

FINDING OUR COMPASS



REFLECTIONS ON A WORLD IN CRISIS

CHRIS WRIGHT

FINDING OUR COMPASS:

REFLECTIONS ON A WORLD IN CRISIS

Chris Wright

Copyright © 2014 Chris Wright

ISBN: 978-1-63490-043-0

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2014

First Edition

Hereditary bondsmen! know ye not
Who would be free themselves must strike the blow?

Byron

Table of Contents

PREFACE	VII
PART ONE	1
CHAPTER ONE - SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE INDIVIDUAL	3
PART TWO	191
CHAPTER TWO - ROBERT BRENNER ON RECENT ECONOMIC HISTORY	193
CHAPTER THREE - MORE NOTES ON ECONOMICS AND NEOLIBERALISM	251
CHAPTER FOUR - SUMMARIES OF HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP.....	291

Preface

This is an odd book, both timely and untimely. From an objective standpoint it is timely, addressing the urgent issues of our age. It takes as its starting point the coming demise of a civilization, at the hands of global warming, economic stagnation and crisis, and possible nuclear war—all ultimately products of corporate capitalism in its neoliberal phase. It consists largely of reflections on how we got here, how to interpret our society and ourselves, and what ideals are worth extracting from the wreckage of the past. It eschews academic conventions in favor of getting directly to the point and not mincing words.

But that is also why it's untimely. Its defiance of institutional norms and political correctness, in addition to its unusual, Nietzsche-esque form, makes it very different from the kinds of books that attract traditional publishers and markets. To its cost, it exists *between* academic and popular markets, drawing from scholarship but presenting ideas in an un-academic way. Indeed, the whole of Part Two consists of summaries of and commentaries on left-wing scholarship that has impressed me. Few writers dedicate themselves to collecting and summarizing scholarship, to make it more accessible to the public and bring it all together; Noam Chomsky is one. But since good, materialistic (Marxist or semi-Marxist) scholarship is so useful in explaining our world, I've decided to compile here some of the notes I've taken in recent years on the work of such academics as Robert Brenner, David Harvey, Harry Braverman, David Graeber, and Walden Bello. People who don't find academic writings accessible should nevertheless know of this scholarship and at least read summaries of it, so they have a better understanding of society.

Part One is even more unconventional, jumping from subject to subject in a series of brief reflections. Superficially these “sections” might appear to be random and unrelated to each other, but I have organized them carefully so that thematic threads tie them together. They’re taken from a huge collection of notes I’ve accumulated in the last fifteen years, on philosophy, history, psychology, culture, music, etc. Overall, the unifying perspective is the young Marx’s: “For a ruthless criticism of everything existing!,” including capitalism, the U.S. government, Western intellectual culture, academia, postmodernism, certain strains of feminism, even the concepts of “genius” and “greatness” that people use to exalt a few individuals and denigrate everyone else. I want to defend the integrity of reason and the individual from attacks by the bane of our age, institutional thinking and behavior. Collectivism is humanity’s enemy; unfortunately it’s almost ubiquitous in the modern world. But its most dangerous manifestation is corporate capitalism, which is why the book’s main polemic is against capitalism.

This book is essentially an extension of my first, *Notes of an Underground Humanist* (2013), and can be read in conjunction with it. Subjects I discuss only briefly here are dealt with in more depth there, and vice versa. My second book, *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States* (2014), is probably the most original and important of the three, containing a major revision of Marxism and clarification of its true relation to anarchism, a discussion of the past and present of the “solidarity economy” (focusing on cooperatives), and a case-study of the successful New Era Windows cooperative in Chicago. Readers interested in a constructive critique of Marxism should turn to that book, which also contains informed speculation about where society may be headed in the next fifty years, as the present *ancien régime* disintegrates.

I have to confess to a rather pessimistic point of view on that score. I think we’re all in for some horrific suffering and titanic

FINDING OUR COMPASS

upheavals. I just hope we make it through the conflagration and into a more peaceful world on the other side.

Part One

Chapter One

Social Structures and the Individual

Valedictory.— Our civilization is approaching the end. We're peering over the precipice, and chaos boils below. The time has come to sum it all up, to take account of where we are and what we've done, and to pass judgment. We, the generations now living, have been lucky or unlucky enough to be present as history nears its climax; we have an abundance of human experience to survey and draw conclusions from, conclusions to pass on to posterity as it surveys the even more breathtaking ruins we'll leave. We want to go out with some dignity, with positive lessons to impart to our descendants so that they know not all of us were idiots. We've lived long enough to learn life's truths; we've suffered enough to be wise. Let's cast our glance from the future to the past and grasp the threads of human thought while there is still some link between what was and what is, some memory of what is rapidly fading. Perhaps some future explorer will discover our buried treasure, our Dead Sea Scrolls, and read about lost worlds, and be carried away by tales of folly and adventure. In the meantime, a few glimmers of honesty and perspective may light up our world and reveal it to itself...

*

Advice for writers.— In general, it's a good idea for writers to imagine how their work would be seen by posterity. Would their descendants view it as parochial, time-bound, and faddish, or would they still find intrinsic and timeless merit in it? Would it hold up in a different cultural context? If not, the writer should rethink his work so as to give it more universal relevance, thereby heightening its artistic and intellectual value. It's true that one cannot, even in imagination, entirely rise above one's culture and view its artifacts

from the outside; nevertheless, insofar as we're *humans* and not mere cultural byproducts, the exercise is partly within the bounds of possibility. Indeed, people are constantly judging their societies and particular social practices from a human, semi-"objective" standpoint; such are moral judgments, properly so-called, grounded in the timeless and universal morality of the Golden Rule, i.e., respect and compassion for others. (This morality seems to be ingrained in the human brain, judging by people's near-universal, albeit frequently compromised and conditional, acceptance of it.) Aesthetic and intellectual judgments, too, are not mere epiphenomena of a particular culture but are natural, though socially influenced, expressions of innate structures in the human cognitive and affective faculties. The writer's, in fact the artist's and philosopher's and scientist's, task ought to be to transcend the limitations of time and place and appeal to the highest standards of the innately human. Ideally his work would be "immortal."

*

Enlightenment.— Said Samuel Johnson, on art: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just [i.e., true] representations of general nature. Particular manners can be known to few, and therefore few only can judge how nearly they are copied. The irregular combinations of fanciful invention may delight a-while, by that novelty of which the common satiety of life sends us all in quest; but the pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth." This statement is a sufficient indictment of most postmodernist art, and most things culturally postmodern. It's time we turned away from relativism, solipsism, social atomism, fragmentary perspectives, ironical self-consciousness, instant gratifications, pop art, pop philosophies, and commodified creativity. Honesty and truth are overdue.

*

On the use and abuse of "perspective" for life.— There are delights and dangers in adopting a broad perspective on oneself and one's society. Looking at the "big picture" can either electrify or paralyze one's will. The latter possibility is obvious, given, for example, the big-picturesque horrors of global warming and capitalist global pollution. Oceanic garbage patches the size of continents, slums the size of cities, cities disintegrating into slums, and a planetary future incinerated in the vortex of capitalism are not things that quicken the will to live. Internecine violence running riot from Mexico to the Middle East, from central Africa to Russia, as governments outdo each other in the art of cultivating murderous resentments, does not inspire confidence in one's ability to make meaningful change. Despair on a cosmic scale, encompassing life from low species already extinguished to high species threatened with extinction, suffocates "optimism of the will," "pessimism of the intellect" alone remaining.

The added burden of such modern afflictions has done nothing to ease the ancient burdens philosophers and poets have bewailed since the Upanishads. Earth is a pale blue dot in the infinite expanse of desolate space. What matter our little earthly tribulations or triumphs? Someday we'll all be gone, Earth itself will be gone, and it will be as though nothing ever was. No art, no music, none of the sound and fury of a Faustian but forgotten history. "All is vanity!" The flower of youth wilts, as poets have lamented for millennia, withering into a decayed old age and finally death. Pleasures are evanescent; time consumes all, like Saturn devouring his children. The transience of everything makes life seem meaningless—as does, in another way, the immensity of Earth (however microscopic it is on the cosmic scale), the prodigious mass of humanity compared to which the individual is too puny to mention. People come and go like flies. —The plaintive cry of Ecclesiastes still resonates two thousand years later.

On the other hand, the “big picture” need not be utterly demoralizing. To contemplate the grandeur of the universe can be a nearly religious experience, Kantian in its sublimity. “Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe,” Kant said, “the more often and the more intensely we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” One feels vanishingly insignificant but gloriously exalted at the same time, uplifted to dazzling infinity as one glories in the ability to *reflect* on this black unbounded cosmos. The relative immensity of Earth, likewise, and one’s being a mere momentary individual among billions, fills with wonder and awe, even love for all fellow creatures stranded inexplicably on this floating island in space. Time itself overawes. Translucent as a pellucid mountain river, the life-engendering flow of time carries us along to experience the beauty of *change*. The broad human perspective illuminates hope and the reality of change.

To glance over the modern world is to know the temptation of despair, but it is to know *possibility* as well. Fatalism is a factually incorrect philosophy. Horrors happen daily, but from a broad perspective one sees also constant kindnesses and life-saving interventions. A billion moments of moral beauty every day; ten billion meaningful connections between this life and that life. Even lost in anguish, even surrounded by modern ugliness, one can see beams of hope piercing the gloom. To know the true urgency of humanity’s situation, however, *should* entail not wretched immobility but galvanized movement, passionate activism. When people join together they *can* make meaningful change.

*

The Goethean possibilities of history.— A major advantage of living at this time, so late in history, is that the past is a kaleidoscope of cultural achievements, or rather a cornucopian buffet whose fruits one can sample—a kiwi here, a mango there—a few papayas—and

then choose which are one's favorite delicacies—which are healthiest, which savory and sweet—and invent one's own diet tailored to one's needs. History can be appropriated by each person as he chooses, selectively used in the service of his self-creation. The individual can be more complete than ever in the past! Only, to bring the magnificent array of possibilities down to earth and so give *all* people the means to sample history's treats requires a reevaluation of society's values and transformation of its structures. It's time we spread the banquet not in the gilded halls of the elite but in the humble homes of the people.

*

Goetterdämmerung.— Albert Camus: “We [moderns] read more than we meditate. We have no philosophies but merely commentaries. This is what Étienne Gilson says, considering that the age of philosophers concerned with philosophy was followed by the age of professors of philosophy concerned with philosophers. Such an attitude shows both modesty and impotence. And a thinker who began his book with these words: ‘Let us take things from the beginning,’ would evoke smiles. It has come to the point where a book of philosophy appearing today without basing itself on any authority, quotation or commentary would not be taken seriously.” The reality that he describes is nothing else than institution-think. Expertly calibrated, self-replicating capitalist-friendly institutions dominate culture, and such institutions cannot get to the heart of the matter or exalt the sort of world-engendering creativity that highly ennobles. What they can do is manufacture minute monographs, reduce to the common denominator, and make ever less relevant to human concerns. I recall what I wrote once in college:

Looked at the Tufts University philosophy department website; I might apply there. Part of its mission statement is “to provide students with the skills necessary for Ph.D. res-

earch, as well as to foster the independence of mind required for genuinely creative philosophical work.” It depressed me to read that, as if a draft of nihilism had wafted by: life felt picayune suddenly, mechanical, scholarly—training people to think!—and denying philosophy even as they preach it! Well-oiled parts of the machine, functioning smoothly, cooperating with contemporary ways of doing things. What philosopher has ever cooperated? Philosophy is rebellion, war with authority in every form; it is a *way of life*, not ‘tidy thinking’ or scholarship or a specialty. Spartacus was a philosopher; Daniel Dennett is not.

The verbose perverseness that passes for philosophy now signifies a perversion of the human spirit, a discursifying of it, a domesticating institutionalizing of it, perversely appropriate to a society that has “repressively desublimated” all that is profound and creative in life. The late-capitalist categorical imperative of culture is to trivialize at all costs and for all profits, to privatize, atomize, marketize, professionalize, impersonalize, and stupidize, all in order to replicate and accumulate, to replicate and accumulate institutions and a New Man, *homo bureaucraticus*. Or, ultimately, *homo economicus*. Certainly philosophy, of all things, cannot flourish in such an environment, nor can anything else that demands to be free and unconstrained by institutional limits. The existentialist cry of the mid-twentieth century—followed by the barbaric yawp of the Sixties’ youth movements, preceded by the anti-capitalist vibrancy of labor movements in their heyday and earlier Romantic culture for the modernity-ambivalent elite and saturnalian revelry for the untamed multitude—has died, or faded from cultural prominence, but its echo cannot die until humankind itself does. The cycle continues, and we’re about to see another of its revolutions...

*

Modernity vs. humanity.— Herbert Gutman's "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815–1919" (1973) reminds us of what a rich world we lost with the standardization and atomization of society. Such diversity and humanness, artisanal craftsmanship and pride, free-wheeling festivals of life outside the factory. Actually, already in the mid-nineteenth century the dehumanization was apparent, according to Mike Walsh in the 1840s: "A 'gloomy, churlish, money-worshipping spirit' had 'swept nearly all the poetry out of the poor man's sphere,' said the editor-politician. 'Ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, public games, all are either prohibited or discountenanced, so that Fourth of July and election sports alone remain.'" Local and national power-structures pressing the masses into dull rectangular shapes. The nascent nation-state suppressing local variety, spontaneity being dangerous to centralized power.

*

Homo ludens vs. homo institutorum.— The psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott said it simply—one of those simple but profound truths worth remembering: "It is creative apperception more than anything that makes the individual feel that life is worth living." Creativity is not uniquely human, but humans are uniquely creative. We have a need to create, and to love, and to inquire—to express ourselves and see ourselves reflected in the world. We have the urge to *play*, an urge innate in our biological nature. "Creative impulses are the stuff of playing. And on the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence." The child plays with his toys and his playmates, exploring his new world in the realm of fantasy, like the poet and the artist. The musician *plays* music, as the athlete plays a sport. In theater, one watches a play. The scientist and the philosopher play with ideas, perhaps in great seriousness but with those elements of fun, creativity, "tension," and voluntary submission to implicit rules that Johan Huizinga invokes in *Homo Ludens* (1938) to

define play. Social life is essentially playful, very clearly so as regards flirting and dating, in which the tension of play takes the form of *sexual* tension. And when things get more intimate the partners engage in sexual *foreplay*—and intercourse itself can be delightfully playful. The ubiquity of games in human societies, from simple hide-and-seek to chess and complex card games, in addition to the thrill of friendly *competition* in indefinitely many forms (athletic, intellectual, artistic, etc.), shows how the agonistic spirit suffuses the human mind. The spirit of play, in short, is the spirit of freedom, “superfluity,” joyful self-expression, and immersive engagement with the world.

At the other end of the spectrum are *modern institutions*. Humans, it turns out, are capable not only of play but also of dull and dead seriousness. We have the capacity to *obey authority*, and to imbibe its individuality-denying, repressively collectivistic norms. We join institutions or are subject to them, to the impersonal rules that dictate how we are to act and think, and without even noticing it we participate in the near-extirpation of our individuality (at least in the institutional context). The self-effacing, amoral, mechanical mentality of the typical bureaucrat is the obvious example, which, as Hannah Arendt observed in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), can lead straight into complicity in monstrous crimes. But more benign manifestations exist. Theodor Adorno already remarked in the 1940s that “even the so-called intellectual professions are being deprived, through their growing resemblance to business, of all joy. Atomization is advancing not only between men, but within each individual, between the spheres of his life.”¹ In leisure time one might still “play” and be creative, though mass-produced culture was sapping even leisurely pursuits of their authentically creative and spontaneous element; but in the context of the “job,” the rote conformism of *seriousness* had crowded out freedom and self-

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1978/1951), 85.

expression. Ultimately corporate capitalism itself, with its hideous architecture of concrete hierarchies to control society and amass profit, was and is responsible for such pernicious tendencies—for the bureaucratic collectivism that requires but a nudge to become fascist totalitarianism, and for the detaching of hapless functionaries from the consequences of their actions so that professionals and bureaucrats and intellectuals can all become little Eichmanns engineering distant horrors, and for the kitschifying of culture that brings totalitarianism into the sphere of play, and for the routinizing and vulgarizing of creativity that empties life of its meaning. The two principles are at opposite poles: *creative play*, and *capitalist-institutional atomization*.

It is the tragedy of modern man that “two souls, alas, dwell within my breast.” We seek self-affirming self-expression—authentic engagement with others—even as we let ourselves be regimented by authority. The path to reclaim play, i.e., our very humanity, is the path to reclaim democracy, human dignity, and social justice: tear down the walls that divide us from ourselves and others. Bring back the “ballad-singing, street dancing, tumbling, [and] public games,” and scandalize the bosses with your flouting of their rules. Resurrect the *public*.

