand and intervene causally in the world. The secret to human freedom is that it is ententional, not spiritual or divine: it results from action in relation to an imagined end state not yet physically present. “What we are concerned with here is not freedom from but freedom to. What matters is not some disconnection from determinate physics, but rather the flexibility to organize physical world with respect to some conserved core dynamical constraints. This is not a breakdown of causal efficacy; in fact, just the opposite. Being an agent mans being a locus of causal efficacy.”(480)

With human agency the argument comes full circle. Deacon began from a picture of the universe as an energetic system governed by the second law of thermodynamics. Without introducing exotic causalities or question-begging ideal substances or divine intelligences, he has provided a coherent explanation of how life can emerge from non-life and consciousness from unconscious elements. I am sure that the experts in the various fields that Deacon’s rich and complex account draws upon would be able to raise problems that I am incapable of even seeing, but sometimes science must advance not by parts but by wholesale re-framings. As philosophy is always involved in wholesale re-framings (mechanism, after all, was as much a global philosophical world-view as it was empirical science), philosophers have to be a part of these conversations, even if they might not understand all the scientific details. Deacon is aware of the philosophical dimensions of his account and draws on philosophy where he finds conceptual problems with older frames and as he tries to explain and justify his novel approach. This is not a book for a lazy Sunday afternoon in summer read; it requires full attention and even then, non-scientists will be hard pressed to follow in some spots. But these arguments concern our being here, with the distinctive powers that we have. Who can fail to be fascinated by the answer that Deacon sketches?

Readings: Howard Woodhouse: Critical Reflections on Teacher Education: Why Future Teachers Need Educational Philosophy

Originally posted 9 June, 2023

Howard Woodhouse is Professor Emeritus and Co-Director of the Saskatchewan Process Philosophy Research Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Saskatchewan. *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education* is both a resume of his long career as a philosopher and teacher and a diagnosis and suggestions for cures of the malaise of the school system and teacher education. In this slim but complex volume he argues that the continued intrusion of capitalist market values into schools has extended to the curriculum and methods of faculties of education. If left unchecked, this tendency will undermine the capacity of future teachers for critical reflection and autonomous judgement, turning them into little more than transmission belts for government policy and corporate interests. "Without a basic understanding of philosophical issues and their relationship to educational practice" he writes, new teachers "will become lost in the demands of hierarchical school systems that emphasize conformity to rules and policies, which negate the necessary autonomy of qualified judgement defining their profession." (1)That this transformation would negate the vocation of educators to enable students' intellectual growth is of no concern to today's self-styled "reformers." Woodhouse's argument alerts educators to the crisis, explains the importance of philosophy to teacher education, and makes a number of practical suggestions for the transformation of classrooms at all institutional levels.

He supports his argument with evidence drawn from his own long career as a philosopher, from the educational philosophy of Bertrand and Dora Russell (and to a lesser extent, John Dewey), the philosophy for children movement, and the place-based educational philosophy and practice of Indigenous communities from whom he has learned in Saskatchewan. He integrates these distinct strands of argument by showing how they are forms of "life-value," a term he adopts from the work of John McMurtry. McMurtry's epochal philosophical achievement was to have demonstrated that all values are functions of the needs and capacities of living, sentient beings. Whatever is of value either serves living things as a resource that satisfies their needs or is an expression of their sentient, intellectual, or creative capacities. The Russell's' understanding of education as growth, the cultivation of the philosophical capacities of children, and the First Nation's understanding that scientific knowledge grows up out of lived experience of the nurturing power of the land are all expressions of this underlying principle.

His latest critique of the intrusion of market values into the educational system extends the reasoning of his previous book, *Selling Out*, from the university system into the primary and secondary school systems. Both books build on the pioneering argument of McMurtry's "Education and the Market Model" (*Paideusis,* 1991). In that seminal paper, McMurtry contrasted the values that rule the capitalist market place (all goods are understood as saleable commodities available for purchase by anyone willing to pay the price) with the value that organizes educational systems (the growth of intellect and sensibility through conjoint efforts

with teachers in structured but open-ended inquiry). As is evident, the value that organizes educational systems is undermined to the extent that market values invade. To become educated, students must struggle to understand; the burden of inquiry cannot be alleviated through a cash transaction. The work must continue until insight has been achieved, only to start again, in search of deeper and more comprehensive understanding. If education were a commodity then the insights could be purchased, but even if one could buy diplomas they would not acquire the cultivated intelligence that the piece of paper signifies. The problem is solved, McMurtry and Woodhouse both worry, by transforming the content of education. Instead of open ended inquiry schooling becomes a matter of mechanical skill acquisition, efficiently delivered and standardized tested.