*

On the Holocaust.— Even seventy years later, having learned nothing, Western intellectuals still love to proclaim with the ponderous air of authority that the Holocaust was “thoroughly at odds with the great traditions of Western civilization,” as Richard Rubenstein paraphrases in his book *The Cunning of History: The Holocaust and the American Future* (1975). It was contrary to all our glorious Western values of freedom, truth, beauty, rationality, and other pretty words that intellectuals pretend to admire. Let’s leave aside the fact that “the West” has never had a monopoly on such values: they’re not *Western* values but *human* values, which people from prehistory

onwards have implicitly subscribed to and acted on. More pertinent is the fact that for centuries the West has been more committed to quite different values, such as insatiable greed, plunder and enslavement of foreign peoples, genocide of native populations, vicious exploitation of wage-laborers, murderous hatred of the “Other,” ever-increasing policing of society (in both “soft” and “hard” forms), and atomizing bureaucratic collectivism that dehumanizes everything it touches. None of this has been because Westerners are uniquely evil or have a different human nature from other peoples; it has been because a new kind of society arose, structured around the institutional imperative to accumulate capital at whatever cost to the natural and human worlds. At the same time as horrific tendencies of racism and nationalism gradually developed under the influence of an *inter-nationally* organized imperialistic capitalism, trends of depersonalization, regimentation, authoritarian control and monitoring of populations, and manufacturing authority-friendly popular attitudes through propaganda grew more pronounced. The relatively “personalistic” slavery of the antebellum American South gave way to the impersonal industrial slavery of the South in the 1890s and later.² The violent and tumultuous conquest of society by profit-driven market relations, not *humanizing* but *atomizing* and *instrumentalizing*, spread reifying habits of thought that reduced humans to numbers, calculations, agglomerations, categories, ideologies, foreign objects to be used and discarded. Ever-larger concentrations of capital and industry made possible and necessary ever-larger bureaucracies, with their diabolical Weberian “formal rationality” and “efficiency”—exquisite subordination of every human impulse to the order from on high, the administrative rule, the technique for the smooth functioning of power. Corporate capital and national governments matured

² See Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor Books, 2009).

together, intertwining in their policy formation and administrative machinery, the interests of one often becoming the interests of the other, each requiring for the sake of its power that social dissent be regulated or eradicated and domestic capital continue accumulating. In an over-competitive capitalist world, the obsession of big business with big profits led to nationalistic protectionism, tariff wars, conquest of colonial markets, the “scramble for Africa,” an international arms race that exalted “blood and iron” as supreme values, and ideologies of national and racial grandeur to justify all this imperialism. A brutalization of the human spirit proceeded apace, particularly as savage colonial wars and amoral colonial administration trained bureaucrats in the efficient use of pure violence to attain the ends of power.³ World War I brought imperialist brutality home to Europe, intensifying it exponentially in the process. Afterwards, millions of shattered, defeated, resentful, homeless men roamed the continent, seething with rage against this society that had forgotten them, directing their rage at scapegoats readymade by the ruling class’s ongoing demonization of them: Socialists, Communists, Jews, foreign peoples, effete intellectuals—anything and anyone whose targeting would distract from class structures. Again capitalism plunged into crisis: the Great Depression happened, which raised fears among ruling classes that organized labor or even Communists would attain political power. To prevent this, in a political environment of gridlock and dysfunction, conservatives and big business turned in desperation to the fascist movements that had spread in the 1920s, which they thought they could control. They installed Hitler, and elsewhere in

³ See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958). Nikolai Bukharin, *Imperialism and World Economy* (International Publishers Co., 1929) is a good analysis of the sources and nature of imperialism.

Europe fascist parties made significant headway.⁴ Under Hitler, finally, all the nefarious tendencies of Western civilization that had been building for decades and centuries were unleashed in a *danse macabre* that culminated in the most unfathomable enormity in history, the Holocaust. The racism, the institutional and ideological “categorizing” of people, the enslavement and genocide of the Other, the efficient doing-away-with superfluous people (the Jews were made stateless so that no government had to protect them), the impersonal cost-benefit mode of thinking, and the totalitarian aspects of bureaucracy, states, corporations, capitalism itself, were all perfected—the principle of submission to authority was deified. It should be noted that Nazism and the Holocaust were singularly compatible with corporate capitalism: big business all over the West cooperated with and funded the Nazis (at least until that became politically inexpedient in Allied countries during World War II), who performed a useful service in destroying the German labor movement; and Jewish slave labor was gratefully used by politically connected companies. Nor is there any inherent reason why business should object to genocide, which, in fact, can be profitable for firms lucky enough to get the contracts.⁵ Clear elective affinities

⁴ See, e.g., Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005); Stanley Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); and Daniel Guérin, *Fascism and Big Business* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1939).

⁵ As Rubenstein argues, “both genocide and slave labor proved to be highly profitable enterprises... The business of mass murder was both a highly complex and successful corporate venture,” as it has always been during the imperialistic age from the 1870s to the recent Iraq war. After all, “the same attitude of impersonal rationality is required to run successfully a large corporation, a death camp slave factory and an extermination center. All three are part of the same world.” *The Cunning of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 60, 62. The thoroughly capitalist nature of the Nazi regime is made clear in Ernest Mandel’s *The Meaning of the Second World War* (London: Verso, 1986).

exist between the anti-humanism of capitalism—everything subordinated to the mania for profit, workers ideally being pushed down to a starvation diet for the sake of profits (or, even better, being eliminated entirely through mechanization and automation)—and the anti-humanism of Nazism, which subordinates everything to the mania for power. The superfluity of *humanity* to capitalism was made literally manifest in the superfluity of individuality, personality, and millions of physical beings to state-capitalist totalitarianism—such that the death-factories can perhaps be considered an apt symbol of modernity itself. —In short, far from being a betrayal of Western values, the Holocaust was the *apotheosis* of some of the most deep-seated, albeit implicit, Western values and social structures. Even if it hadn't happened, the catastrophe it signified would have anyway, namely the elimination of human connections in mass society and in the dominant institutions of modern civilization. This plague of multifarious inhumanity has by no means been overcome since World War II; it has only assumed different forms in an age in which explicit racism and virulent nationalism have gone out of style.

*

To see the Holocaust in a grain of sand.— While the industrialized murder of six million people is in a category all its own, one can observe in daily life many of the tendencies that make it possible. The thinking that sees the machinery of death as solely a thing of the past, an incomprehensible anomaly that we have decisively overcome in our more enlightened age, is deeply embedded in us but, as the “enormous condescension of posterity” always is, deeply wrong. One needn't invoke the obvious monstrosities to show how a semi-Holocaustic spirit, a spirit of distanced disregard for all human and natural considerations (including the very survival of the species), still suffuses our society. One needn't, for instance, point to the U.S.'s bureaucratically administered near-annihilation of Vietnam

for the sake of preventing a national liberation movement from starting a “domino effect.” One needn’t mention the U.S.’s provision of arms to Indonesia between the 1970s and 1990s with which to slaughter hundreds of thousands of East Timorese, nor the Reagan administration’s torture of Central America to “shock and awe” the population into acceptance of reactionary governments and domination by U.S. business. One needn’t invoke the Clinton administration’s murder of maybe half a million Iraqi children by means of economic sanctions, nor the second Bush administration’s destruction of Iraq to get control of the country’s oil and benefit politically connected companies like Halliburton, nor, in general, any of the *thousands* of heinous Western political crimes documented in books by Noam Chomsky, Alexander Cockburn, Edward Said, Naomi Klein, Jeremy Scahill, left-wing historians like Gabriel Kolko and Walter LaFeber, and too many other critical voices to list. It’s not even necessary to mention the most recent abominations of drone warfare—murder by video-game—or killing of particular people (including American citizens) by executive fiat, or indefinite detention without trial, or construction of a surveillance state that dwarfs anything even dreamed of by Hitler or Stalin.⁶ All this is in direct continuity with traditions that eventuated in the Holocaust, but to discuss these obscenities is superfluous. It makes it too easy for me to make my case.

No, I see the machinery of death—can’t help seeing it—in the very *words* spoken by low-level bureaucrats, in gestures of contempt by police officers (quite apart from rampant police brutality), in someone’s command to “Get away, this is private property!,” in a corporation’s laying off a thousand workers for the sake of the bottom line, in pop culture’s erasure of individuality, in academia’s enforcement of “politically neutral” scholarly norms, in intellectuals’

⁶ That’s not hyperbole. They couldn’t have fathomed the possibility of collecting billions of records every day of the most insignificant personal interactions.

use of the Holocaust to justify Israeli apartheid (or slander those who criticize it), and in the very *anonymous* structure of capitalist mass society. When an airport security guard callously rifles through someone's luggage or behaves in an intentionally brutish way—indeed, when an airport employee simply commands you, in the *I-will-not-be-contradicted* tone of authority, to step back behind the line because it's not your turn yet—the kernel of moral horror and human degeneration is evident. When an employee says, "I'm sorry, it's the rules; I didn't make them, I just follow them," he has already placed one foot on the path to Nazism. All it takes now is the right circumstances and a succession of nudges for him to become a gas-chamber attendant or an SS officer. For he has forsaken rationality, independence, freedom, sympathy for others, and absolved himself of responsibility and the need to have a conscience. Because of its rarity, few things impress me more than when someone "doing his job" momentarily disregards the rules and makes an exception for you out of his sympathy. "The fee is twenty dollars," he says, "but forget it, I'll waive that." A glimmer of humanity! "Maybe there's hope for the species after all," I then think. But I'm quickly disabused of that delusion when I reflect on the absence of rationality and compassion in social relations themselves, a fact that pressures us all to act in socially irrational and impersonally cruel ways.

Even the most seemingly innocent and ubiquitous actions can have the seed of anti-personal amorality—lack of identification with others, or groupthink and mindless conformism, contempt for people who are "different" or don't follow the common norms—that bears fruit in Nazism and genocide. He who ignores a homeless person on the street has the stain of moral corruption in him, however he rationalizes his behavior. (So much the worse for humanity that we all do that, from time to time.) He who automatically recoils from a working-class black or Hispanic or white man approaching him in the subway with a friendly air, just to talk, must

be profoundly alienated from his fellow human beings, a stranger to them, unconcerned with the majority of them, in fact slightly disgusted by those who show a little independence vis-à-vis conventional styles of dress and behavior. Their fates, their lives and hardships, leave him cold; he simply doesn't care. This is usually true, indeed, even with respect to strangers who belong to one's own social stratum: since they're strangers, what happens to them is not a matter of concern.

"Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent," George Steiner said.⁷ Are you indifferent to the suffering of another person, whether in the neighboring house or on the other side of the world? Then, in a sense, you're an accomplice to it. You let it happen—or you may even indirectly participate in it, say by paying taxes to a militaristic government. After World War II people reproached themselves and were reproached for their silence as the Holocaust was happening, their *having done nothing to make it stop*. Well, why is that question not asked now? The world is in as much agony as ever, and most people are as silent as ever. Nothing has changed. Even now, as in the 1940s, people are being systematically murdered, tortured, enslaved, made superfluous by the *hundreds of millions* (being herded into gargantuan slums where they merely subsist animal-like,⁸ or, in the U.S., being imprisoned *en masse* for having black skin and not having a vital economic role in society). The point isn't only that "all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing"; it is that modern, impersonal evil largely *consists of* people doing seemingly nothing—following rules, showing indifference, ignoring the plea for help. That way lies barbarism.

Of course there are other manifestations of the barbarity. It isn't only because of individual stupidity that millions of Americans deny global warming, detest homosexuals, revile "liberals," and

⁷ George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 150.

⁸ See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2005).

nurse secret race-hatred. It isn't only, or even mainly, an individual's genes that make possible the phenomenon of the latently fascist "authoritarian personality."⁹ There are far more diabolical social forces at work. Such stupid and prejudiced attitudes, which by their nature cannot be based on dispassionate reasoning about facts or impartial openness to experiences, to new people and new ideas—such attitudes well up out of the impersonal, defensive, diffusely resentful, beset-from-all-sides mode of experience that has disfigured so many millions of minds since mass society made the individual superfluous. Without self-validation, one becomes a moral and intellectual homunculus. To some extent we moderns are all *les étrangers*, but evidently some feel more so than others—often from their greater material grievances—and embrace in their alienation emotional notions of belongingness versus otherness, Us versus Them. Contempt and hatred for the outsider, comforting submission to the authority of the insider. The question is, who will get to these alienated masses first, the left or the right? As it turns out, the right has far more resources than the left, since the right is precisely big business, and so the winners in the race are usually the forces that blame all woes on everything except the one thing that matters, class. And so instead of a more productive semi-submission to left-wing authority—(for, after all, there *is* an authoritarianism of the "left," an undemocratic institutional and personality structure, deplorably common among leftist political parties and fringe groups)—what you get is a counterproductive submission to fascist authority. And thus a pullulating of radically illogical thinking,

⁹ Theodor Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950). The spread of contemporary semi-fascist movements and parties has revived interest in this concept, and recent work largely validates Adorno and his colleagues' conclusions. See, for example, William F. Stone, Gerda Lederer, and Richard Christie, eds., *Strength and Weakness: The Authoritarian Personality Today* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993).

which, combined with mass anonymity and impersonality, gets you—the Holocaust. Or, more recently, *enthusiastic marching into global environmental destruction*, the goose-stepping elite leading its goose-stepping followers straight off the cliff.

The market mode of behavior is therefore, humanistically speaking, the twin of the authoritarian, or rather totalitarian, mode of behavior. Corporations, of course, are totalitarian entities (hierarchies that rent employees, suppress dissent, enforce a common ideology, etc.), and capitalism is just fragmented totalitarianism, profit-making machines competing against each other and trying to destroy each other. An unfortunate externality of which is the destruction of life and nature. So, in addition to plowing full steam ahead to end millions of species and hundreds of millions of human lives, companies have now accomplished the grotesquerie of profiting *by means of* this very apocalypse. Capitalism can make money from its own self-immolation! For example, companies are buying water rights and farmland because “drought and food shortages can mean big profit”; the greater frequency of natural disasters means insurers can raise rates; and melting ice in the Arctic exposes oil reserves for BP and Shell to exploit.¹⁰ Just as a brave new world of *species*-holocaust lies ahead, so new frontiers of profit thus tantalize our intrepid corporate world-conquerors. *Vive* capitalism and its commodification of all!

—The point, however, is that the potential for humanity’s self-extinction by means of Weberian formal rationality—methodical calculation, quantitative reasoning, mechanical adoption of the proper means to an end—is implicit not only in the operation of any bureaucracy but also in the simplest market transaction. For each side seeks personal profit of some sort in disregard of “externalities”

¹⁰ Julia Greenberg, “6 Industries That Will Profit From Global Warming,” *Wired*, February 27, 2014; Matthew Campbell and Chris V. Nicholson, “Investors Seek Ways to Profit From Global Warming,” *Business Week*, March 7, 2013.

and non-market values. Someone with an idealist turn of mind could even interpret the modern world, in Hegelian fashion, as a progressive, dialectical unfolding of all the human and anti-human dimensions latent in the logic of the market transaction, revealed as the all-devouring market economy has colonized the world.¹¹ All the modern reduction of people and nature to commodities, and the mass movements of workers' resistance, and the extermination of whole peoples, and the despairing cultural reactions against market-driven alienation, and the subordination of society and politics to the power of money—a left-wing Hegel would say it's all there, in potentiality, in the mere act of selling a product to a customer for a profit. —Cosmic evil can be present in a grain of sand.

*

Collectivism.— Collectivism comes in both noble and evil forms. In the former, the principle of the individual is paramount; in the latter, the principle of the mass. The one means the rule of mutual self-actualization, self-respect, sympathy for others, democracy, human diversity—“an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” to quote Karl Marx. It is, in short, authentic community and sociality, healthy equality, a state of society in which, to quote Hegel, individuals recognize the self in the other and the other in the self, humans as human, rational beings as rational—freedom and dignity personified, one's desire for the other's recognition calling forth one's own powers and potentialities. Perhaps never fully realized on a large scale, this anarchist ideal of free and dignified (though not conflictless) community can at least be approximated—as it is, for example, in many grassroots-democratic activist groups, not to mention families, friendships, and relationships between lovers—and *must* so be in

¹¹ See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

order for the social animal called *homo sapiens* to really belong to himself and be at home in the world.¹²

On the other hand is the all-too-common kind of large-scale collectivism, the reducing-to-the-common-denominator kind. This is often present to some degree—along with the “good” kind of collectivism, existing in tension with it—even when a small group of people, be they friends or acquaintances or strangers, interact socially. One is pressured, almost imperceptibly, to conform to the ideas and norms that emerge from the group’s behavior, the senses of humor, the opinions that command the most assent, the reactions to particular charismatic or uncharismatic people in the group. Even on this innocuous level of everyday sociality, the group spontaneously develops something like a collective consciousness that molds and guides one’s own consciousness along the path of uniformity. All participants must recreate in the common space that has been cleared, drawing from the common touchstones, the tropes, social techniques, group interests—sports, television, movies, popular music. Defying the accepted norms, however slightly, gets one ostracized—frequently by being ignored, an effective method.

Collectivistic coercion takes more pernicious forms, however, in institutions and institutionally determined mass thinking and action. Here is where the real crimes against all that is good in life

¹² See Alexander Berkman’s thoughts on equality in *ABC of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1977/1929), 25: “‘But will not life under anarchy, in economic and social equality, mean general levelling?’ you ask. No, my dear friend, quite the contrary. Because equality does not mean an equal amount but equal *opportunity*... Do not make the mistake of identifying equality in liberty with the forced equality of the convict camp. True anarchist equality implies freedom, not quantity... Individual needs and tastes differ, as appetites differ. It is equal opportunity to satisfy them that constitutes true equality. Far from levelling, such equality opens the door for the greatest possible variety of activity and development. For human character is diverse, and only the repression of this free diversity results in levelling, in uniformity and sameness.”

take place. Examples have already been given; let us only quote a few thoughts from the anarchist Alexander Berkman, who fathomed the depths of modernity's extreme collectivism:

Our lives and habits, our behavior and manners, even our thoughts and feelings are pressed into a uniform mould and fashioned into sameness. The spirit of authority, law, written and unwritten, tradition and custom force us into a common groove and make a man a will-less automaton without independence or individuality... The authority of the past and present dictates not only our behavior but dominates our very minds and souls, and is continually at work to stifle every symptom of nonconformity, of independent attitude and unorthodox opinion. The whole weight of social condemnation comes down upon the head of the man or woman who dares defy conventional codes... In science and art, in literature, poetry, and in painting this spirit compels adaptation and adjustment, resulting in imitation of the established and approved, in uniformity and sameness, in stereotyped expression.¹³

While tendencies of repressive collectivism exist in all social life, outside institutional contexts they are not truly *repressive*, per se. It is only with stultifying institutional authority, market relations, policing and soldiering, and the professionalizing of the mind that one gets...the mass holocaust of individuality. Personally, having spent much time in academia, I am most familiar with intellectuals' collectivism, and so will focus on it here.

I must confess to an emotional *disgust* with the "stereotyped expression," the cowardly uniformity of the intellectual world in all its crannies, from the mainstream media to the cobwebbed corners of academe. It's hard for me to be objective about something with

¹³ Ibid., 26.

which I am so intimately familiar. It's gotten to the point that the very idea of being published in a scholarly journal or by a traditional publisher makes me uncomfortable, because it associates me with the Machine. To submit to being "polished" like a pretty pebble in the tumbler of bureaucratic culture seems to me a violation. The benefit to it, of course, is that it's the only way to be taken seriously by intellectuals—although if you dissent too much from favored dogmas or methods, even having the imprimatur of a respected institution or publisher won't be enough to get you taken seriously. In the end, though, is it not undignified to *want* to be noticed by most of these people, or by the institutions they personify?

The basic point is simple and obvious: institutions select for obedience and conformity, such that if you act independently you will almost certainly be kicked out or ostracized. If you're slavish, you will meet with greater success. The essence of any large institution is thus collectivism, submersion in the mass and subordination to impersonal rules. Contemporary conservatives who decry "socialist collectivism" (amusingly accusing Obama and other such center-right politicians of it) are unaware that the institutions and behavior they adore, namely corporations, market-determined behavior, and acknowledgement of other people only as instantiating the types "employee," "manager," "executive," etc., are the most collectivistic of all. In the truest sense of individualism, it's impossible to imagine a more anti-individualistic structure than the market or its corporate apotheosis, in which people's individuality is (ideally) erased. Because of this erasure, though, these institutions do exemplify a *perverted* individualism, in the same way that bureaucracy and totalitarianism do: all that exist are *atoms*, windowless monads of suppressed humanity.

Being farther from the operations of power, academia is less pathologically fragmented and collectivistic than the market economy or the corporate world. The difference is fairly marginal, though, given that every facet of academic culture embodies

fragmentation and collectivism. Scholarship is intensely specialized, people spending entire careers studying subtopics of a subtopic; the fetish of “expertise” reinforces the notion that all that matters is familiarity with a specialized and conventional scholarly literature; careerist imperatives overwhelm any interest in truth, realistic understanding, or genuine originality (at least in the humanities and social sciences). Economics, for example, is a particularly egregious case, because its main functions are to mystify and to provide ideological idealizations of capitalist behavior. Already in the 1980s, economists were complaining that

Economics has...become so broad and so complicated that, within the fields, one group of specialists barely speaks the same language as the Ph.D.s across the hall. And so much of what is published seems more to proselytize for an ideology than to make sense of the chaotic world... It's no wonder that a single economic development can be interpreted as a godsend or a disaster, depending on the interpreter's frame of reference.¹⁴

Even in more serious disciplines than economics, though, the worship of ideology—i.e., collectivism—over intellectual integrity is so obvious that only the blindly indoctrinated could fail to see it. In history departments, for instance, the “fashionable theory of economic nondeterminism” of politics and society about which Gabriel Kolko complained in the 1960s, and which has reigned since at least the 1950s, now takes postmodern forms of obsession with

¹⁴ Quoted in Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 83. The shallowness of contemporary economics is shown by the fact that virtually no American economist predicted the 2008 financial crisis and economic collapse.

gender, sexuality, and “discourse.”¹⁵ As a result, the incredibly important work of Kolko and a few likeminded New Left historians, like that of other materialist scholars such as the political scientist Thomas Ferguson, is rarely mentioned among academics. Indeed, it is nearly unmentionable, because of its subversive implications and its implicit critique of postmodernist idealism.¹⁶ A radical like Kolko is not “one of us,” he is not mainstream enough, and so is to be ignored. The fact that his work explains the sources of American foreign and domestic policy is irrelevant; what matters is that other academics rarely mention him, so it would be impolitic to do so oneself.

We tend to forget that intellectual artifacts are not simply produced by individuals pursuing their own idiosyncratic interests; they are, in most cases, expressions of institutional priorities and configurations. They are *collective* products, testaments to institutional agendas, power-relations, and the kinds of work that can make it through academic, media, and publishing filters—which of course tend to filter out anything that is challenging to their own power and interests. In forgetting this institutional context and background, we forget that there are overwhelming pressures for only innocuous and conventional work to be rewarded, and for critical voices to be marginalized. The vast majority of people in an elite institution will be successfully indoctrinated with its ethos and agendas, so that the interests of the institution become their own personal interests. As a result, they react with emotional hostility to anyone who doesn’t follow the rules with utmost fidelity—thereby revealing the essential meanness and smugness of collectivism. All may be pleasant and polite on the surface, as long as norms are followed, but scratch this veneer and an abyss of petty hate and

¹⁵ The quotation is from Gabriel Kolko, *The Roots of American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 81.

¹⁶ See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist* (Bradenton, FL: Booklocker, 2013), chapters one and two. I also discuss postmodernism below.

contempt opens up. Whether you're a scholar booted from academia for criticizing Israel or a graduate student who incurs the wrath of professors for not submitting to hyper-specialization, the "herd of independent minds" will brook no dissent.

The rule of collectivism also produces a ubiquitous *stupidity*. I'll have more to say later about the subject of stupidity in America; for now, I'll confine myself to the observation that narrow institutional points of view are not often sensible, self-critical, or grounded in reason and realism. They are dogmatic and stupid, based on myths about the importance and value of the institution in question (and therefore the people who identify with it). So, to the extent that someone identifies with an institution—as most professionals do—he will exhibit traits of dogmatism, stupidity, and self-overestimation. For example, journalists are trained to think that their profession, in its present reality, is both "objective" or "neutral" between opposing points of view and inherently adversarial towards power, two ideas that are obviously false (and mutually inconsistent);¹⁷ politicians are generally convinced of the nobility of their motives and their relative innocence regarding social problems or state crimes; most academics believe the self-glorifying myth that ideas and philosophies, rather than institutional dynamics, are what move the world. And all professionals are basically ignorant of the functions they really serve in the political economy, their complicity in the evils of the world, and the by-no-means-flattering reasons they have been able to rise in their professions (namely because of their obedience and submissiveness). They often even deny such truisms as that society has a ruling class and that the wealthy have wildly disproportionate control over politics, the media, and mainstream ideologies. In other words, naïve self-deceptions are ubi-

¹⁷ The writings of Noam Chomsky and Glenn Greenwald substantiate this point. Also see Matt Taibbi, "Hey MSM: All Journalism is Advocacy Journalism," *Rolling Stone*, June 27, 2013.

quitous among the institutional automatons who constitute the “elite.”

In addition to an underlying meanness, smugness, and stupidity, intellectual collectivism breeds a remarkable pretentiousness. Whether it’s a philosopher poring over a sentence by Nietzsche, a literary or film critic writing a turgid essay on some little facet of a poem or a movie, a poet laboring for hours and days to come up with the most dense and paradoxical imagery possible, or a postmodernist disguising a trivial idea in jargonistic, pleonastic prose, intellectuals excel in pretense. Academic conferences can be unbearably pretentious, full of people taking themselves seriously to a comical degree—priding themselves on their vocabulary, their articulate-ness, their specialized knowledge—subject to the delusion, apparently, that what they’re talking about has some sort of significance (which it rarely does).¹⁸ The endless “calls for papers!” to submit to yet another conference remind one of how insular and therefore feckless the intellectual world is. But because academia takes itself very seriously, it encourages self-serious behavior in the people who submit to it. “Pretentiousness,” in fact, often just means “institutionally sanctioned behavior.” Since institutions are artificial and anti-human, the behavior appropriate to them strikes us as artificial, even ludicrous (or, sometimes, downright evil, as in the case of the corporate sector).

Incidentally, it isn’t only academics. Far from it. One turns on the television, flips to CNN, and sees Serious People discussing issues of high moment, such as whether Edward Snowden is a traitor or a hero, or what to think of the president’s latest rhetorical performance. “Panels” provide “expert” “commentary” on “both sides” of an issue. It is all intensely serious and important, and one is overawed by the intellectual fireworks on display.

¹⁸ The one question that doesn’t exist in their otherwise amply stocked arsenal of interrogatives is the most important one: “*Why does this matter?*”

The ubiquity of such pretentiousness in elite culture serves an important function: it signifies that *authority is being taken seriously*. That's generally what elite pretentiousness is, just a taking-seriously of authority, a refusal to acknowledge how absurd and risible are the performative dimensions of authority. The rules about what can be said and what can't be said, and how to say what can be said, protect the supposed legitimacy of authority, which is to say authoritarian collectivism (for that's what authority means: a collective submission to power). If you're forbidden from "questioning the motives" of your fellow politicians, or from asking a scholar "*Who cares?*" about the (usually uninteresting) thesis of some little article he has published, or, in general, from saying "Come on, let's be *real* and admit what we all know but are pretending to deny!," then institutions can function smoothly and authority can operate without a hitch. That's the categorical imperative that explains much of what is ludicrous and awful about the world.

For all these reasons, I take a different perspective from most people regarding who it is I respect and who I don't. I'm inclined to respect someone who's lower on the totem-pole, because he still may have an independent mind (and also is typically not such an asshole as his superiors are); the successful and admired, on the other hand, I usually consider rather contemptible. *Ceteris paribus*, someone who's a "top scholar" has already lost most of my respect (unless he or she proves me wrong). Few things are sadder than an institutionalized mind.

Certainly there are overwhelming pressures to submit; but one should at least try not to *mentally* submit too. A little nonconformism is a good thing.

*

Social Luddism, a necessity.— No one has ever said it better than Mario Savio in 1964, in the context of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. Just as we have a duty to remember and reflect on every

great horror of history, so, in a different sense, do we have a duty to remember and reflect on words like these, spoken in a moment of high disgust with the bourgeois world: *"There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop! And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!"* This is the immortal message of anarchism—man's primordial and instinctual cry for freedom. And it is the passion that has birthed a better world from time immemorial, and will continue to do so until the human species is extinguished. *Authority vs. freedom and rationality: that is the underlying "dialectic" of history.*

*

I dance, therefore I am.— A piece that's good for restoring the love of living after you've been corrupted by contact with authority is Beethoven's King Stephen Overture. It's joy in fun and fun in joy. Enjoy! :-)

*

The secular divine.— My God: Beethoven's Choral Fantasy. I discovered that piece earlier this year [2010]. I thought it was a little strange at first, unstructured and meandering, but...you know, it's quintessential Beethoven, the affirmation of everything in spite of everything, the redemption of the universe. I often get tears in my eyes when watching great music performed by...*people*, people who have devoted their lives to art and you can see it when they're singing, the hours and years of practice and passion as they belt out their notes, their devotion to music. That beautiful soprano with the blond hair coiffed perfectly and the makeup and earrings on—the most beautiful thing about her is that she's a woman, just a normal

person who wants to look pretty like all women and has a family and sees her friends every day and has to do maintenance on her house every year—and yet here she is standing between an orchestra and a chorus, belting out Beethoven, *singing*—humans can *sing!* (how superfluous!)—singing about how “graceful, charming and sweet is the sound of life’s harmonies!” The three men and the three women singing about God’s grace being bestowed on humanity when love and strength are united, and peace and joy advancing in perfect concord, and then the chorus trumpeting that we must “accept the gifts of high art!,” and the orchestra and piano and the conductor swinging his arms wildly singing along with the chorus (you can only see his lips moving but you know he’s shouting as loud as the singers)—can you picture these men and women sitting and standing beside each other in front of a rapt audience, not fighting or arguing or talking of money or politics or responsibilities but *singing about art*? It’s a miracle, the only real miracle in life.

A community, timeless and universal because they’re performing music scribbled two hundred years ago by a deaf man who lived alone in his cluttered and filthy apartment—scratched-in ideas transported from one man’s head to a concert hall where worshipers pay homage to the thing most worth paying homage to, art. It’ll all be over soon (two hours), but its very transience enhances its beauty.

*

The clean air of the Baroque.— Notwithstanding the uniquely life-affirming character of Beethoven’s music, Bach has pieces that are more invigorating than anything except, perhaps, standing atop some Himalayan peak a breath away from the heavens. (The difference is that the air of Bach, unlike that of the Himalayas, has a superabundance of oxygen.) —To momentarily escape from the polluted atmosphere of modern culture into the “luminiferous ether” of the Baroque and Classical periods, which transmits light

straight into one's *money-stained* soul—Bach's translucent Partita No. 5 for keyboard, Handel's limpid Water Music, Vivaldi's sun-drenched Four Seasons—restores youth and life. It's actually possible to *breathe* in this air of freedom from commodification!

*

Antitheses.— For the last couple of hours I watched videos on YouTube of William Buckley, Norman Mailer, Martin Amis, Christopher Hitchens and such characters. It was almost an unreal experience. These people and evidently their circles were/are not ordinary, in the worst possible way. I was watching degenerates, narcissists, poseurs, boors, and bores. No doubt brilliant in their own diseased way. But I couldn't help thinking I was in the electronic presence of personified decadence. Hitchens of course was the embodiment of sleaze, his whole being *icky, greasy, slimy*. Those are the adjectives that come immediately to mind when I look at him. The perfect emblem of this group of people, this whole literary cocktail-party subculture, would be a picture of Hitchens' face in the midst of an attempted smile. A grotesque, false image. Pop culture meets pretentious intellectualism meets Roman homosexual orgies.

—The essence is simple: with those people, as with most pop culture, I can feel myself being lowered—to the particular. With Chomsky, as with good classical music, I can feel myself being elevated—to the universal. It's pollution vs. cleanliness. Shiny pollution vs. radiant cleanliness.

*

From the Greeks to the Enlightenment.— The best way to think about the human task of living is that it should be, as Nietzsche said, a continual journey of self-overcoming. The project should be that embodied in the great religions' concepts of salvation or nirvana: *to overcome particularity*, to wash out the blemishes of self-fixated particularity. That is, to fuse the particular, i.e. oneself, with the univ-

ersal, by remaking oneself in its light. We are born spotted, tainted with the “sin” of self-immersion, base impulses, and ignorance; our task is to become (relatively) spotless, elevated above ordinary determinations so that in freedom we master ourselves. The imperative, in short—the *categorical* imperative—is to be *clean*, and, on the whole, whatever doesn’t make you feel clean should usually be rejected as ignoble and corrupting. We all have capacities for high and low things, for things that a universal humanity would appreciate and things it would despise. Our calling is to cultivate the former capacities and let the others atrophy. —On one side is stupidity, ignorance, slavishness, unreasoned emotion, unconcern for others, greed, smugness, hedonism, and brute bodily pleasures, all things that entrap within the *determined self*, the unfree and “unclean” self ruled by animal impulses. On the other side is intelligence, knowledge, courage, reason, compassion, generosity, a deep humility, and “spiritual pleasures,” things that liberate from the self’s primal immediacy and so make free and dignified. Insofar as these latter qualities are grounded in internalization of “the other’s” perspective—broadening of experience and the desire to impress other people—which is a uniquely human capacity that makes possible our very self-consciousness, they are, in a sense, the *fulfillment of human potential*, of the universality implicit in self-consciousness. The former qualities, by contrast, are merely human manifestations of the lowest animal conditions and instincts. Stupidity, for example, is utterly immersed in itself; intelligence incorporates others.

While it may sound odd, therefore, the idea of cleanliness—moral, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, etc.—is a useful “regulative principle” for human thought and action (to speak in Kantian language). It is evocative; it is imprecise but elevating, and recalls that other ennobling idea, the concept of universality. It shouldn’t be confused with *purity*, which is extreme, potentially fanatical and anti-humanistic; cleanliness is more moderate—merely moral, beau-

tiful, rational, humane, elevated above petty resentment and neurotic fixations. One can also use the idea of cleanliness as a test to determine what is “decadent”: if some cultural artifact doesn’t seem *healthy*, a sign and product of good health, vigor, or lofty universality, one might well call it decadent—that is, a symptom of sickness, neurasthenic self-consciousness, polluted and anti-human life, pathological social atomization, or psychological and cultural exhaustion. Most twentieth-century avant-garde art is decidedly decadent (which doesn’t mean it’s worthless). Even late-nineteenth-century composers, such as Brahms and Wagner, can be very decadent, unlike Mozart and Haydn. The social context of the former was, so to speak, dirty and sick (hypochondriacal, navel-gazing)—as you can sometimes hear in its music—that of the latter relatively clean and vital, naïvely confident.