The book is organized into five pithy chapters. Each begins with a short personal reflection that motivates the philosophical argument to come. Despite their concision, each is richly illustrated with appropriate historical evidence. The first chapter details the way in which the market model has infiltrated faculties of education in Canada, the UK, and the US. The consequence for future teachers is that their careers will be "reduced to that of technicians working to advance the goals of the market." (11) However, even that reduction is only a first step. The 'reformers' ultimately aim at doing away with living teachers altogether. Woodhouse cites Robert Heterich, president of Educom, an academic-corporate consortium, who advocates "'remov[ing] the human mediation … and replac[ing] it with automation' … to reduce unit costs and programme students for the market."(24) The emergence of ChatGPT perhaps brings this dream closer than educators might have feared.

To the objection that machines cannot teach because machines cannot think, technocrats will respond (as they do in the case of "artificial" intelligence), by redefining teaching as that which the teacher bot can do. Human intelligence is bound up with our self-conscious awareness of our vulnerable being-in-the-world. Therefore, it is not algorithmic, even if some basic operations can be formalized and replicated by machine functioning. All intelligent reflection and action is bound up with meaningful interpretation and caring interacting with the natural and social environment. However impressive the operations of technologies like ChatGPT, they are not alive, do not care, and therefore cannot produce meaningful interpretations of the problems their creators claim they can help solve. However, this objection disappears if intelligence is defined as the machinic assembly of sentences. If students are taught that intelligence is the execution of algorithms then, after a few generations, that is what everyone will believe intelligence is, and the existential basis of the criticism will be undermined.

The same fate awaits teaching if technocrats like Heterich win. All teachers have to rely on routines and rules of thumb which those who would eliminate the teacher believe can be formalized and programmed into a machine. However, as with human intelligence, the affective and communicative core of teaching would be eliminated. Teaching is not the efficient transmission of information; teaching is the multi-sided ability to frame problems in such a way that students form the desire to investigate it on their own. Only through their own efforts can students grow intellectually. The role of the teacher is to help them find their way into whatever problem is under investigation. If students are taught that education is simply the efficient assimilation of skills and data, then they will lose the affective connection to problems that genuine education stimulates. The result will be that the human project terminates in our having

replaced ourselves with machines. What will replace the role of effort and striving as sources of meaning in our lives no one can say.

Woodhouse exposes the supreme danger of these trends. He anchors his alternative vision in the educational philosophy of Bertrand and Dora Russell. Woodhouse demonstrates that, despite his occasional lapse into scientism, Russell was, at heart, a humanist and the educational philosophy that he and Dora developed placed the free development of the student at its centre. For the Russells, educational systems should be modelled on the principle of living development that governs the natural world: "The metaphor of growth runs throughout Bertrand and Dora's educational philosophy … "the humanistic conception of education" they write 'regards the child as a gardener regards a young tree … as something with an intrinsic nature, which will develop into an admirable form, given proper soil and air and light."'(34) Gardening is both joyous and terrifying: one plants the seeds in well-prepared ground but one cannot force them to grow. So too with teaching: the teacher prepares the ground by framing the problem in ways that the students can understand, but then must trust the students to do the work themselves. As the gardener cannot force the tree to grow, so too the teacher cannot brow beat the students to learn. Their task is not to force but to enliven the inner principle, the "desire to know" which, as Aristotle said, lies at the root of human relationship to the world.

Even when well-intentioned, the move to turn teachers into testable skill-transmitters would destroy the nature of education. Anyone can memorize times tables; writing *Principia Mathematica* requires imagination and drive, not just mastery of the rules of formal logic. ChatGPT can assemble sentences, but until it feels the joy of awakening each morning and the utter desolation of the loss of a loved one, poetry will elude it. Education enables students to find their own voice: some as mathematicians, perhaps, and some as poets, but all as sensitive, reflective, confident but not dogmatic citizens of the world. To become educated is to become alive to the world as a question. Thinking is– as Dewey understood–active intervention into the order of things, the very opposite of parroting the correct slogan or learning what you need to say to get the job. The world will always exceed our grasp, but that is a good thing: the inherent questionability of things ensures that there will always be something meaningful for the next generation to do (as long as there is a next generation).