The ideals of cleanliness and universality overlap with, but are superior to, Nietzsche’s ideals of strength, enthusiasm, “overflowing vitality,” instinct, *virtù* in the Renaissance sense. There is some intuitive plausibility to Nietzsche’s judging the worth of things by determining where to place them on the spectrum from shriveled weakness to brimming-over strength. This standard of value is reminiscent of past “aesthetic moralities” that center not on the antithesis *right/wrong* or *good/evil* but on *noble/base*: Aristotle’s ethic of virtue is an example, as is, perhaps, Goethe’s (unoriginal) conception of the “genius” whose demonic vitality is such that he isn’t bound by ordinary standards of right and wrong.¹⁹ One problem with such an emphasis on “strength,” of course, is that it subordinates the claims of altruism to those of egoism. The weak but

¹⁹ Goethe’s example is Napoleon. In Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov is initially seduced by this ethic, until through suffering he rises to the higher Christian morality. It’s worth noting, by the way, that the Nietzschean and Goethean standards of value were already recognized, and rejected, by Plato, whose character Callicles espoused them in *The Gorgias*.

good man is considered lower than the strong but amoral man. Another problem is the vagueness of words like “strong” and “weak”: their meanings are elusive, tending to evaporate the more closely you examine them. Moreover, insofar as the terms are meaningful at all, someone can be psychologically strong and weak in different respects—indeed, *everyone* is both strong and weak (whatever that means). A third problem, perhaps most damning, is that the Nietzschean—or Calliclean—value-system is the parochial ethic of the master class, which has the requisite leisure and privilege to care about individualistic values of “*virtù*” and whatnot. To people preoccupied with the tasks of survival, all this master-moralizing seems *juvenile*, parasitic, self-indulgent, a mere luxury. It’s unreal. What makes more sense is to try to be morally and intellectually clean—compassionate, cooperative, communally oriented, not self-fixated but attuned to the health of the collective, which is also the health of the self. One attains a kind of universality—and “strength”—simply by working together with others, molding and being molded by them, internalizing their perspectives, thus achieving intelligence, knowledge, courage, reason, and the other noble values that thinkers from Plato to Nietzsche have upheld (in different ways and for different reasons). The egoistic ideal of strength or “health” is therefore best achieved precisely through altruism, which can also be a symptom of it.²⁰

*

In defense of Socrates.— Nietzsche ridiculed the Socratic equation “*reason = virtue = happiness*,” calling it “weird” and decadent, but in fact one can consider Nietzsche’s ridicule itself to be weird and decadent. It is of a piece with his inability to see the value of the altruistic Christian morality, the psychological profundity of which should be obvious. Happiness is based on high self-esteem, which requires that you see your implicit self-love confirmed in the world,

²⁰ See Max Scheler’s discussion of St. Francis in *Ressentiment* (1912).

reflected in people's behavior towards you, validated by yourself and others. Ordinarily, acting virtuously will get you not only self-respect but also the respect and affection of others—which will itself increase your self-respect, and so your happiness. In those cases in which doing the right thing gets you ostracized or punished, you will still at least have the happiness of knowing your own value, and your superiority to the contemptible herd. Conversely, it is well known that dissolute living or obsessive chasing after fame and money does not equal stable happiness, because it does not entail a secure sense of self. So, inasmuch as it is reasonable to do what makes you happy, it is reasonable to do what is right and virtuous. Moreover, the pleasures of reason—science, philosophy, inquiry and creativity—can be definitely happiness-inducing, even if at times an obsessive engagement with philosophy or science can be tormenting. Doubtless there is *some* truth to the cliché that ignorance is bliss; for example, ignorantly believing in God—the idea of which reason rejects—can make people happy, and understanding the “meaninglessness” of human existence isn't necessarily a happy experience. It can drive to despair. In fact, however, it is never just *a thought* (like the thought of God's nonexistence) that makes someone unhappy; it is a thought conceived in certain circumstances, for example conditions of social alienation or loneliness or lack of interest in life. It isn't *reason* or *knowledge* that makes unhappy, as so many poets and others have thought; it is *a particular set of experiences*, which cause you to latch onto some given thought and obsess over it, imagining that *it* is the source of your unhappiness. In a healthy social environment, it's perfectly possible not to be disturbed by some truth that a person in a different social context might find disturbing. —In any case, it's a risky strategy to pin your happiness on a lie, like the lie that God exists, because doubt is apt to seep in and upset your carefully arranged house of illusions.

In short, the Socratic equation is not only morally uplifting but psychologically valid, all things considered. One can object to it on

the grounds that it optimistically oversimplifies, given that virtuous people are not necessarily happy—and vice versa—and “rational” people are not necessarily virtuous or happy, etc.²¹ But on the level of ideal-types—and/or in a sanely organized society—there does seem to be an elective affinity between the three concepts of reason, morality, and happiness. Enlightenment thinkers thought so. And the Enlightenment is not easily called a “decadent” movement; it was too naïve, confident, optimistic, and vigorous for that. What *is* decadent, perhaps, is a late-nineteenth-century rejection of something as universal and “clean” as the Socratic and Enlightenment association of reason, morality, and happiness—for such a (Nietzschean) rejection proceeds from a faux sophistication, a disgust with optimism, a fondness for perverse formulations, a late-romantic or *fin-de-siècle* fascination with the irrational and the repressed. —One should strive to be rational and moral, and relative happiness may well ensue.

*

Thoughts on morality.— The “moral sphere” has extended in recent centuries, so that now such things as slavery, colonialism, racial segregation, and discriminatory treatment of women are considered wrong. But we still have a ways to go. There are the obvious left-wing concerns: horrific treatment of animals and the environment, brutalization of homeless people, demonization of immigrants, tolerance of degrading wage-labor, etc. But aside from these issues are ones that almost nobody talks about, which can be summed up in the observation that people are frequently *not nice* to each other. Being unkind ought to be considered *immoral*, not just unpleasant. Unkindness is ubiquitous, and in a sense it’s inhuman. Indeed, any

²¹ One can also object that, contrary to Kant’s philosophy, morality cannot be grounded in pure reason alone, and so in this sense morality ≠ reason. I think that this Humean and Nietzschean objection is correct, but to defend it would require a technical discussion inappropriate here.

act that demonstrates an absence of empathy should be thought of as immoral. For what is morality if not respect and consideration for others?

Broadly speaking, then—but also strictly speaking—it’s immoral, say, to ignore someone (*ceteris paribus*), whether a homeless person on the street or someone who’s talking to you at a party or a friend who sends you an email. That is, doing so has negative implications regarding your worth as a human being. If you want to be a good person, you should always act on the basis of empathy and respect. That isn’t always possible, of course, which just means that it’s impossible to be an absolutely good person, or to always fulfill moral imperatives.

In fact, imperatives can conflict. Respecting human life is a duty, but one may also have a duty to kill a mass murderer if that’s the only way to prevent him from killing again. Or one may, in some extreme scenario, have a duty to lie to someone, even though lying is immoral because it shows a lack of respect and so forth. Moral values can also conflict with non-moral values—and it isn’t always right to follow the moral value in this case. For instance, it may hurt a person’s feelings to criticize an irrational belief he holds, but one’s commitment to truth and reason may justify so criticizing his belief. (It’s debatable whether commitment to truth is “moral” *per se*, but insofar as it doesn’t impinge on one’s treatment of others, a case can be made that it’s a non-moral value.) All this goes to show that no one, except maybe a very young child, is “innocent,” everyone is tainted, indeed in most moments we’re acting contrary to morality in some way or other (e.g., by not roaming the streets looking for suffering people to help). Still, the broader one thinks of the moral sphere as being, and the more one acts on that belief, the more one can pride oneself on being a “basically good” person.

*

Reason = virtue = dignity.— One of the glories of being human is that we're the only creature that can intentionally *rise above* impulses that nature has implanted in us. What a miracle! Our self-consciousness and intelligence make it possible to reflect on some deep aspect of ourselves and say, "No, I reject that," and act contrary to it. For example, it seems to be a natural impulse, or at least a natural *tendency*, for us to treat unattractive or uncharismatic or obese or short people differently from their opposites, to show them less appreciation or affection (other things being equal). This seems to be true in every society, and so must be grounded in nature, in natural responses to the world. Nature, in fact, has given us a myriad of immoral, "illiberal" impulses. But it has also given us the ability to internalize others' viewpoints, thus giving us empathy and allowing us to invent the concept of morality. And so we can say, "No, it's wrong to treat people differently on the basis of qualities that are *not part of the moral sphere*, such as height or skin color or attractiveness," and adjust our behavior accordingly, to some extent defying nature. Indeed, such moral defiance of nature is a major manifestation of humans' unique *freedom*; and so, as classical thinkers have said or implied (Plato, the Stoics, Kant, Hegel, Goethe), we are in a sense acting more freely—less "instinctively"—when we choose to act morally and rationally rather than hedonistically or in other ways determined by primitive impulses. Not only is moral behavior *right*; it's *dignified*.

*

"Morally neutral" humanism?— The old question of the humanities' relation to humanity continues to bedevil, bewilder, and bemuse. Intellectuals like Stanley Fish perform mental acrobatics to justify their life-pursuits.²² Do art and the humanities tend to ennoble? Does immersion in them make moral, elevated, broad-minded, and

²² See Fish's articles "Will the Humanities Save Us?" and "The Uses of the Humanities, Part Two," *New York Times*, January 6 and 13, 2008.

humanly empathetic? Does it give one a greater appreciation of “life’s meaning,” or greater understanding of other minds and cultures, or greater capacities for public-spirited and informed citizenship? Does it give one the mental habits and resources with which to live well and resist modern dehumanization? What, in the end, is the humanities’ value at all?

That creating and studying humanistic works need not make humane is shown by the caliber of so many people who create and study these works. “Humanistic” intellectuals are perfectly capable not only of being cultural decadents, contemptible narcissists, and personally immoral obscenities (pedophiles, sadists, abusers of women, whatever you want), but also of being enthusiastic fascists, Nazis, and semi-Eichmannian bureaucrats. The scholarship of Zeev Sternhell, for example, shows how the ideological seeds of fascism germinated in the fecund soil of alienated turn-of-the-century European intellectual culture.²³ George Steiner’s thoughts are worth quoting at length:

The simple yet appalling fact is that we have very little solid evidence that literary studies do very much to enrich or stabilize moral perception, that they *humanize*. We have little proof that a tradition of literary studies in fact makes a man more humane. What is worse—a certain body of evidence points the other way. When barbarism came to twentieth-century Europe, the arts faculties offered very little moral resistance, and this is not a trivial or local accident. In a disturbing number of cases the literary imagination gave servile or ecstatic welcome to political bestiality. That bestiality was at times enforced and refined by individuals educated in the culture of traditional humanism. Knowledge of Goethe, a delight in the poetry of Rilke, seemed no bar to

²³ Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

personal and institutionalized sadism... It is at least conceivable [not only that the humanities don't humanize, but that] the focusing of consciousness on a written text, which is the substance of our training and pursuit, diminishes the sharpness and readiness of our actual moral response. Because we are trained to give psychological and moral credence to the imaginary, to the character in a play or a novel, to the condition of spirit we gather from a poem, we may find it more difficult to identify with the real world... The capacity for imaginative reflex, for moral risk in any human being is not limitless; on the contrary, it can be rapidly absorbed by fictions, and thus the cry in the poem may come to seem louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside. The death in the novel may move us more potently than the death in the next room. Thus there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity.²⁴

One can't help thinking of Hannibal Lecter reveling in Bach's Goldberg Variations as he kills and cannibalizes his victims.

It's significant, however, that such juxtapositions seem strikingly incongruous. Great artistic and philosophical works have an intrinsically elevated character, in the sense of embodying and speaking to our higher capacities: reason, spirituality, existential wonder, empathy (thus the genre of tragedy, for example), creativity guided by standards of beauty and human resonance, and the quest for understanding. Whatever the "usefulness" of art and the humanities, their being a manifestation and confirmation of such high values and capacities already justifies them. Humans are perpetually drawn to them, from the cave-paintings of Cro-Magnon man to the poetry of postmodern man. They are the creative facets of the

²⁴ George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 60, 61.

human spirit at play, self-constrained only by rules of logic, proportion, harmony, expressive power, and fidelity to experience. It is a magnificent fact that art and the humanities hold a magnetic attraction for people in all times and of all ages: we're fascinated by them, whether the six-year-old fantasy-conducting a Beethoven symphony or the sixty-year-old writing a commentary on the philosophy of Spinoza. And if the creation and appreciation of such works is, so to speak, justified in itself, so is the study and analysis of them. For that is a humanistic, creative act as well, an expressing of our higher powers, a contribution to the thoughtful assimilating of experience, an oblique contribution to the object of analysis itself (to its meaning for others). This whole humanistic and artistic sphere of life—together with the academic study of it—does not need a justification outside itself; it is justified as long as it moves us, grips us, captures our imagination and is not creatively barren or a parody of itself, as it can be in the hands of mediocrities.

The reason it seems as though art and the humanities *should* have a morally uplifting effect is that they intrinsically affirm humanity. Their pursuit of beauty and truth is a pursuit of what is good and noble, what inspires and serves as an ornament to life, what raises one's vision from crass self-advantage to a more disinterested and universal plane of experience. We are drawn out of ourselves and called to join a community of minds. Indeed, one of the foundations of art is empathy, implicit identification with the feelings and thoughts of others; it is largely this that moves us, whether in a piece of music or a poem or a painting. Thus there is a kind of inherent moral quality to art, or at least good art—even to negative works like Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. But a huge proportion of art and philosophy—surely the best of it—is more positive, moral, and “humanistic” in spirit than absurdist or thoroughly nihilistic, and in such cases the connection between morality and the humanities is especially clear. It strikes us as particularly obscene that admirers of Goethe should have become Nazis.

On the other hand, art also exists in tension with humanity, as the passage quoted from George Steiner shows. While the aesthetic may have moral overtones, it is perfectly possible to sacrifice morality in the creation and appreciation of art. In themselves, the ethical and the aesthetic are two very different things. Kierkegaard, for example, illustrates this with his famous story of Johannes the Seducer, whose aesthetic approach to life disregards morality. A lived philosophy of aestheticism, in fact, can be pure decadence, pure moral and psychological rot; see Thomas Mann's story "Death in Venice," or consider an aesthete like Oscar Wilde (whose life, however, was not without some tragic dignity—unlike that of his lover Lord Alfred Douglas, and most other such refined hedonists). The production of art even has an ironic similarity to capitalist production: humans and nature are objectified and subordinated to a "higher" principle, whether beauty and profundity in art or profit and capital accumulation in capitalism. Some film directors are notorious for treating actors cruelly in the attempt to produce a more compelling work of art, and performance artists sometimes integrate violence into their routines. Doubtless such art is rarely good, consisting of mere provocation; but it is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the aesthetic stance, inasmuch as the ethical-for-its-own-sake is obliterated.

From this perspective, there is nothing inconsistent about artists and most types of humanistic intellectuals (except maybe ethicists) being morally objectionable in some way. Art and the humanities constitute a separate sphere of life, a separate set of values, from ethical treatment of others, even if particular works—the large majority—do embody and proceed from an ethical vision that is properly moral. Indeed, the humanities don't *give values* at all; they *reflect* values, as science does, and can be used in the service of any agenda. They don't in themselves give meaning to life or make us appreciate life's value; they don't necessarily make their partaker wise or compassionate or broad-minded. They have no *necessary* utilitarian justification. All depends on *how* one "takes them up."

The most that can be said is that using art and the humanities in a morally and intellectually elevated way, to improve oneself and the world, is more consistent with their spirit than *not* being improved by them would be. They are most fully realized when one remakes oneself in the light of the values they embody, viz., human connection, exaltation of the imagination, and insatiable hunger for truth. One honors and personifies art and philosophy by treating *oneself* as a work of art and philosophy.

Thus, if you approach art and the humanities with the right attitude, they *can* be all the things stated in the first paragraph above, and that does give them a myriad of utilitarian justifications. A good system of education would approach these works from a humanistic standpoint, not only as valuable in themselves (aesthetically, philosophically, etc.) but as important components of the good life—as means for us to make *ourselves* more valuable. Their study, and the study of good scholarly analyses of them, should make us more thoughtful and empathetic, more informed about the world and better able to act intelligently on that information, more adept at “critical thinking” about people and society, more open to alternative viewpoints, more well-rounded and able to appreciate the “more complexly valuable” experiences we have access to,²⁵ and, yes, more moral and concerned for others. Reading good literature and literary criticism is not only a pleasure in itself but can foster deeper understanding of ourselves and others; reading moral philosophers and their commentators can and should make us more thoughtful about how we act and interpret our actions; listening to and studying great music can invigorate, can sharpen the appetite for life and cultivate acute sensibilities; studying history can teach innumerable lessons about our own society, where it’s headed, and how best to change it. None of this is automatic; it requires good

²⁵ See Barton Swaim, “Book Review: ‘The Value of the Humanities’ by Helen Small,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 14, 2014.

teachers, an educational system that prioritizes humane learning, and an open and interested attitude on the part of students.

Incidentally, these reflections on what the humanities *can* be also provide some criteria for great art, philosophy, historical writing, and critical commentary. The distinction, again, can be conceptualized as between decadence and vitality. The literary criticism of Georg Lukács elaborates on this in detail,²⁶ but to a great extent it is intuitive. What is healthy, and what isn't? What stimulates to action and exalted achievement, and what enervates or disgusts or alienates or seems comically pretentious? (A good deal of avant-garde art falls under the latter category.) What induces a feeling of brotherhood with humanity, and what fills with contempt or existential nausea? What *integrates*, is ambitious and comprehensive, and what fragments, is overly specialized or parochial? What contributes to realistic understanding, rationally and clearly placing things in proper relations to each other, and what mystifies or obfuscates? Despite what formalists and postmodernists and *l'art pour l'art* advocates might think, considerations of morality and "healthiness" and truth—considerations of *content*—cannot be irrelevant to judging the value of a work of art (although of course art should never be subordinated to ideology or moralism).²⁷ While it's true that art and the humanities in a sense constitute their own separate sphere of experience with its own standards, on a deeper level they are integrated into life, society, and personality, and cannot or should not be divorced from their context. The Goethean and Marxian attention to the *whole* is the noblest, truest, healthiest,

²⁶ See, e.g., his *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

²⁷ Even the postmodernist decadent Susan Sontag recognized the value of this Marxian-humanistic perspective late in her life, when she to some extent repudiated the formalist sins of her youth. See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist*, 432, 433.

and most moral—most humanistic—approach to living, to art, and to analysis.

Whether any of this justifies the enormous academic apparatus of the humanities is an open question, which I'm inclined to answer in the negative. Most scholarship and criticism is forgettable, and most teaching is of middling value to the student, who is not served well by the anti-humanistic, pro-status quo priorities of the educational establishment. Nevertheless, when done well, humanistic teaching can open the student's mind to new and more adequate ways of viewing the world, and it can even contribute to such things as democracy, civic engagement, and other populist values our society pretends to uphold. In particular, if their spirit is properly imbibed, the humanities can instill a healthy and moral disgust with capitalism, consumerism, authority, irrational thinking, war, and all things inhumane. At their heart, art and the humanities are essentially moral, the very jewel of human creativity and ethical awareness.

*

Literature in the service of compassion.— I recommend Gogol's story "Diary of a Madman." Comedy and tragedy are united seamlessly: the more comical it becomes, the more tragic. It's reminiscent of *Don Quixote*, except more moving. A civil servant who has been ground into the dirt for decades, treated as a nobody, his sole purpose in life to sharpen His Excellency's quills and copy out documents—becomes infatuated with His Excellency's daughter. He starts having conversations with her dog, to find out more about her. The more debased he is, the more his humanity rebels: he has been so degraded that he comes to believe he is King Ferdinand VIII of Spain, waiting for the deputation that will take him to his new kingdom. Instead it takes him to an insane asylum (which he thinks is Spain)—after he has finally, in his own eyes, regained his dignity by behaving like a king with the clerks at his office. His delusion has

even given him the courage to declare his love to the girl. (Courage required delusion, because of the delusive trappings of society.) But in the asylum they manage to strip him even of his life-saving insanity: he cries out that he is a miserable wretch, that he longs for his mother in his old peasant hut. "Give me a troika with horses swift as the whirlwind! Climb up, driver, and let the bells ring! Soar away, horses, and carry me from this world!" But after this piteous speech, the last sentence of the story is the comical non sequitur, "And did you know that the Dhey of Algiers has a wart right under his nose?" The man is obsessed with little things like that, little flaws in appearance, little gradations in rank, because that's what his society is obsessed with. And that's the tragedy of it. He has been made incapable of seeing his humanity, even as he screams inwardly that he is a man!

You see, appearance is everything. Social status determines all. It takes a change in his self-perceived status for the man to finally put an end (in his own eyes) to his dehumanization. That's the only way people know how to, in this world. There is no such thing as humanizing yourself, because the only way to do so is to play the game of social rank, which is a dehumanizing game. You can't break out of the framework; the charade has become the cast of your mind. So even if you're a king, you're still dehumanized.

And obviously the dog is symbolic.

What a masterful story! Totally free of bathos—totally light-hearted—but infinitely tragic. It forces the reader to rely on his imagination, to imagine the real situation behind the character who writes such silly journal entries. At forty-two years of age he goes insane. Think of all the pain behind that! We're forced to *imagine* the pain, though, which makes it more effective. —Through such means, literature can sharpen our moral sense.

*

The fraudulence of status.— In order to determine someone's intellectual or artistic integrity and acuity, a simple test is available. It has to be supplemented with others, but it's useful. If in any context you can tell that someone is responding to a set of ideas or a work differently from how he otherwise would have on the basis of *who produced it*, you know he lacks integrity as an intellectual or an artist. If it's clear that he dismisses a work or an idea because it wasn't produced by a person with the proper credentials, the proper status or fame or institutional qualifications—or, conversely, if he positively values a work because it *was* produced by such a person—you can write him off as shallow or a fake. I'm talking particularly about people who, as judged by society, are supposed to be the "experts" in some given field, in other words academics, artists, critics—the arbiters of taste and "truth." If they show any snobbery or credentials-worship or groupthink, you know immediately that, to that extent, they're charlatans and frauds.

By this standard, unfortunately, the large majority of intellectuals and artists are, to some degree, frauds. As I said above, they value institutional conventions more than genuine merit. An art critic will extravagantly praise some silly painting with a respected name attached to it and ignore a nearly identical painting by an unknown. So then you know: "Buffoon." An academic philosopher won't care about original ideas he reads in a student's paper but will be terrifically impressed by unoriginal or simplistic ideas he reads in a book by Foucault or some lesser-known colleague. "Buffoon." Since institutions function by virtue of groupthink and snobbery, it's no surprise that most people (at least among the higher-ups) in a given institution are groupthinkers and snobs.

One sees it constantly. It's the very *air one breathes* in any elite institution. To give a random and perhaps subtle example: years ago I attended a literary conference for a few days and took these notes:

FINDING OUR COMPASS

There are public readings every night, usually by the famous writers here. Ravi Shankar, Alexander Chee, Josip Novakovich, Katha Pollitt (annoying liberal feminist). But last night and tonight, readings by students. Much less well-attended, of course, than the celebrities' readings. But they're more enjoyable, more affecting. All these diverse people, many of them shy and worn down by life, all talented, all sharing their private lives with strangers. Brought together by a love of something the culture doesn't love; the only common denominator a love of writing. People not famous, writing on faith. Predictably none of the famous people attends these readings, only a few students. But they're so much more powerful than those other readings! Far more intimate, certainly more transporting because no ego is involved and no books outside waiting to be bought, only mysterious pasts like that woman whose every piece is about her son Simon who died young and those women who read quietly with head bowed low, their writing wonderful. What has brought them here? What pasts? Most of them won't be successful authors because few people have the right luck and connections, but they continue writing anyway on faith.

At the celebrity readings the audience is duly appreciative, basking in the presence of fame, applauding the sometimes idiotic selections on display. (For example, Katha Pollitt read a piece that related her experiences with a small group of Marxist activists; most of it was devoted to glib jokes at their expense, which duly elicited laughter from the audience.) The whole charade, with all the glamor and self-congratulation and two-minute-long introductions of each writer, repulsed me. Such artificiality! Any of the poems and stories written by the students could have been read and would have received the same applause; people would have been clamoring to buy the book, would have wanted autographs—although, actually, those reactions

might have been relatively justified, since some of the students' work was better than the celebrities'.²⁸ Only in the later, sparsely attended student readings could one escape the snobbery and credentials-worship.

Evidently there is something about "high status" that brings out human mediocrity. —For one thing, the *spectacle* of it all, of the cultural world, is supremely *vulgar*. No one is more vulgar than an intellectual trying to get noticed. Just think of the Slavoj Žižek dancing for the cameras, clamoring for attention, costuming themselves (sometimes literally) in whatever garb will provoke a response from the culture industry. Fashionable decadents, clownish self-promoters, actors on the stage of a (now) dying civilization. Such as when a Žižek makes it his mission to offend the delicate sensibilities of his liberal intellectual friends—declaring, for instance, that "the problem with Hitler was that he wasn't violent enough." "What?!" the culture industry duly gasps, playing along by pretending to be aghast. "Well," he gives his prepared response, "Hitler's violence didn't fundamentally challenge the system, and in this sense Gandhi was more violent than Hitler." Ah, good point, great contribution, way to contribute to rational discourse—let's play on the meaning of "violence" and twist it around to provoke our liberal friends and capture the headlines of a bored intellectual world, since the only thing that matters is getting noticed. These people, these insular attention-whores of the elite—and, more generally, all the millions of pseudo-intellectual upper-crusters and middle-crusters who in their parasitic boredom take them seriously, just as they take seriously (or play the game of taking seriously) all and only those who have the stamp of some elite institution's approval on their forehead—as though the whole charade of status, recognition, riches, resumé-padding, curricula vitae, *means* anything!—should be seen not really as autonomous and dignified human beings but more as *institutional byproducts*, waste products of

²⁸ I don't mean my own, which wasn't great; I mean other students'.

the culture-factories. Such a huge industry with such huge profits is bound, after all, to produce a titanic volume of pollution.

What all this phony status-worship amounts to, in short, is *anti-democracy*. We don't live in a democratic world, which is just to say we don't live in a human world, a world based on individuality, morality, clear communication, and rationality. We live, as I've said, in an institutionally structured world—what's worse, a world structured by *capitalist* institutions. Integrity and merit will rarely be rewarded in such a world, and democracy will barely exist.

In a sense, though, these reflections should be a comfort to the millions of people who unjustly suffer from a lack of recognition, whether they're talented artists or dedicated activists. Their lack of recognition, far from proving their lack of worth, can be thought of as an indication of it, since what civilization values is pretense and fraud. And highly "successful" people should ask themselves what their success suggests about them, and whether they too, like so many others, are living an inauthentic existence.²⁹

*

With regard to the elite, another test of intellectual integrity is readily available: simply ask the person in question what he thinks of Noam Chomsky. If he expresses contempt or scorn, you know what to think of him. Assuming he isn't ignorant of Chomsky's work, he has either internalized conventional norms and ideologies, and thus has become blind to facts and moral truisms, or he is a fundamentally dishonest person. (Or both.) Alan Dershowitz is the obvious example.³⁰

The reason I make these seemingly harsh and close-minded judgments is that nearly all Chomsky's political, social, and ethical

²⁹ On the notion of authenticity, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

³⁰ See Howard Friel, *Chomsky and Dershowitz: On Endless War and the End of Civil Liberties* (Olive Branch Press, 2014).

commentary follows from elementary values and truths and is backed up by overwhelming evidence. Most of what he says is, indeed, mere common sense, expressed eloquently. Only a mind that has been subtly or egregiously warped could fail to see the essential social and moral truth in his opinions, or would fail to be impressed by his reasoning and his superhuman factual knowledge. It's no surprise, then, that most "ordinary people" wherever he goes seem to adore him, and that authorities and the elite loathe him. For the latter have achieved their station by internalizing warped norms, while the former, who have not had to be so deeply indoctrinated (because they're more distant from the workings of power), still have common sense and understand moral principles, such as that you should apply to yourself the standards you apply to others. Or that participatory democracy is a positive value. Or that it's good to alleviate others' suffering. These three principles alone, in conjunction with an array of facts, are enough to establish Chomsky's positions.

Intellectuals love to insist that "things are complicated," in part because it's by complicating simple things that they get a paycheck—but also because it absolves them of the responsibility to take a stand against the powerful institutions they serve—and then they dismiss Chomsky because of his supposedly simple-minded statements.³¹ But moral truths are, in fact, not terribly complicated. In any case, it's clear what to think of people who flippantly denounce someone but rarely or never give specific examples to justify the denunciation. (Or, when they do give examples, they actually redound to Chomsky's credit, as in the case of his consistently defending the right to free speech of people who hold

³¹ Obviously society is complex. But if you want to understand it in broad outlines, a few simple premises and hypotheses (such as those exemplified by Chomsky's work) can get you very far. A materialist like Chomsky or Kolko has significantly deeper understanding of the world than the typical postmodern intellectual. (See below.)

obnoxious views. How *deformed* must a mind be not to understand that de-fending the right of a Holocaust-denier like Robert Faurisson to air his views isn't the same thing as defending the views themselves??³² The very notion of *principle* is foreign to the average intellectual—a fact that Chomsky himself documents abundantly.)

*

The upside-down world.— Given the nature of modern society, failure is a point in one's favor. —Our world is like a stagnant pond: the scum floats to the top.³³

*

Anti-intellectual intellectuals.— If intellectual curiosity means the desire to learn new things, encounter new ideas, explore and explain the world, then “intellectuals” have no more of it than other people do. Possibly less. They limit themselves to one field and do their job and earn their paycheck, as a reward for serving the masters by enforcing conventional wisdom and political correctness. In fact, it's much more common to find subtlety and openness of thought, as well as sheer common sense, among the working class, which has been far less indoctrinated and regimented than the middle and upper classes. The British journalist William Cobbett said it in 1820: “Give me leave to say that...these [lower] classes are, to my certain knowledge, at this time, more enlightened than the other classes of the community... They see further into the future than the Parliament and the Ministers. —There is this advantage attending the pursuit of their knowledge: they have no particular interest to answer; and, therefore, their judgement is unclouded by prejudice and selfishness. Besides which, their communication with each other is

³² “The Faurisson affair” of the late 1970s is worth reading about if you want an example of cleanliness fighting an uphill battle against pollution.

³³ As the historian Albert Prago said, in an amoral society, the amoral man is best qualified to succeed.

perfectly free. The thoughts of one man produce other thoughts in another man. Notions are canvassed without the restraint imposed upon suspicion, by false pride, or false delicacy. And hence the truth is speedily arrived at." Talk to someone from the working class about politics and, unless he's a white man who has been corrupted by Limbaughite fascism, you'll see he understands elementary Marxian truths—that the rich run the country, politicians are virtually bought by the corporate sector, American "democracy" is a sham, the whole game is rigged against the majority of the population—that most academics can't even comprehend, much less believe. The more education, the less rational.³⁴

*

Popular sanity. — No reasonable person would deny that pop culture is a vulgar, artificial, debased and debasing thing. Does this mean that "the people"—who tend to enjoy pop culture—are vulgar and debased? Not necessarily. For one thing, we should distinguish between *popular* culture and *pop* culture, "the corporate-sponsored mass culture that is so often mistaken for [the former]," to quote T. J. Jackson Lears. Genuine popular culture is the kind of thing there was among the farmers in the 1890s' Populist movement, among New England's Italian anarchists in the early twentieth century, and

³⁴ To give a minor example: upon my arguing once that big business has near-total control over U.S. policy, a highly respected liberal historian said there was an obvious problem with this opinion, namely: if the rich are so clearly in charge, why doesn't everyone know this fact and rebel against it? To which I replied that most people (not academics) *do* know it—just look at public-opinion polls—but that it isn't exactly easy to rise up collectively and overthrow a society's central institutions. His blindness to these profoundly obvious truths is symptomatic, and very different from non-academics' relative clear-headedness. See Nicholas Abercrombie et al., *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984).

among the working-class communities of the nineteenth century.³⁵ Neighborhood theaters, festivals, picnics, ethnic churches, benefit societies, cooperatives, democratic labor unions, Communist-associated ethnic workers' clubs in the 1930s—every conceivable form of *mutuality*. Popular culture is bottom-up, not top-down, and so *brings together*. Mass culture, by contrast, is founded on the co-optation and mutilation of a few popular impulses into means of making profit, tools of business. Whatever is good and authentic in the original becomes bad and commercial in the copy. In music: classical, jazz, blues, bluegrass, folk, rap—all can be puerilized, vulgarized, atomized, *lucrified*. Same with literature, theater, the plastic arts, religion, dance, and sex. It can all cease to be a means of authentic expression, a sublime sublimation of individuality, as it becomes impersonal—impersonally replicated on the assembly-line of capitalist culture.

It's the same, incidentally, with social movements. Truly popular movements are anti-authoritarian, even anarchistic, emancipatory; the Ku Klux Klans, the fascism, the McCarthyism, the social conservatism are not populist but pseudo-populist, business-engendered and -supported.³⁶ Strains of authentic popular discontent are manipulated, attenuated, and directed to new repressive ends as the elite sees in them an opportunity.

People value art, self-expression, and emancipation. In a society that doesn't reward those things—or actively suppresses them—many people will embrace their ubiquitous substitutes and even cling to them desperately to escape, if momentarily, a life of hassled boredom. When one is surrounded by fun and “sexy” distractions, sees everyone else indulging in them, and is relentlessly pressured

³⁵ See, e.g., Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), and Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

³⁶ See Jesse Lemisch, *On Active Service in War and Peace* (New Hogtown Press, 1975).

to do the same oneself, it requires a willful and rebellious nature to turn away from them and into the past or an alternative present. One may, therefore, end up with low cultural tastes—or, politically, sympathize with a pseudo-populist “movement” like the Tea Party—but the deep-seated human affinity for high art and high values can never be wholly eradicated. Even a world formed and defined by anti-human social structures cannot destroy the instinct for beauty and high creativity, which is wont to show itself in small and unexpected ways.

We’re reminded of all this by the socialist Oscar Ameringer’s autobiography, *If You Don’t Weaken* (1940). In it he describes proselytizing for socialism in the 1890s, in isolated communities in Oklahoma, where he got a good reception. The “white trash” took a liking to him and his message.

“White trash!” [he writes]. There is good stuff in those people. If many of them now are below par it is not their nature that made them so, but the greed and stupidity of their so-called betters...

Dinner over, and dishes washed, the two o’clock meeting started under the big tent with singing and instrumental music. Singing was led by our choir, recruited on the ground. The instrumental music was supplied by myself and three sons, and we played only the best, so far as the best can be played by a brass quartet augmented by piano. Before our instrumental concert, I usually gave a short lecture on classical music, which I defined as Bill Nye had defined Wagner’s music: “it is a helluva lot better than it sounds.” I also explained how to acquire the appreciation of good music by simply listening to it with all your mind and heart. Believe it or not, we played arrangements of Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert quartets, chorals of Bach, songs of Mendelssohn...and of course gems from Stephen Foster,

America's own sweet singer. They loved it. Those simple people took to good music like ducks to water. Their minds were not yet corrupted by the Tin Pan Alley trash that later was a music for profit. Besides, "classical music" is folk music clarified, interpreted and ennobled by the great masters, and these were folk people.³⁷

What we need are social structures that bring out the best in us, not the basest.

*

Lessons from history.— The elite has the money, but the workers have the dignity. The elite consumes; the workers produce. Future ages always forget the past elite or view its decadence with horrified contempt; the lower classes go on to found new societies and are vindicated. The masters die off, Hegel said, being collectively a parasitic excrescence, while the slaves birth new worlds. Think of the old American South: the slaves went on to form cultures of Christian love and soulful living—the Negro spiritual, gospel, ragtime, blues, jazz, arts of sublimated emancipation—while the slave-masters' culture, based on idle leisure and violent exploitation of a productive people, withered away. Think of the French *ancien régime*: the aristocracy was good only for patronizing its artistic servants (Mozart and others), while the *sans-culottes* made revolutions that began the modern era. Think of ancient Rome: the grand empire collapsed under the weight of its own rot, as the despised barbarians triumphed and a more democratic Europe rose. Thus will our modern global empire collapse, our modern aristocracy succumb to its own decadence, and our *sans-culottes* lead the way to a new world.

³⁷ Oscar Ameringer, *If You Don't Weaken* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1940), 265, 266.