Despite Russell's reputation as a stuffy and conservative analytic philosopher, criticism was central to his philosophical practice. "The essential characteristic of philosophy," he argued, "which makes it a study distinct from science, is criticism. It examines critically the principles employed in science and in daily life, it searches out any inconsistencies there may be in these principles, and it only accepts them when, as the result of a critical inquiry, no reason for rejecting them has appeared."(32) One can immediately see the importance of this practice of philosophy for teachers and students. If education is not to degenerate into indoctrination, then teachers must be able to think critically about the curriculum they are being asked to teach, and to have the intellectual courage to oppose curricula that suffocates thinking under dogma. By being critical themselves they will instill in students the *need* to intervene when unsupported arguments circulate as facts or when narrow ideology demonizes and attacks. However, a genuinely critical practice is humbling: no one has all the answers, every position can be questioned, and when one is the target of criticism one knows that one owes one's interlocutor a reasoned argument.

This capacity for (self)-criticism is central to the vocation of philosophy and education, but it can also– if it is practiced as an end in itself– conflict with philosophy's positive, life-serving dimension. Life is not only opposition (although we must have the strength to oppose). Life is ultimately worth living because it is an opening to the beauty and magnificence of the universe. Social problems are problems precisely because they impede those who suffer from them from living– feeling, thinking, acting, relating, savouring, enjoying– to the fullest. The principle of life-enjoyment is the root which feeds all struggles. Criticism has to maintain connection with this root lest it degenerate into nihilistic skepticism or despair. Everything is open to challenge, true, but for the sake of expanding understanding, not drowning it in doubt. Woodhouse does not explicitly pose this sort of challenge to Russell's definition of philosophy, but the final three chapters make clear that he is implicitly aware of these sorts of dangers.

The third chapter focuses on the principles and practices of the philosophy for children movement. First developed in distinct but related directions by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, the effort to incorporate philosophy at every level of education was motivated by the goal of freeing education from rigid bureaucratic structures. Instead of a teacher standing in front of the class drilling students until they can perform the appropriate repertoire, Lipman, Sharp, and their followers reconceived the relationship amongst learners as a "community of inquiry."(61) Inspired in part by John Dewey's understanding of education as problem-based inquiry, the proponents of philosophy for children wanted to turn the class room into an incubator of children's native curiosity.(62) The teacher would be more shepherd and less drill sergeant and the child viewed as a unity of affect and intellect alive in wonder to the world, needing guidance but able to find their own way together with their co-explorers. Thinking of themselves as a community they would feel united in common purpose, but they would also understand that as a community of individual minds, each person sees the world from their own angle. Hence students would also discover for themselves the inevitability of disagreement, the need for dialogue, and respectful argument as the primary means for resolving disputes.

The movement has made some headway in Canada, the UK, the US, but Woodhouse is keen to stress that the trend has been away from philosophical education of any sort. Obviously, if teachers lack philosophical education they will be in no position to cultivate philosophical dispositions in their students. Philosophy is essentially a practice, not trivial familiarity with this or that thinker from the past. Woodhouse defends philosophy first as disposition and practice and second as an academic discipline. The life-value of the academic discipline is not expressed by the fact that exists but in the difference that it makes to those who study it. The development and nurturing of a philosophical disposition towards intelligent criticism in the service of truth and life-enjoyment must be the guiding idea.

No institution is more human than education. Animals learn but their cognitive capacities, no matter how impressive, are minute in comparison to human thought and feeling. It can expand to the edge of the universe and ask what still lies beyond; it can shrink to the size of a quark and imagine the world from that perspective; it is capable of the most tender and subtle refinements of meaning and a generator of metaphorical connection without limit, but poorly educated it is also capable of justifying genocidal violence. Thus, it is not hyperbole to argue that the human future depends upon the quality of our educational institutions and educators.

Woodhouse makes this connection between education and survival through the example of climate change. The final two chapters focus on the link between philosophical education for teachers and their ability to motivate students to understand the problem and become the sort of engaged citizens who can help solve it. In order to advance his argument, Woodhouse draws inspiration and insight from the place-based learning at the heart of Indigenous societies. Drawing on the knowledge of both Elders and Indigenous intellectuals, Woodhouse shows how the holistic (affective, intellectual, practical, and spiritual) understanding of the complex interrelationships upon which life depends must be integral to life-valuable climate change education. Woodhouse cites Marie Batiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood to explain the connection between Indigenous and "Western" science. "The traditional ecological knowledge of Indigenous peoples is scientific in the sense that it is empirical, experimental, and systematic. It differs in two important respects from Western science, however: traditional ecological knowledge is highly localized, and it is social. Its focus is on the web of relationships between humans, animals, plants, natural forces, and landforms in a particular locality, as opposed to the discovery of universal laws." (89) While I agree that this difference is real, I do not think that it is best understood as a difference between Indigenous and "Western" forms of science.

The more important point that Batiste and Youngblood are making here, I would say, is that science has a common, practical root. Chemistry does not originate with the periodic table, but with cooking and other forms of life-serving transformation of substances. Taxonomy does not begin with Linnaeus but with long-evolved local understandings flora and fauna and their uses. Medicine does not begin with the MRI machine but with caring attention to vulnerable bodies and the medicinal properties of plants. It is true that the science that has developed since Galileo and Newton demands generalization of results expressed as mathematically formalized regularities, but I think that this demand should be understood as continuous with and a development of that much longer practical history of science rather than as cliched "Western" alternative to older forms of knowing. The mathematical notations that supposed "Western" science employs are not Western in origin but Egyptian and Greek (geometry), Indian (the all important value of 0), and Arabic (algebra). Science, practical and mathematical, has always been an international and cross-cultural practice. Like all forms of knowledge (including religious and philosophical) science can be deployed in ideological ways to justify domination. The best means to oppose this very unscientific use of science is to demonstrate its deeper and more cosmopolitan origins rather than (ironically) allow "the West' to take credit for the extraordinary and undeniable achievements of post-17th century mathematical natural science.

That said, the more important point is to insist upon the connection between genuine knowledge and the understanding, maintenance, and development of natural and social life-support systems. Woodhouse integrates the various strands of his argument by invoking McMurtry's "primary axiom of value." The axiom holds that all value whatsoever either serves life as a means of satisfying a need or expresses the sentient, intellectual, and creative powers of living things. The value of the engaged, reflective, and critical form of education that Woodhouse depends is clearly explained by the axiom. The human intellect needs education in order to develop its full range of abilities, and the educated person experiences life more fully, is capable of a greater range of activities, and is reflectively aware of the interests of others, other living things, and nature as a whole. Life cannot be lived anyway one wants or is able to pay for; since the world exists outside of our won minds and skins we must take into account the needs of others,

contribute to their satisfaction in some way, and, overall, strive to live in way which are to "coherently inclusive" of the needs and goals of others.(98)

Education is our first and last line of defense. It must be approached as the hard but joyous work of exploring our universe and the problems of human social life together, in respectful but sometimes difficult argument. Cats and crows can master a few skills and we should admire them for it, but human intelligence is not the mastery of skills and teaching is not the transmission of information. If Covid taught teachers anything, it is that on line platforms are useful for transmitting information, but make actual pedagogical communication extremely difficult. The desire to learn develops best when living learners work together in shared space, challenging and inspiring each other to expand the circle of understanding ever wider.

Readings: Richard Ford: The Lay of the Land

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Even though one could say that as a philosopher reading forms a large part of my work, my interests pull me in so many different directions that I feel I am perpetually behind (sometimes embarrassingly so), publishers' lists in any particular field or genre. That is true for philosophy and doubly so for literature (which is better than philosophy, since it nourishes the mind but also pleases in a way that very few philosophical authors and their too-careful-to-the-point of verbosity prose are able to achieve). So it came to pass that I sat in my garden in July 2023 reading Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, published in 2006.

The Lay of the Land is the third volume of a trilogy that began with *The Sportswriter* and continued with *Independence Day*. In one respect, the trilogy is classic Americana: an epic that traces the domestic dramas of Frank Bascombe, former sportswriter cum New Jersey real estate not-quite mogul, on his journey from early to middle middle age, through his struggles to love his kids, divorce, re-marriage and its sundry complications, and finally to some sort of inner peace.

In almost all respects Bascombe is everything I absolutely rejected when I was younger. I disdained the social conventions that Bascombe lives by, never wanted to have children, valued ideas and art more than money, dressed in tight black jeans and a leather jacket rather than pale pastel golf shirts. But the power of literature (and all art) is to draw us into worlds which are not our own. The greatness of literature is not found in how accurately it "represents" this or that reality but with how skillfully it constructs its own reality for readers– who are not the characters– to explore. And if we have the courage to explore a world which is not our own we might find– sometimes to our horror, but always to our edification– that we see ourselves, or some aspect of ourselves, where we least expected to find them.