*

Revolutionary betrayal.— Here’s a (somewhat oversimplified) one-sentence summary of the origins, trajectory, and outcome of the American Revolution: it “ended in reaction as the Founding Fathers used race, nation, and citizenship to discipline, divide, and exclude the very sailors and slaves who had initiated and propelled the revolutionary movement.”³⁸ In general, *mutatis mutandis*, that’s how revolutions go. *Class struggle* is the original and essential meaning for most of the population, but the leadership that takes over uses ideology to justify setting up a new hierarchy, a new authoritarian structure. One elite takes the place of another—and so the vicious cycle of history continues. In the case of the American experience, the Progressive historian Carl Becker pithily observed that the Revolution wasn’t only about home rule but also about who would rule at home. For example, during the revolutionary turmoil of the 1770s farmers and urban tradesmen in several colonies forced the ruling elite to pass radically democratic laws and constitutions meant to protect debtors and the economic independence of all “commoners.” The Pennsylvania constitution of 1776 actually abolished property restrictions on voting, created a unicameral legislature with members elected for one year, created a judiciary appointed by the legislature for seven-year terms but removable at any time, and eliminated the post of a governor who could veto laws, installing in his place a twelve-member Supreme Executive Council that would administer the government. The Thermidorian reaction to all this “irresponsible” democratizing occurred in the 1780s, when bondholders and other anti-debtor, anti-farmer groups forced governments to roll back many of the rights previously won

³⁸ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (London: Verso, 2000), 328.

by the people, in the name of “fiscal responsibility.”³⁹ Our now-revered federal Constitution, far from being “revolutionary,” was but the culmination of Thermidor. Throughout these years “ordinary farmers agitated for a more accountable, localist, and responsive government because they accurately perceived the class agenda behind the new federal Constitution.”⁴⁰ Of course they basically lost the fight, as democrats usually do (except in the long run).

*

Notes on a classic.— Charles Beard’s *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) is still worth reading, a hundred years later. He quotes E. R. A. Seligman’s formulation of “the economic interpretation of history” and calls it “as nearly axiomatic as any proposition in social science can be.” As Seligman says, “The existence of man depends upon his ability to sustain himself; the economic life is therefore the fundamental condition of all life. Since human life, however, is the life of man in society, individual existence moves within the framework of the social structure and is modified by it. What the conditions of maintenance are to the individual, the similar relations of production and consumption are to the community. To economic causes, therefore, must be traced in the last instance those transformations in the structure of society which themselves condition the relations of social classes and the various manifestations of social life.” Sheer common sense, which only the highly educated could dispute. (Seligman doesn’t formulate it very precisely, but the Marxian intuition is compelling.)

³⁹ Hm, sounds familiar...

⁴⁰ Seth Cotlar, review of *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution*, by Terry Bouton, and *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, by Woody Holton, *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 76, no. 4 (November, 2010): 971–973.

Beard proposes to show that “substantially all of the merchants, money lenders, security holders, manufacturers, shippers, capitalists, and financiers and their professional associates” supported the Constitution, while most of the opposition came from non-slaveholding farmers and debtors. His economic interpretation of history is, therefore, corroborated by his study of the Constitution. “The direct, impelling motive [of support for the Constitution] was the economic advantages which the beneficiaries expected would accrue to themselves first...” It’s possible that Beard places too much emphasis on the crass self-interest of the Constitution’s framers and not enough on their genuine belief that what they were doing was for the common good. On the other hand, historians who reject Beardian and Marxian arguments as being reductive are wont to forget the elementary psychological truth that people find it very easy to rationalize doing what is in their interest. Nothing is easier than to convince oneself of a noble justification for doing what one *wants* to do. The question of personal motive, therefore, or self-interpretation, isn’t very important or interesting; the main point is that people tend to see the world, and the good, implicitly in class terms, specifically in terms of what benefits *them* (or the institutions they identify with). Their experience is structured in manifold ways by class; their very ideals are often little more than sublimations of class interest—as in the case of the farmers and debtors who wanted radical democracy because it would be good for them, and the bondholders and merchants who wanted an “aristocratic” and strong federal government—which they got—because it would be good for them. Anyway, the liberal article of faith that policymakers somehow levitate above vulgar economic interests and nobly acknowledge only ideas and ideals is transparently idiotic.⁴¹

⁴¹ For refutations of such charmingly naïve liberal opinions, see the scholarship of Gabriel Kolko, Walter LaFeber, Thomas McCormick, and Thomas Ferguson, for starters.

Query: how did the “imagined community” of a *single nation* arise among a bunch of fragmented colonies in the late eighteenth century? Beard answers: “Nationalism [among Americans] was created [in part] by a welding of economic interests that cut through state boundaries.” He mentions the identity of interest between creditors and the wealthy in many different states, as opposed to “their debt-burdened neighbors at the back door.” For example, southern planters shared the interest of Massachusetts creditors in having a strong federal government that could put down insurrections, in the former case among slaves and in the latter among debtors (as in Shays’ Rebellion).

Interesting: “[*The Federalist*] is in fact the finest study in the economic interpretation of politics which exists in any language; and whoever would understand the Constitution as an economic document need hardly go beyond it.” James Madison was basically a historical materialist in the broad sense, as is clear from *Federalist No. 10*. “...The most common and durable source of [political] factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society. Those who are creditors, and those who are debtors, fall under a like discrimination. A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes actuated by different sentiments and views.” Proto-Marxism.

In general, “the live and persistent economic force which organized and carried through the ratification [of the Constitution] was the personalty interests [i.e., mercantile, securities, manufacturing, etc.] and particularly the public security interests [bondholders]. As has been pointed out, these had the most to gain immediately from the Constitution. Continental paper bought at two and three shillings in the pound was bound to rise rapidly with the establishment of the federal government...”

I need hardly add that the processes of writing and ratifying the Constitution were the opposite of democratic. For instance, probably not more than one-sixth of adult males were allowed to vote to ratify the document. And no popular vote was involved in calling the Convention and selecting delegates. In fact, the whole process was frankly illegal, flouting as it did the provisions in the Articles of Confederation for amending that document. The Articles were simply ignored.

I also needn't add—but will—that the Constitution itself constitutes a “marvelously dexterous system of barriers to [democracy's] expression” (Robert Lynd). As Noam Chomsky likes to remind us, James Madison thought that government should be designed “to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority.” Or, as John Jay said, “the people who own the country ought to govern it.” Thus you get the U.S.'s insane electoral college, the initially indirect voting of senators (until that was changed in the early twentieth century), the early restrictive franchise, the elitist Senate itself, the convoluted and deadlock-prone system of passing laws, and the incredible obstacles set up to prevent easy passage of new Constitutional amendments. All are more or less in the interests of the opulent, who therefore overwhelmingly supported the Constitution—so much so that, in the struggle to get it enacted, they finally even consented to adding some unsavory democratic provisions demanded by commoners, like the Bill of Rights. See Woody Holton's *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (2007), which substantially supports, while refining, Charles Beard's arguments.

*

The ironic anti-capitalism of the Founding Fathers. — In the footnotes to chapter 6 of Chomsky's *Understanding Power* are these illuminating remarks: “[Thomas] Jefferson did not support capitalism; he supported independent production... The fundamental Jeffersonian

proposition is that 'widespread poverty and concentrated wealth cannot exist side by side in a democracy.' This proposition is dismissed by liberals making peace with the rich and coming to terms with inequality, but Jefferson perceived the basic contradictions between democracy and capitalism... In 1817 he complained that the banks' mania 'is raising up a monied aristocracy in our country which has already set the government at defiance...' A year earlier he said he hoped the United States would reject the British example and 'crush in its birth the aristocracy of our monied corporations which dare already to challenge our government to a trial of strength and bid defiance to the laws of our country...' "Men divide naturally into two parties, 'aristocrats and democrats,' [Jefferson] wrote. On one side stood 'those who fear and distrust the people, and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes'; on the other stood 'those who identify with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the honest & safe, altho' not the most wise depository of the public interests..." Among all the Founders Jefferson had the most positive view of democracy, but later in their lives even John Adams and James Madison were disgusted by the growth of American capitalism. After all, they had been trained in the Ciceronian school of civic virtue, republican ideals of engaged citizenship, liberty and independent-mindedness, public-spiritedness—all the very opposite of capitalism, this tornado of privatization that has been laying waste to the world since the fifteenth century. The tragedy of our Founding elitists, including even Jefferson, was that they were mere tools of historical forces they didn't understand: in thrall to the conservative, antiquity-derived ideology of republicanism, which incorporated the naïve Enlightenment notion that in the sphere of politics men of property (unlike the propertyless) could act in disinterested and virtuous ways, they were blind—until it was too late—to the fractionating and mammonizing tendencies of commercialism and early industrialism. The republican empowerment of the opulent

and crushing of the poor had the opposite effects Madison and Adams wanted it to: it helped clear the ground for the most rapacious tyranny in history, the tyranny of capital. *This* is the Founders' true legacy.

*

The dialectic of business's attacks on the public sphere.— In my Master's thesis, *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution* (2010), I argued that in the coming decades, the state and the ruling class, in order to partly contain popular discontent and so prop up their power, will probably have to evolve in ways that will undermine their position in the long run. I ought to have noted that neoliberalism itself—the state's configuration in the past thirty-five years—has shown similar dynamics. It has been the means by which the ruling class has maintained and even augmented its power after the popular uprisings of the 1960s and 1970s, but ultimately it will prove—or is proving—to have made the long-term position of the ruling class untenable. It has so undermined social stability that I suspect power-structures all over the world are panicking now. In the last twenty years there has been a militarizing of police forces and an expansion of the “national security” state in order to control the population, and these trends are intensifying. But they won't prove adequate to the challenge. As the global economy falls apart and privatization continues to rend the social fabric, the ruling class will, I think, have to start tolerating and even supporting the kinds of decentralized “solidarity economy”-esque initiatives Gar Alperovitz discusses in *What Then Must We Do?* (2013), because they'll be thought to help stabilize society and will seem less subversive towards power than mass political movements (which will exist too). Gradually, with the conditional help of sectors of the ruling class that don't understand the historical significance of their actions, a new society will thereby be constructed in the interstices of the dying one. Thus, the rich and their state will advance to another stage of the dialectic, another

stage of their self-undermining, in which they participate more actively—out of necessity—in destroying the conditions of their rule. The “necessity” of this stage, if it occurs, will have organically emerged from the previous neoliberal phase, which itself grew out of the unsustainability of the earlier, more “populist” phase (the heyday of the welfare and regulatory state between the 1940s and 1970s), and so on back to the beginning. Marx was right that history has a logic.

*

Capitalist parricide.— The nation-state and capitalism were born as twins from the fertile, ancient womb of greed and power-hunger. They grew up together, were playmates from an early age—going on treasure hunts, playing Cowboys and Indians, in their later years preferring Monopoly—learned from each other, helped each other achieve their dreams, relied on each other in difficult times. Their youths and early adulthood were full of storms and stresses, brutal competition with bullies in their neighborhood—feudalism, aristocracy, absolute monarchy, foreign empires—in addition to more distant but redoubtable enemies like community, untamed nature, and the stubborn human urge for freedom, but in the end, working together, they were able to triumph over all adversaries. And yet just at the pinnacle of their glory, cracks in their relationship emerged: the nation-state, the (slightly) more responsible partner, resented capitalism’s reckless and profligate ways and thus demanded adherence to codes of behavior that capitalism found onerous. So the latter, having always been the more ambitious and restless one, plotted to free itself from all constraints, whatever the cost. At last the opportunity arose: with the help of new technology it broke free of nation-statist, welfare-statist restrictions and roamed the world unencumbered by social contracts or conscience. Power-mad, it reveled in orgies of violence and destruction that reduced every country they touched to semi-chaos. With blind disloyalty,

having been corrupted to the point of insanity by power, it finally even turned against its brother and plotted to *kill* the nation-state. Perhaps the state's continued remonstrances against the totalitarianism of profit-making, feeble and infrequent though they were, annoyed it. Whatever its motives, capitalism resolved to sabotage the laws, conventions, contracts, treaties, borders, and civil society organizations that were the conditions of its brother's life: former compromises between the siblings were scrapped, and capitalism appropriated more and more of the world to its own private sphere of arbitrary power. The resultant social disorganization, popular protest, and ruination of nature amounted to a slow-acting poison wending its way through the nation's metabolism, making it ever sicker and more desperate to suppress every rebellious symptom of the illness. At the same time the state, ironically, behaved especially abjectly toward its conniving and too-powerful brother/partner, trying to stay in capitalism's good graces—and too weak now, anyway, to act independently. All its efforts, however, were for naught: its sibling had outgrown it and showed no mercy. The nation-state succumbed to its afflictions and approached death. —But a surprise lay in wait for capitalism. Far from now being the supreme, unchallenged power on earth, it found, as it stared in epiphanic panic at its collapsing brother, that in killing the nation-state it had also killed itself! A reckoning worthy of Edgar Allan Poe's horror! The dying state could no longer protect capitalism from its enemies or its own demonic will to self-destruction, and so it, too, advanced swiftly to its mortality. Thus the brothers, still dripping with blood from all their conquests, were swallowed up in the death-heap of history, to which they had themselves contributed so mightily. Death reclaimed its own.⁴²

*

⁴² See my paper "The Tortured Demise of the Nation-State," in chapter two of *Notes of an Underground Humanist*.

Reason vs. mainstream economics.— Classical and neoclassical economics are ridiculous. Maybe at times they stumble into a good idea or two, but the foundation is unreal. Let's just use our common sense for a minute. If a country wants economic development, there has to be high aggregate demand for goods. Without demand, producers will have no reason to supply goods. What's the surest way to create demand? Let government use its enormous tax revenues and its power to borrow to directly demand products and services (infrastructure development, etc.), to partly redistribute income to those who will use it to buy the most stuff, and to fund and direct public institutions that will contribute to development. For these reasons alone, government has to be the foundation of modern economic progress, as it has been. But it is also needed in the sphere of foreign trade, to establish import tariffs and quotas. After all, development is based on continual improvements in labor productivity. (With more productive labor, output can be greater and relatively cheaper, which brings in more revenue that makes it possible to hire more workers and/or pay them more—if, that is, they organize and force that to happen—which both raises aggregate demand and gives business incentives to raise productivity more, etc. It's a virtuous circle.) Government therefore should use its unequalled revenues (and power) to direct investment—or encourage it to be directed—where there is the greatest potential for improvements in labor productivity. This might well necessitate tariffs and quotas, to give domestic business a chance to catch up with international competitors who have had a head start. In fact, as it turns out, every country that has ever successfully industrialized has done so through protectionism, heavy government involvement in the economy, and substantial reliance on extra-market mechanisms.⁴³ This circumstance in itself refutes the dominant conceptions of the dominant modern schools of economic thought.

⁴³ See, e.g., Paul Bairoch's *Economics and World History: Myths and Paradoxes* (1995), or Richard Du Boff's *Accumulation and Power: An Economic History of*

*

On the "law" of comparative advantage.— According to Adam Smith, "were the Americans, either by combination or by any other sort of violence, to stop the importation of European manufactures, and, by thus giving a monopoly to such of their own countrymen as could manufacture the like goods, divert any considerable part of their capital into this employment, they would retard instead of accelerating the further increase in the value of their annual produce, and would obstruct instead of promoting the progress of their country towards real wealth and greatness. This would be still more the case were they to attempt, in the same manner, to monopolize to themselves their whole exportation trade." Chomsky comments: "Surely among the most spectacularly refuted predictions in economic history, but solidly based in the abstract theories that continue to be imposed on the weak."⁴⁴ We're lucky that Alexander Hamilton ignored classical economics, preferring to industrialize his country.

*

the United States (1989). Even Britain, the pioneer, industrialized only by smashing India up, colonizing it, and forcing it to be a net importer of British cotton goods. And of course cotton-plantation slavery, essential to the early industrial revolution, was a rather egregious violation of market principles. (More accurately, in one sense it was their apotheosis, since it put a price even on human beings; but its reliance on brute force had little in common with the idealized free market.)

⁴⁴ As Chomsky says, the greatest economists of the time "urged that Americans should import superior British manufactures and concentrate on their comparative advantage in primary resource and agricultural export." Not exactly good advice, though it's still preached to developing countries. Chomsky, *Hopes and Prospects* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 77.

On economic crisis.— The famous old American Commie Israel Amter gives a simple explanation in his unpublished autobiographical manuscript from the 1940s—so simple, in fact, that you'd think (wrongly) even a mainstream economist could understand it: "What is a crisis? Periodically the goods produced by the workers and farmers pile up because the workers who produce them cannot buy them back and consume them. The workers' total pay never equals the price of what they produce [because it's in the interest of the capitalist to pay his workers as little as possible]. The market is glutted. Production slows down. Factories close. Millions are thrown out of work, sometimes for years. The result is, food products must be and are plowed under [as in the Great Depression, scandalously]. Meat products are destroyed. Fruits are left to rot. People starve. Families are forced out of their homes and compelled to live in shacks, Hooverilles and whatnot. —This is what happens in a crisis."⁴⁵ In other words, in capitalism the absurd happens: there is "overproduction" and "underconsumption," because the masses don't have enough money to buy all the products that the economy can produce. One has to keep repeating such truisms even, or especially, in the early twenty-first century because common sense has been buried under the decades-accumulated manure of capitalist propaganda and neoclassical economics. Since the Great Depression governments have become more savvy at regulating the economy, keeping the flow of money and credit going (by means of central banks' bag of tricks), smoothing economic cycles to some extent, softening crises at least in the short term, all of which is assisted by the ever-growing mountain of consumer and government debt—necessary because of what Amter says, that workers aren't paid enough to buy enough and so have to use credit, and because governments don't take in enough tax revenue to pay for all the initiatives necessary to keep society functioning and the rich happy—but the core of the problem is still what's described in simple

⁴⁵ The manuscript is in the Tamiment library at NYU.

terms above. It has been understood by the brained since at least the turn of the twentieth century, when the proto-Keynesian under-consumptionist school of thought was already well-established among lefties and laborites.

*

A more thorough statement of the above is given in the following resolution proposed at a Chicago conference of the Communist Party's Unemployed Councils in 1930, in the context of the Great Depression:

The basic cause of this mass unemployment is the fact that the workers receive as wages only a fraction of the value they create, and cannot buy back their product. Hence vast quantities of commodities are left in the hands of the capitalists which they, despite their luxury and myriads of hangers-on, cannot consume or find markets for. Thus ensues "over-production," shutdown of industry, and mass unemployment. The capitalists cannot make profits; therefore, they make the workers starve.

In its period of rapid growth and development [in the nineteenth century] capitalism was able to overcome these periodic crises by temporary shutdown of industry, by more intense exploitation of the home markets, and by the extension of foreign trade. But now the periods of crisis become longer and longer, and the periods of industrial activity shorter and shorter.