I have never been a sports writer (but I do spend too much time watching hockey and baseball), have never been divorced and have no children, but I am a middle aged man. Of course, the universe sends us no mystical signs, but it is amusing sometimes to think that it does. The delay of 17 years between Ford's publishing the novel and my beginning to read it allowed my age to catch up with the protagonist: we are both 55. Perhaps occult forces were at work guiding my eye to this volume on a springtime book-shopping trip to Ann Arbor. Maybe the universe wanted to warn me about something (but I hope not, because Bascombe has prostate cancer).

Even as I shuddered at the thought of being caught dead in chinos and loafers, (not to mention being terrified of being diagnosed with cancer) the book made me realize the obvious: I was very far from being the cool near-teenager living in a basement apartment in Toronto but a middle middle aged (I hope 55 is middle middle age) man, sitting in the back garden of my two story brick house in Windsor. I was not a real estate agent but a Philosophy professor, decidedly middle class, living a very different life than my working class origins, and also capable of basic existential mathematics: every day on the planet increases the probability of my receiving the sort of bad news that Bascombe receives. The book forced on me the reality of the commonalities that age and class impose which run deeper than our chosen values. These

commonalities do not negate differences of life goals and priorities, but they force us to be honest about the whole of what we become. That honest reckoning is difficult, because the funnest thing in life is self-deception.

But in order to provoke nourishing self-reflection and understanding, novels must please the mind. What pleases is Ford's absolute mastery of economy of expression. His sentences are exquisite: "This Clevinger, entered the quiet, reverent classroom of test takers, walked among the desks and toward the front to where Ms. McCurdy stood, arms folded, musing out the window, possibly smiling. And he said to her, raising a Glock 9-mm to within six inches of the space just above the mid-point between her eyes, he said, "Are you ready to meet your Maker?" To which Ms. McCurdy, who was 46 and a better than average teacher and canasta player, and who had been a flight nurse in Desert Storm, replied, blinking her periwinkle eyes in curiosity only twice, "Yes. Yes, I think I am." A scene of absolute horror is rendered with such quiet attention to the banal details that it renders the extraordinary ordinary in a way which better drives home the deeper point (which the rest of the novel explores) that each of us should cultivate the quiet dignity of Ms. McCurdy as we come closer to that inevitable meeting.

As I began the novel, storm clouds gathered quickly as they do here this time of year. The wind picked up and I became conscious of sitting under the limbs of a large mulberry tree. Directly overhead, jets headed out on a easterly flight path from Detroit Metro towards Europe. I thought: "If a branch fell or a 777 on its way to London dropped a piece of its wing on me, could I, in the fraction of a second before the tree or flap crushed me, answer the question with the same equanimity as Ms. McCurdy?" Probably not, because I do not believe in the God that gave her strength. Philosophy is not therapy. One can, with Socrates, extol the examined life and believe that philosophy is preparation for death (because it helps us live well and fully) and still spend most of one's days trying to distract oneself from that relentless existential mathematics that I noted above. Every moment that you live is a subtraction from a finite sum of days.

I do not know how a younger man or a middle aged woman would experience *The Lay of the Land*. To be sure, the novel could still resonate for those at a different stage of life or experiencing it from a female perspective, but I am not certain they would feel the novel's pull the same way a person in my position feels it. I am not saying that Ford had only middle aged men in mind when he wrote the book, but for me, its power lay in how perfectly it captures the way in which, no matter what one does at 55 (or thereabouts) one cannot deny that one is no longer young. Having adult children (like Bascombe) would put a fine point on that fact, but even without them one just *feels* (and looks) one's age. And that is disconcerting, initially, whatever one's walk of life, because it shatters the temporal illusion in which people live. Second to second, one does not look different, feel different, or worry about the next second being one's last. But ruthlessly iterated over decades, we do change, our hair recedes, our knees ache, we would rather have a martini in our back garden and read Richard Ford than go to a club. Most importantly, we start to recognize emotionally, and not just abstractly, intellectually, that one second *will* be our last, and we are much closer to our final breath than to the first.

There is thus a deep intelligence at work beneath the surface narrative of the novel. Most people are not philosophers and do not ruminate on the meaning of life or grapple with their mortality by reading existential philosophy. Many seek spiritual comfort in religious communities, but

many, like Bascombe, approach these essential problems through their memories. As we age, the number of days remaining to us shrinks, but we accumulate memories, and these become the substance of on-going self-examination: was I a good father or husband or partner, was I there when my friends needed me, did I make the right career choice, study the right subject, vote for the right candidate, speak up when the situation demanded. These are totally banal questions, and yet absolutely central to the only evaluation of one's life that ultimately matters: one's own. The difference between the philosophical and literary treatment of these issues is that in the latter case we experience them through the constructed feelings and thoughts of the characters: they are evoked, rather than laid out in the abstract. As soon as literature lectures it dies as art: if you want to lecture, become a professor; if you want to be an artist, trust that your audience will find their own way through your work.

There are no lectures in *Lay of The Land.* There are, unfortunately, some badly drawn scenes (Bascombe's thoughts as he fantasizes about his daughter's lesbian partner) and a melodramatic climax whose motivation I could not understand at all. The novel recovers from the fireworks of the climax and reaches a satisfying conclusion consonant with the tenor and the themes that Ford so wonderfully unfolds in this novel and its two preceding volumes. I do not know if Ford plans a fourth volume that would take us through to the end of Bascombe's days but, for myself, I hope not. Sometimes literature, like life, is best when it leaves some things hanging in the balance.

Readings: Yanis Varoufakis: Technofeudalism

Originally posted 14 November, 2023

There have been numerous attempts over the past twenty years to understand the mutations that contemporary capitalism has undergone. John McMurtry argued in 1998 that the world has entered "the cancer stage of capitalism." Whereas capitalism was originally a productive system driven by the sale of physical commodities for profit (described by Marx's formula M-C-M1) contemporary capitalism, according to McMurtry, devoured the public services and infrastructures past generations of struggle had created. Privatization schemes stripped societies of their public wealth while banks made money speculating on currencies and exotic financial instruments with no material reality save the damage the fluctuating value of currencies caused people still dependent upon the real economy. Instead of M-C-M1 the cancer stage, according to McMurtry, was best described by the formula M-M1-M2 …n.

McMurtry's arguments were influential amongst critics of the speculative economy but did not make any impact with Marxist political economists. Thomas Piketty did capture the attention of Marxists, at least in so far as they have been motivated to criticise his attempt to construct a socialist but non-Marxist understanding of the contradictions of contemporary capitalism. Piketty too focuses attention on the outsized role that the financial sector plays in the twenty-first century. Piketty argues that capitalism has been replaced by 'hyper-capitalism' in which rent-seeking financiers profit from de-regulated money markets and tax cuts. Income and wealth inequality has exploded and reached levels not seen since the "gilded age' that preceded the First World War.

Alongside of these systematic efforts there have been a host of books that have described contemporary capitalism through one or another qualifying adjective. Naomi Klein worried about "disaster capitalism" while Zuboff argued that we had entered the age of "surveillance" capitalism and Giblin tried to understand the dynamics of "chokepoint" capitalism. Newly entering the fray is former Syriza finance minister Yanis Varoufakis. In *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* he argues, in a popular tone but systematic fashion, that capitalism has been replaced by what he calls (following Cederic Durand) "technofeudalism."

Like McMurtry and Piketty, Varoufakis believes that the continued growth of the financial sector signals a change within capitalism, but he goes beyond either in arguing that the change has now become qualitative. "The internet shattered capitalism's evolutionary fitness … by incubating a new form of capital, which has ultimately empowered its owners to break free of capitalism and become a whole new ruling class. … Yes, capital still exists, but *capitalism* does not." (55) Varoufakis makes two interrelated arguments to support his conclusion that the global political economic system is now better understood as technofeudal. First, rent has replaced profit as the primary driver of the behaviour of firms, and second, wage labour has been supplanted (within what he calls the "cloud capitalist" sector), with the unpaid labour of "cloud serfs." Cloud serfs are the ordinary people who willingly fill the internet with the content which media and distribution platforms like Facebook and Amazon subsequently monetise.

Varoufakis explains the differences between feudalism, capitalism, and technofeudalism in a technical (but not mathematical) appendix. “Under feudalism,” he writes, “the power of the ruling class grew out of owning land that the majority could not own, but were bonded to. Under capitalism, power stemmed from owning capital that the majority did not own, but had to work with to make a living.” Finally, “under technofeudalism, a new ruling class draws power from owning cloud capital whose tentacles entangle everyone.”(215) If Varoufakis is correct, the “cloud capitalists” like Jeff Bezos are a new ruling class because all other capitalists are dependent upon access to their networks in order to do any sort of business. The Amazons of the world do not earn revue from the profits of exploiting their own workers but by extracting rents from productive businesses who must contract with them to distribute their product or reach their customers.