With the huge development of industry in many countries; with more intense international competition and shrinkage of the colonial markets; with the tremendous speeding up of the workers and mechanization of industries, which constantly throws more workers out of jobs; with the driving of millions of farmers and farm workers from the farms by the

industrial crisis into the cities where they search in vain for work—the capitalist crisis daily deepens [and] “over-production” grows constantly, with a gigantic, permanent mass unemployment.

The productive capacity of capitalist industry thus hopelessly outruns the power of capitalist markets to buy. And this basic contradiction, fatal to capitalism, must go on intensifying itself so long as capitalism lasts, with increasing unemployment, hardships and misery for the workers. The world capitalist system is in a state of the deepest crisis.⁴⁶

Sound familiar? Aside from the dated talk of colonial markets, this analysis applies almost perfectly to the present. Workers in the meatpacking industry, for example, can tell you about the barbarism of the “speed-up”; workers and even economists can tell you about how automation is throwing people out of jobs. Mass purchasing power thereby decreases, which shrinks markets, which threatens profits and so forces capitalists to cut costs, which they do by cutting wages and investing in automation, which continues the vicious circle. Overextended credit can keep the economy going for awhile, but, as we saw in 2008, a day of reckoning has to come sooner or later. Then the government bails the system out and sets it in motion again—so that another collapse can happen, etc. This cycle can’t last forever, as mass unemployment (and insecure employment) grows and revolutionary movements spread.

Part two of this book goes into more depth on this Marxian common sense.

*

⁴⁶ Communist Party archives, Tamiment library, microfilm set 7548, reel 163. I needn’t observe that it was World War II’s colossal “pump-priming” of the economy that got the U.S. out of its mess.

Capitalism, socialism, and planning.— Ideological buffoons like Friedrich Hayek and his contemporary disciples pretend that the difference between capitalism and socialism is that the latter is planned and the former isn't. It's "the market" versus "centralized planning." But this has nothing to do with it. For a very long time, capitalist societies have been largely planned, indeed since we entered the era of corporate capitalism in the early 1900s (if not before). Oligopolistic firms do all they can to limit competition or "the free market," whether by means of trade associations, cartels, trusts, takeovers, informal agreements, or political lobbying.⁴⁷ As the state got more involved in regulating economy activity in the mid-twentieth century, more centralized planning became the order of the day. The Pentagon's use of funds did much to determine the direction of the economy; such innovations as computers, satellites, numerical control of automated machines, containerization, electronics, lasers, the internet, and biotechnology were hatched in the state sector, relying on public funding. And of course corporations benefit from government policies in all kinds of ways: corporate welfare, for example, is vastly more fiscally significant than social welfare.⁴⁸ In addition, central banks conduct very careful planning. Even a government's turn to relatively laissez-faire policies has always had to be planned, as Karl Polanyi and David Harvey describe in *The Great Transformation* (1944) and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) respectively. So there is nothing intrinsically "spontaneous" about capitalism. Far from it: the history of imperialism and colonialism shows that capitalism has always had to be politically imposed, through astonishing violence and brutality.

⁴⁷ See Robert A. Brady's *Business As a System of Power* (1943) and Gabriel Kolko's *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900–1916* (1963).

⁴⁸ See Ralph Nader, *The Ralph Nader Reader* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2000), 147–194.

The true distinctions between capitalism and socialism lie in *who* benefits from the planning and *how* the planning is done. If it's centralized and top-down, as in the former Soviet Union and the United States, it's not socialist. If it's intended to benefit an elite at the expense of wage-earners, it's not socialist. Socialism is defined as workers' control over their economic activity, and that control necessarily has to be grassroots-based (because that's what popular control means). Naturally it will function so as to benefit the population, i.e., the people doing the work; one can expect that a true economic elite wouldn't even exist. Such a society might very well incorporate markets, or, conceivably, it might not. This would be for the people to decide. The point is that markets have little to do with the capitalism/socialism divide.

*

Radical human nature. — The power of indoctrination is shown by the fact that most people don't consider themselves radical leftists, socialists, or anarchists. The way they act shows that basically they are, only they don't know it. They think that authority not only isn't self-justifying (to quote Chomsky's definition of anarchism) but is often or usually unjust, and merely has to be tolerated because it can't realistically be dismantled. Democratic values spontaneously appear whenever people get together: they listen to each other, try to respect each other as equals, organize democratically to get things done, and resent people who act autocratically. This is anarchy in the positive sense, or anarchism in action. Grassroots organizing is 'anarchy,' in that top-down authority or bureaucracy is *not* the operative principle. In fact, one can argue that 'democracy,' 'anarchy,' and 'morality' are but different terms for the same thing, or terms that emphasize different aspects of the same intuition about how humans ought to behave. Respect and compassion for others, openness to new ideas, the positive valuing of free communication, resistance to arbitrary authority—this whole complex of interrelated

ideas, which together are mere common sense, is quintessentially anarchistic. Nearly every popularly valorized kind of behavior is anarchistic, while authoritarian behavior is maligned. If people deny that society as a whole ought to be governed from the grassroots up and not from the top down, they're contradicting their own more fundamental adherence to democratic, anarchist values.

Or consider the concept of socialism. Centuries of discipline and propaganda have not persuaded most people that having a boss is a good thing. Far from it. Bosses are frequently detested, and people hate the boss system itself. They hate having to follow the orders of a "superior," and would much rather be in control of their own economic life. This simple, obvious desire is the intuition behind socialism: workers controlling their own work, and people democratically deciding how to use resources. The practicability of such a system is shown by the success of worker cooperatives (typically more successful than capitalist businesses)⁴⁹ and of various large-scale experiments in socialism, such as in Catalonia in 1936 (before being crushed by the forces of reaction). In any case, whatever people explicitly think about the widely misunderstood concept 'socialism,' their basic acceptance of its values—when not slandered as 'socialist'—should be obvious from their preferences about how to organize the workplace, viz., democratically.

As for the "radical left" in general, people's understanding of social dynamics and consequent disgust show that at bottom they have a semi-Marxist conception of the world. Judging by public opinion polls, a large majority of the population understands that government is primarily run by and for the rich, and that the economy functions to benefit primarily the rich. And they hate this fact. Okay, they're Marxists, at least on the inchoate level of emotion and barely-articulated understanding of society. Moreover, their broadly left-wing, social democratic values are shown by hundreds

⁴⁹ Chris Wright, *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution: History and Possibilities in the United States* (Bradenton, FL: Booklocker, 2014), chapter two.

of polls in the last fifty years.⁵⁰ Incredibly, according to Gallup polls a majority of Americans even supported labor unions in every single year from the 1930s to 2013, except in 2009, when only 48 percent approved of them. The average rate of approval has been 62 percent. This is despite *massive* business propaganda against unions, and a massive disinformation campaign by the media since the 1980s.

The main point, to repeat, is just that the natural, quasi-instinctual, default way for people to think and behave with each other—and the morally valued way—is the freedom-loving, anti-authoritarian, far-left way. Only when authoritarian institutions muddle our thinking and behaving do we get confused and start to malign the values we're implicitly most committed to.

*

Lessons from the Great Depression.— Richard Wright's autobiographical *American Hunger* (1944) ought to be more widely read than it is. The life and thoughts of a young, Communist-sympathizing black man in Chicago during the Great Depression... What a different world it was! And yet what a similar world! Some truths are timeless:

When I reached the relief station, I felt that I was making a public confession of my hunger. I sat waiting for hours, resentful of the mass of hungry people about me. My turn finally came and I was questioned by a middle-class Negro woman who asked me for a short history of my life. As I waited again I became aware of something happening in the room. The black men and women were mumbling quietly among themselves; they had not known one another before

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, *Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986). The Gallup, Pew Research Center, and World Public Opinion websites are treasure troves of information.

they had come here, but now their timidity and shame were wearing off and they were exchanging experiences. Before this they had lived as individuals, each somewhat afraid of the other, each seeking his own pleasure, each staunch in that degree of Americanism that had been allowed him. But now life had tossed them together and they were learning to know the sentiments of their neighbors for the first time; their talking was enabling them to sense the collectivity of their lives, and some of their fear was passing.

Did the relief officials realize what was happening? If they had, they would have stopped it. But they saw their "clients" through the eyes of their profession, saw only what their "science" allowed them to see. As I listened to the talk I could see black minds shedding illusions. These people now knew that the past had betrayed them, had cast them out; but they did not know what the future would be like, did not know what they wanted... Had [society's rulers] understood what was happening, they would never have allowed millions of perplexed and defeated people to sit together for long hours and talk, for out of their talk was rising a new realization of life. And once this new conception of themselves had formed, no power on earth could alter it.

The ruling class knows its game better now than it did in the 1930s, or rather it plays it better. Urban space has been redesigned since the 1970s to fragment people and make mass meetings more difficult; entertainment has been privatized, atomized, with the help of new technologies; social monitoring has become more intensive and sophisticated. Yet still people manage to reach out to one another! Occupy Wall Streets still happen, protest demonstrations still happen, mass strikes happen. As the rulers' fear grows they try to instill more fear in the population to keep it submissive, but that trick gets shopworn and shabby after a while. A new conception of

ourselves is slowly forming, which no power on earth will be able to alter.

*

Ruling-class competence.— It's usually wrong to say—as people often do—that powerful institutions don't work well or that powerful people and bureaucrats are incompetent. They're actually quite competent at fulfilling their real goals or functions, which are rarely the ones they announce to the public. And their institutions do what they're supposed to; they serve the interests of those who control them. For example, a stagnant economy is in the interest of many of the most powerful institutions in society, for various reasons (such as the usefulness of high unemployment as a bludgeon against organized labor, and the appeal of low inflation to the financial sector); hence, the economy is allowed to remain stagnant, and institutions do not function to make it more dynamic. Before 9/11 the CIA didn't prioritize the fight against terrorism, as scholarship proves;⁵¹ the terrorist attack therefore didn't prove the CIA's "incompetence." What it proved was the agency's lack of concern for the population. Under Cheney, too, the hunt for bin Laden wasn't a top priority, as shown by the fact that he passed up good opportunities to get him. Bin Laden's existence was useful to Cheney as a tool for instilling fear in the public. Intelligence agencies weren't really incompetent with regard to the whole "weapons of mass destruction" fiasco in Iraq; they understood that Hussein wasn't manufacturing WMDs. But Cheney and Bush wanted to go into Iraq for strategic reasons (to get control of oil with which to influence global politics, etc.), so they manufactured whatever reasons they thought would work. First WMDs, then democracy promotion. It's true they didn't achieve their maximal goals, but that was because of unexpected massive popular resistance by Iraqis—

⁵¹ See Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

not the sectarian violence but peaceful protest movements unreported by the U.S.'s mainstream media.

Individuals in elite institutions can be stupid in many ways, but they do their jobs fairly well as determined by institutional priorities, which is why they have high positions to begin with.

*

Lessons from a critical sociologist.— In the last chapter of *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1966), Barrington Moore explains the value of Marxian analytical methods, as contrasted with methods that emphasize *cultural* factors, ideologies, subjective values, etc. Here are excerpts:

“...Materialist efforts to exorcise the ghost of idealism in cultural explanations are chanting at the wrong spook.⁵² The real spook is a conception of social inertia, taken over probably from physics. There is a widespread assumption in modern social science that social continuity requires no explanation. Supposedly it is not problematical. Change is what requires explanation. This assumption blinds the investigator to certain crucial aspects of social reality. Culture, or tradition—to use a less technical term—is not something that exists outside of or independently of individual human beings living together in society. Cultural values do not descend from heaven to influence the course of history. They are abstractions by an observer, based on the observation of certain similarities in the way groups of people behave, either in different situations or over time, or both. Even though one can often make accurate predictions about the way groups and individuals will behave over short periods of time on the basis of such abstractions, as such they do not explain the behavior. To explain in terms of cultural values is to engage in circular reasoning. If we notice that a landed aristocracy resists commercial enterprise, we do not *explain* this fact by stating

⁵² This is the one point on which I disagree with him. Idealism as such is analytically and ethically problematic.

that the aristocracy has done so in the past or even that it is the carrier of certain traditions that make it hostile to such activities: the problem is to determine out of what past and present experiences such an outlook arises and maintains itself. If culture has an empirical meaning, it is as a tendency implanted in the human mind to behave in certain specific ways 'acquired by man as a member of society,' to quote the last phrase of Tylor's famous definition...

"The assumption of inertia, that cultural and social continuity do not require explanation, obliterates the fact that both have to be re-created anew in each generation, often with great pain and suffering. To maintain and transmit a value system, human beings are punched, bullied, sent to jail, thrown into concentration camps, cajoled, bribed, made into heroes, encouraged to read newspapers, stood up against a wall and shot, sometimes even taught sociology. To speak of cultural inertia is to overlook the concrete interests and privileges that are served by indoctrination, education, and the entire complicated process of transmitting culture from one generation to the next... Finally, to take values as the starting point of sociological explanation makes it very difficult to understand the obvious fact that values change in response to circumstances. The perversion of democratic notions in the American South is an all too familiar example, incomprehensible without cotton and slavery. We cannot do without some conception of how people perceive the world and what they do or do not want to do about what they see. To detach this conception from the way people reach it, to take it out of its historical context and raise it to the status of an independent causal factor in its own right, means that the supposedly impartial investigator succumbs to the justifications that ruling groups generally offer for their most brutal conduct. That, I fear, is exactly what a great deal of academic social science does today."

He's right. An egregious and well-known example is the myth, or the Big Lie (see *Mein Kampf*), propagated by pseudo-scholars like Samuel Huntington, Bernard Lewis, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam

Harris that we're in the midst of a potentially apocalyptic "clash of civilizations" between the Christian (or, in some versions, secular) "West" and the Muslim "East" or "Middle East." This *cultural* fault-line is conceived as the primary geopolitical fact of the present. It's Us versus Them. The Huntingtonian hypothesis has been amply refuted since its introduction in the early 1990s;⁵³ it is widely known by now, or should be, that "they" don't "hate us for our freedom" (or our Christianity or secularism or whatever) but for our savage imperialistic policies that are ripping their societies apart. Nevertheless, bipolar, culturalist, Huntington-type thinking persists, largely because of its usefulness to the powerful. (It distracts from intra-societal conflict, particularly from class and other institutional structures, and generates popular support for militaristic policies.)

Indeed, this sort of culturalism is not far from racialism, which is not far from racism. As the story goes, people in a particular region of the world—in this case, North Africa and the Middle East—acquired a long time ago, in some primeval past, something called "a culture," which has stayed with them nearly unchanged for centuries and millennia just because cultures are the sorts of things that are very hard to change. The longer they exist, the harder it is to change them. By virtue of mere inertia, as Moore says, traditions are supposed to pass from generation to generation passively, like the ebb and flow of time itself. There is little room for human agency in this story: one grows up in a cultural atmosphere, soaks it up like a sponge, and passes it on to one's descendants. So now, in the

⁵³ See, for example, Edward Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," *The Nation*, Oct. 4, 2001; Sandra Buckley, "Remaking the World Order: Reflections on Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*," *Theory & Event* 2, No. 4 (1998); Carl Gershman, "The Clash within Civilizations," *Journal of Democracy* 8, No. 4 (October 1997). In fact, polls have demonstrated that the vast majority of Muslims have nearly identical values to most Westerners. See my paper "'Eastern Muslims' and 'Western Liberals': Ne'er the Twain Shall Meet?," at www.academic.edu.

twenty-first century, an Arab or Middle Easterner necessarily has this tremendous cultural burden simply because he comes from North Africa or the Middle East. He cannot be other than he is; it is virtually in his blood. –Edward Said dealt with all this long ago in his classic *Orientalism* (1978), but, since ideological servants of power-structures continue to exist, “Orientalist” thinking does as well.

Culturalism, or idealism, comes in less obnoxious forms too. In fact, in these forms it’s almost ubiquitous. Hackneyed concepts like “American individualism” or “the competitive spirit” or “Americans’ traditional conservatism” are used to explain everything from the proliferation of guns and violence in the U.S. to the weakness of labor unions. With that simple rhetorical trick, the whole history of the labor movement, of business and state violence, of corporate propaganda and public-relations campaigns, of myriad social possibilities that were foreclosed by repression, is erased.⁵⁴ What culturalism/idealism really amounts to is *anti-historical thinking*. No wonder conservatives and the powerful love it: for knowledge of history is dangerous to authority, and has to be suppressed.

Even scholars who think of themselves as consummate historians are often inadvertently suppressing history by putting forward idealistic interpretations. For example, to explain political policies in terms of the ideologies that politicians use to justify them is to suppress the *real* history, the institutional history, in favor of a fairy-tale that glorifies the powerful. To take a random but typical

⁵⁴ See David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Patricia Cayo Sexton, *The War on Labor and the Left: Understanding America’s Unique Conservatism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1991); Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1996); and Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

instance: in *The Global Cold War* (2005), Odd Arne Westad argues that “the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics.”⁵⁵ He pays little attention to economic dynamics and institutional interests, relying instead on policymakers’ rhetoric and self-understanding. Thus, in addition to legitimizing powerful actors and the political status quo, his method falsifies the history, or rather “superficializes” it.⁵⁶

But it may be unfair for me to pick on Westad: his approach is and always has been the default approach of 95 percent of intellectuals. What people who actually care about truth should do is heed Moore’s materialist admonitions.

*

Some obligatory postmodernism-bashing. — The ironic thing is that even honorable postmodern historians, people of a different caliber than the Samuel Huntingtons and Bernard Lewises of the world, are engaging in superficial and unchallenging (to conventional wisdom) scholarship by focusing on culture and “discourses” at the expense of *concrete living conditions*, institutional pressures, business practices, propaganda campaigns, and class conflicts. These are what really determine people’s lives. Postmodern historiography has prided itself on being *super-historical*, more rigorous than scholarship of the past, but inasmuch as it downplays material contexts, interests, and access to resources—largely determined by class relations—it fails to get to the root of the matter.