Even if Varoufakis is correct that social media and distribution platforms make money by extracting rents from other capitalists rather than profit from exploiting their own workers, that fact alone would not entail the death of capitalism and the birth of technofeudalism. Rent and capital have always co-existed. Capitalists love rent because it is a form of income that yields returns above normal prices. As Varoufakis explains, ” rent is “any price paid by a buyer above the price which most closely reflects the exchange value of the commodity.”(220) Rent is a function of natural or artificial scarcity. A piece of land can only be used for one function at a time, works of art are unique. Their owners can therefore name their price when offering it for lease or for sale. While it is true that their surplus is a function of exploiting the scarcity of the resource or object that they own and not exploiting labour in the classic Marxist sense (unpaid surplus labour beyond the time necessary to pay for the reproduction of the labourer), that does not mean that they have ceased to be capitalists.

Piketty and David Harvey have also looked carefully at the role rent seeking plays in contemporary capitalism and neither have concluded that we have gone back to the future of technofeudalism. Ownership and control over land was essential to the feudal economy, but its fundamental difference from capitalism was the way in which labour was deployed. Peasants and serfs were tied, literally and figuratively, to the land that they worked, and they were paid in kind, not in wages. The immobility of labour meant that the productivity gains made possible by new techniques or bringing new land under cultivation were limited, because labour could not follow technical improvements or new developments. Capitalism replaced feudalism when those structural and ideological impediments were overcome and labour could follow investment (which followed profits). However, the development of capitalism did not eliminate ground rent, it simply introduced a new strata (which did become a new ruling class): the capitalist farmer who rented from the aristocratic landowner the farm that he worked with wage labour. The “triumph of rent over profit” is evidence of a structural crisis in the capitalist economy, but it does not prove that capitalism has been replaced by technofeudalism (118).

Although Piketty does not accept the (controversial) Marxist explanation of crisis as the result of a falling rate of profit, he agrees with Marxists like Michael Roberts that falling profits in the real economy have driven capital into the speculative economy in search of higher rates of return. My point is that we do not need to posit the existence of a new social formation and a new ruling class to explain the phenomena that Varoufakis is studying. A simpler explanation might conclude that capital seeks the highest rate of return. Downward pressure on profits will push

capital out of the real economy into financial speculation. That outflow of capital signals a crisis of profitability and the wider social problems economic crises tend to cause, but is not proof that capitalism has been replaced by technofeudalism.

What about the other side of Varoufakis' argument, the role of the labour of "cloud serfs" in the new economy? Varoufakis notes that "Big Tech's workers … collect less than 1% of the firm's revenues. The reason is that paid labour performs only a fraction of the work that Big Tech relies on. Most of the work is performed by billions of people for free."(84) It is a fact that platform users provide unpaid labour for social media firms, and I agree with Varoufakis that the entwining of leisure and labour on-line constitutes a novel form of domination. His argument is a necessary corrective to the overly optimistic celebration of "immaterial labour" and "prosumption" in the work of thinkers like Paolo Virno and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. However, the fact that social media users provide content for free does not mean that wage labour has ceased to be essential to the capitalist economy.

While it is true that new communication technologies have changed the nature of work and created new forms of dependency linking consumers to producers through on-line platforms (now even other corporations are dependent on access to "cloud capital" while ever more people become psychologically and socially dependent on their on-line relationships) one must not forget that the hardware that these platforms use and the energy the networks require are still created using old fashioned wage labour to pay miners and manufacturers and network engineers. Other analysts of the changing nature of work in contemporary capitalism have acknowledged the increased complexity and further fragmentation of the working class without concluding that workers have become 'cloud serfs." Ursula Huws, Phil Jones, Nick-Dyer-Witherford, James Steinhoff, and Atle Mikkonen Kjosen have examined the composition of the contemporary working class in detail and concluded that it is increasingly super-exploited and dominated, but still a working class in the standard Marxist sense. No one makes their living shopping on Amazon. The fact that Amazon monetises their preferences and sells the information does not mean that those people are cloud serfs of Amazon. They have other jobs which pay the wages that they spend online.

Thus, it is only partly true that "cloud capital … has revolutionized its own reproduction. The true revolution that cloud capital has inflicted on humanity is the conversion of billions of us into willing cloud serfs volunteering to labour for nothing to reproduce cloud capital for the benefit of the owners."(85) The truth is that users willingly contribute to the reproduction of the web-based interface through which they access the platform, but the existence of the platform itself presupposes the material labour of the workers who extract the minerals and manufacture the machines on which the platform runs. Capitalism has constantly reconfigured the working class in light of changing technologies without ceasing to be capitalism. Varoufakis might be correct that workers have been replaced by cloud serfs *if* social media users made their living using these platforms. As I noted above, they do not, but spend a portion of their earnings on-line as they formerly would have in traditional concrete and glass stores. Just as the landlord would have charged the owner of the business rent for use of the physical space, so too cloud capitalists charge rent for access to a portion of cyberspace. That change is significant, but, I would argue, still understandable as a change within capitalism rather than a change to technofeudalism.

While I was not convinced by his general conclusions, novel analysis of the changing dynamics of global capitalism is always welcome. The book contains an excellent explanation of the new forms of rent which the digital economy has made possible, a concise history of financial markets and monetary policy from the end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, through the global response to the 2008 crisis up to today, and a clear, de-mystifying explanation of derivatives and the way they radically destablised the global economy. Varoufakis sets these explanations in the context of the rise to prominence of the American dollar and how its use as the global reserve currency has served the interests of American, European, and Chinese capital. "Shortly after the dollar was decoupled from gold, Europe's currencies were decoupled from the dollar. Once they lost their fixed exchange rate, the dollar value of European and Japanese currency began fluctuating wildly … The dollar became the only safe harbour." (45) As America's manufacturing industry declined, its economy was kept afloat by the repatriation of the dollars in which European, Japanese, and Chinese profits were denominated. America "gobbled up everything produced in Japan and, later, China. In return, the foreign (and often American) owners of these distant factories sent their profits, their cash, back to Wall Street to be invested– an additional form of tribute, which enriched America's ruling class, despite its deficit." (44)

The global power of the American dollar also contributed to the hypertrophied growth of the financial sector. Dollar denominated profits flowed into wall Street to be invested by banks which grew larger and larger. As these banks grew, they started to invent the exotic new investment instruments whose sale generated monstrous profits but ultimately de-stabilised the global economy and led to the 2008 crisis. Cloud capital consolidated its hold on the global economy in the wake of the 2008 crisis. According to Varoufakis, the vast sums that governments poured into the economy to stablise the banking sector were not put to productive use but instead used to fuel another speculative cycle. The low-interest rate policy of central banks- given an extended lease on life by the pandemic– addicted firms to free money.

We are now exiting that era. Interest rates continue to rise at the same time as economic growth is slowing in most of the world. The Ukraine War has shaken much of the world's confidence in the American dollar, but no one can say what might replace it or what the overall consequences for the global economy might be. The polarization between the Global South and the Global North, already tense in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has reached a crisis level in response to Israel's invasion of Gaza. These spectacular political clashes are playing out against a backdrop of intensifying economic competition between China and the United States (153, 159, 161). While I was unconvinced by his characetrisation of the global economy as technofeudal, I agree that 2008 marked the beginning of a long term structural crisis that has not yet been solved.

Unfortunately, the socialist and social democratic left has not been able to translate the crisis of capitalism into a politically and economically unified movement. Varoufakis was one of the victims of the failure of the socialist left when Syriza was undermined by the intransigence of the European Central Bank. He concludes his book with a rough sketch of an alternative economic system, one of many that can be found in the books of socialist intellectuals. Like Michael Albert's Parecon and Pat Devine's negotiated coordination economy, Varoufakis argues that an alternative must begin with collective ownership of universally needed resources (including

information resources) and democratic planning of economic priorities and processes. The real problem that the left faces (aside from the identity politics that he also appropriately criticises, 183,184) is that these models float in the air without a coherent political movement to carry them forward. One can construct any model of an alternative economy one wants, but in order to start building it, governments have to establish control over their own economic resources. Unfortunately, the financial system– as Syriza found out– cannot be controlled by any one government. Since the financial system controls people's savings and pensions, its threats have to be taken seriously by even the best left wing governments. Syriza was armed with a referendum victory in which the Greek people rejected further austerity. However, when the bankers merely scoffed and threatened to destroy the Greek banking sector, Syriza had to give in or risk watching its citizens savings and pensions evaporate.

Hence the biggest problem the left faces- whatever we calls the society we are trying to change– is not how to sketch plans for a systematic alternative, but re-establishing credibility with workers. No transitional program will get off the ground if it cannot protect workers' short term interests in secure work for a living wage. Syriza's unfortunate defeat and the political ascension of the far right in numerous European capitals stresses just how difficult this problem will be to solve.