But *explanation*, after all, seems not to be the typical goal of postmodernists. In whatever discipline, they’re more interested in “*playing*” with texts, images, and ideas, somewhat like artists do. Historians dig up old sources and play around with them, relate

⁵⁵ Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

⁵⁶ See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist*, 251, 252.

them to each other in new ways, try to uncover new “meanings.” This sort of play has always been an important aspect of historical scholarship, but in recent decades it’s been taken to extremes—as is suggested, indeed, by the ubiquity of the concept “play” in writings of postmodern ideologists. Thus, contemporary historiography plays with notions of gender, racial and ethnic identities, sexuality, ideological constructions of nationalism, forms of religious expression, and so forth. Much can be said in favor of such an emphasis on subjectivity and discourse. People are, after all, subjective beings, whose identities are important to them. Whether they are important enough to justify an almost exclusive focus on them is another question—particularly when such focus obscures the behavior of institutions and the more “objective” facts of class location that are, indeed, essential to understanding the broader social significance of particular discourses and identities (and reasons for their propagation, for people’s adherence to them, etc.). E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) remains a model of how to fruitfully fuse an interest in the subjective and in the objective, so as to *explain* the former and not just fecklessly “play” with it.

At its worst, idealist historiography tends to construct a world of discourses and identities floating in the air, unanchored in any material realm, with facts of power distribution and economic dynamics not only invisible but implicitly supposed not to exist. Everything is imaginary; all that exists is “society’s imaginary.” People and groups ethereally play with ideas—or the latter play with themselves, and human agents enter only as enablers of this play. It’s all rather ahistorical—and therefore, again, not surprisingly acceptable to the neoliberal institutional matrix in which postmodernism has flourished. Corporate capitalism is perfectly happy with postmodernism and so supports it and funds it, because it distracts from class structures and doesn’t contribute to an understanding of power. Materialists like Thomas Ferguson are hounded

out of their university departments;⁵⁷ idealists from Derrida to Baudrillard to Joan Wallach Scott become academic celebrities.

Other criticisms of postmodern scholarship can be given. For instance, because it so often consists of mere masturbatory play, one doesn't know what general conclusions to draw from it. It appears to have no interesting implications, such that the implications usually stated by authors are trivialities (or, sometimes, falsities). It's all just play—mere *particularity*—undertaken for the sake of itself. Here's a review I wrote years ago of a relatively good book in this vein:

The widely respected collection of essays *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (1997), edited by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, is a typical product of the postmodernist impulse as manifested in historical scholarship. Like all postmodernism, it deals primarily with “discourses,” with the play of contradictory subjectivities, identities, ideas, cultures, “vocabularies,” “grammars,” etc., in this case in the context of European colonialism. Specifically, the editors and contributing authors are interested in how “both colonies and metropolises shared in the dialectics of [cultural] inclusion and exclusion, and in what ways the colonial domain was distinct from the metropolitan one” (p. 3). The authors' purpose is to explore how in “the shared but differentiated space of empire...hierarchies of production, power, and knowledge” were shaped, paradoxically, against the backdrop of universalist ideologies such as liberalism, democracy, and human rights. A theme running through the book is the conventional postmodern polemic against “bin-

⁵⁷ See Chomsky, *Understanding Power* (New York: The New Press, 2002), 243. Chomsky himself is an exception, a radical who has been protected by his stature in linguistics and by his being an acknowledged genius who is a credit to MIT.

ary oppositions," including those between ruler and ruled, white and black, and "active" metropole and "passive" colony. Things were and are complicated, not "Manichaean." Another theme is the argument that universalist Enlightenment ideologies themselves bore much of the blame for the exclusions and violence perpetrated in the colonies. Also, of course, it is argued that the colonized had agency, resisted but participated in their own subjection, and that colonial cultures, instead of being purely passive, influenced metropolitan cultures to some degree. (The metropolises defined themselves in relation to the Other, etc.) In sum, the book is devoted to "deconstructing" supposed "meta-narratives." Its strengths and weaknesses are those of postmodernism in general.

The weaknesses are on full display in the introductory essay, which surveys postcolonial scholarship. The authors insist, rightly, on the complexity of the issues and the importance of subjectivity and particularity—such insistence is the main strength of all postmodernism—but aside from this, one is hard-pressed to find strengths. First of all, the chapter and the book, like most postmodernist "texts," fluctuate between hyper-particularity and hyper-abstractness, never finding a middle ground. Furthermore, the abstractions tend to be either truisms or oversimplifications. Consider some examples: "Colonial regimes were neither monolithic nor omnipotent. Closer investigation reveals competing agendas for using power, competing strategies for maintaining control, and doubts about the legitimacy of the venture" (p. 6). That's a truism, totally uncontroversial but presented as if it is an important insight. (When has power ever been monolithic or omnipotent? Who has ever thought it was?) "What is striking is how much the consolidation of bourgeois power at home and abroad drew on a polyvalent discourse of civ-

ility that emphasized different criteria for its measure and at different moments could move state policy in opposite directions" (p. 10). Truism. "Focus on the contingencies and contradictions of colonial rule emphasizes that political possibilities do not just lie in grand oppositions but in the interstices of power structures, in the intersection of particular agendas, in the political spaces opened by new and renewed discourses and by subtle shifts in ideological ground" (p. 18). Truism. Nothing interesting there. "As we have shown, the colonial situation was characterized by alternative projects and by the displacement and failure of such projects in colonial encounters: such processes did not begin or end with decolonization. Meanings of institutions, bureaucratic habits, and cultural styles set up in the colonial era were continually being reshaped" (p. 33). Truism.

The authors also tend to oversimplify or uncharitably characterize opposing positions. World systems theory, for example, argues that "colonization was one aspect of the development of a capitalist world system, through which the 'core' allocated itself the more complex and lucrative productive processes...and the 'periphery' was allocated the task of producing primary commodities through slavery or coerced cash crop production" (p. 19). The authors criticize the theory for ignoring "agency"—but that's silly, because obviously when one is analyzing the entire world economy one cannot pay close attention to the agency of some village in Senegal or some protest movement in Ecuador. "The theory's assumption of passivity within colonial economies," they write, "has been amply refuted by research in different parts of the world." It is hardly a profound discovery that people in India were not, after all, rocks, passively letting colonizers do whatever they wanted to them. But unquestionably the colonized were *more* "passive" (victimized) than

the colonizers; this is all that world systems theory is committed to. —And yes, it's true that by saying "colonized vs. colonizers" here I'm positing a "Manichaeian" dichotomy, a "binary opposition," but, again, in order to *talk*, or to explain anything at all, one has to make simplifying assumptions that abstract from the infinite complexities of lived experience while grasping essential features. This is how science proceeds, for example. If one brought postmodernist hyper-particularity and methodological qualms into the natural sciences, nothing would ever get done.

The second chapter, written by Uday Mehta, titled "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," illustrates another typical fault of postmodernism: excessive idealism, i.e., the attribution of more "agency" to ideas (or discourses, etc.) than to institutions or people.⁵⁸ Mehta is puzzled by the historical contrast between "the inclusionary pretensions of liberal theory and the exclusionary effects of liberal practices" (p. 59). "One needs to account for how a set of ideas that professed, at a fundamental level, to include as their political referent a universal constituency nevertheless spawned practices that were either predicated on or directed at the political marginalization of various people. More specifically, one must consider if the exclusionary thrust of liberal history stems from the misapprehension of the generative basis of liberal universalism or if in contrast liberal history projects with greater focus and onto a larger canvas the theoretically veiled and qualified truth of liberal universalism." It is as if Marxism never happened.⁵⁹ Let's leave aside the bad writing and unnecessary jargon. The point is that Mehta blames *practices* on *ideas*: a set of ideas "spawned practices." We're

⁵⁸ This fault is ironic, because in other contexts postmodernists are obsessed with glorifying people's agency.

⁵⁹ Appropriately, Mehta begins his essay with an epigram from Hegel.

back to Hegel, but without the profundity. In reality, of course, it is practices and institutional dynamics—people’s material interests, the interests of power-structures, etc.—that spawn ideas, or at least determine what kinds of rhetoric and ideologies predominate in a given society.⁶⁰ If the liberalism of John Stuart Mill’s day tolerated colonialism and various political exclusions, that isn’t because liberalism itself is somehow “necessarily” exclusionary; it is because intellectuals and power-elites consciously or unconsciously accommodated themselves to the interests of powerful institutions. Indeed, a much stronger case can be made that “true” liberalism, uncompromised by acquiescence to the interests of power-structures, is committed to the freedom and rights of all people, their right to control their economic, social, and political lives. Certainly classical liberals like Wilhelm von Humboldt would find much more to like in a Noam Chomsky than in a Friedrich Hayek, or any other apologist for the powerful.

The rest of the essays in the book are uneven in their quality, although they do, at least, show careful scholarship. They analyze conditions in colonies from Southeast Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, subtly investigating the dilemmas and paradoxes of racial, class, and gender identities among Europeans, Creoles, and natives. One is uncertain, however, what conclusions to draw from them, except that...things were complicated. Identities and cultures, not surprisingly, are full of tensions and “contestations.” The authors investigate in bewildering detail all the permutations of these

⁶⁰ After all, it requires *resources* to propagate ideologies. Groups and institutions will favor ideas friendly to their interests, and those entities with the most resources will have the most success in spreading their ideologies (or, in many cases, in undermining democratic and liberatory ideologies that hold sway).

contestations. After reading for several hours, one closes the book and thinks, "Wow, cultures sure have been contested." Aside from that, specialists and antiquarians would find much of interest in this book.

One can't fail to be impressed by the ability of academics to ignore or deny materialist common sense. But, again, intellectual acuity and honesty rarely further the interests of the powerful, so one shouldn't expect the privileged to be very acute or honest.

*

The un-rational. — Much as one wants to believe otherwise, there is little difference between Fred Phelps's flock of reason-proof homophobes and most people. The main difference is just the commitment the flock displays toward the single issue of anti-homosexuality. Their fanaticism is what distinguishes them, not necessarily their un-rationality and irrationality.⁶¹ People constantly use reason, but their use tends to be half-hearted and ephemeral; it quickly succumbs to "causation" (indoctrination, value-judgments, lack of interest). Consider my experiences in the class I'm taking on gender, in which everyone (it's all women) is a postmodernist but I. I argue against the famous historian Joan Scott, but it's quite impossible to change their minds on anything. They'll always be convinced, for example—at least until they unconsciously evolve out of the belief—that biology is totally irrelevant to history and gender-

⁶¹ Those two qualities signify two different ways of not being motivated by rational considerations. The first term denotes one's being outside the domain of pure reason, as in emotional states and value-judgments; the second term denotes one's *contradicting* oneself either in acts or in thoughts. (Value-judgments can indeed be "rational" or "irrational," but only in their *relations* with each other, so that, for instance, it is unreasonable to be committed to mutually inconsistent values. The act of valuing itself is outside reason, i.e., neither rational nor irrational.)

roles, that as historians we shouldn't even mention the word "biology" unless we're studying the history of the science. –Needless to say, I never state directly that there are connections between biology and gender-roles. The women (feminists) would burn me in effigy. I only suggested once that the association of women in 19th-century Europe with the domestic sphere was due in large part to the biological facts of childbirth and nursing. One girl countered that not all women have children; I admitted that but said the point is that men can't give birth, that the female sex is the only sex that can. They stared at me uncomprehendingly. Finally another girl said that's true *now* but might not always be true, due to technological advances or whatnot. I let that pass, thinking it futile and irrelevant to argue the point; nevertheless (I said), in the nineteenth century it was true that only women could have babies. "There's such a thing as biology." But no, according to the professor biology is only an interpretation. Besides, as historians we have no business invoking biology. "But...we have bodies," I muttered despairingly. "So bodies are relevant to society. Which means biology is too." But I was forgetting that biology is just a social construction, and that arguing with these people was like smashing my head against a marble wall.⁶²

*

⁶² The biological sciences are indeed "interpretations" and "social constructions," but that fact has no interesting implications. In particular, it doesn't imply that they have no truth, i.e., that they do not at least partly correspond to reality. More fundamentally, the non-thinkers in my class are confusing biology-the-real-thing with biology-the-science, which studies the real thing. They're effectively denying the existence of biology-the-real-thing, the actual processes that occur in the actual body. (*These* are what I was referring to by invoking "biology," but the professor turned my meaning around when she said that biology is only an interpretation.) They're idealists, postmodern idealists.

*The science.*⁶³— It's embarrassing (to humanity) that it's still necessary to give evidence that men and women are innately different, but I'll quote a couple scientists whose books the reader may not have read. In *The Blank Slate* (2002), Steven Pinker summarizes what should be common sense: "Variation in the level of testosterone in different men, and in the same man in different seasons or at different times of day, correlates with libido, self-confidence, and the drive for dominance... When women preparing for a sex-change operation are given androgens, they improve on tests of mental rotation and get worse on tests of verbal fluency. The journalist Andrew Sullivan, whose medical condition had lowered his testosterone levels, describes the effects of injecting it: 'The rush of a T shot is not unlike the rush of going on a first date or speaking before an audience. I feel braced. After one injection, I almost got in a public brawl for the first time in my life. There is always a lust peak—every time it takes me unaware.'"

"Many of the sex differences [in behavior] are found widely in other primates, indeed, throughout the mammalian class..." An obvious but very suggestive fact.

"The brains of men differ visibly from the brains of women in several ways. Men have larger brains with more neurons (even correcting for body size), though women have a higher percentage of gray matter. (Since men and women are equally intelligent overall, the significance of these differences is unknown.) The interstitial nuclei in the anterior hypothalamus, and a nucleus of the stria terminalis, also in the hypothalamus, are larger in men; they have been implicated in sexual behavior and aggression..."⁶⁴

Pinker also gives compelling evidence that "two key predictions of the social construction theory—that boys treated as girls will

⁶³ The following sections on feminism complement the discussion in chapter three of *Notes of an Underground Humanist*.

⁶⁴ Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 346–348.

grow up with girls' minds, and that differences between boys and girls can be traced to differences in how their parents treated them—have gone down in flames." One can expect that many feminists will dismiss Pinker as an ideologist and so forth, but the range of scientific literature he draws on is impressive.

Simon Baron-Cohen's *The Essential Difference: Male and Female Brains and the Truth about Autism* (2003) is more systematic, providing overwhelming evidence that male and female brains are innately different, in interesting ways. His main thesis is that male brains are better at systemizing (which he defines), while female brains are better at empathizing. The "maleness" and "femaleness" of brains varies between individuals, but clear tendencies apply to each sex. The behavioral and biological evidence Baron-Cohen adduces validates most stereotypes about the sexes, such as male dominance, aggression, and interest in certain types of abstract intellect, versus female nurturance, attention to people's feelings, and interest in people-centered things over "systemizing." He mentions the usual compelling data relating to hormones, for example that boys born to women who have been prescribed a synthetic female hormone (diethylstilbestrol) are likely to show more female-typical behaviors. Or that male-to-female transsexuals show a reduction in "direct" forms of aggression (physical assaults) and an increase in indirect or "relational" aggression—which suggests that "testosterone affects the form that aggression takes."⁶⁵ He also gives evidence to support the obvious idea that genes—and there are genetic differences between males and females—partly determine systemizing and empathizing abilities.

Anyway, isn't it just *reasonable* to think that both biology and socialization would contribute to the nature of gender roles? *A priori*, this is what a reasonable person, unblinded by ideology, would think. No surprise, then, that science tends to confirm it.

⁶⁵ Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 99.

*

Institutional blinders.— What makes things like academic “gender feminism” possible—or the postmodern dismissal of science, or scientists’ dismissal of philosophy, or analytic philosophers’ dismissal of all things Continental, or historians’ dismissal of sociology, or economists’ dismissal of history—is the parochialism of modern intellectual life, which grows out of the institutional fragmentation of society. Most of the time, whatever isn’t institutionally sanctioned isn’t pursued, because most people are conformists content to adopt the limits of their institution as approximately the limits of their mind. So academics narrow themselves to their chosen department of knowledge and rarely venture out into the big, scary world of other kinds of thought. “The way *I* do it is right,” everyone thinks, “and besides, it’s necessary to specialize in something. So I devote my intellectual labors to my specialty.” Also, understandably, all people (not just academics) interest themselves only in what they find most congenial to their tastes and beliefs. The problem is that their tastes and beliefs are encouraged to be limited and one-sided given the limits and one-sidedness of institutions, including the one that has molded them most.

*

Magnificent maenads.— An intriguing phenomenon happened in 2013: Daniel Bergner published a book called *What Do Women Want?: Adventures in the Science of Female Desire*, and feminist commentators in the media went into raptures. Salon.com is a good gauge of liberal feminist sentiment; Tracy Clark-Flory’s column on June 1, 2013 bore the gushing headline “The truth about female desire: It’s base, animalistic and ravenous.” As she summed up, “Bergner, and the leading sex researchers he interviews, argue that women’s sexuality is not the rational, civilized and balancing force it’s so often made out to be—that it is base, animalistic and ravenous, everything we’ve told ourselves about male sexuality.”

Two thoughts: first, I'm not sure feminists should be proud that female sexuality is animalistic and ravenous. Second, how is it possible there are people who deny that female sexuality is animalistic and ravenous? Hasn't that been known at least since the ancient Greeks?

On the second point: this is yet another example of the tyranny of political correctness emasculating the human intellect. Any man who has had sex, and any woman with self-knowledge, should know that female sexuality is or can be almost frighteningly ravenous. The Greeks knew it, as shown by the ecstatic, intoxicated sexual rites of the maenads, female followers of Dionysus. Far from its being seen as glorious, as contemporary feminists apparently see it, the animalistic character of female sexuality was seen (tendentiously) by the Greeks as proof of women's lower, un-rational nature, even as an indication of their relative passiveness and lack of self-control. It's ironic, to say the least, that modern feminists are gleefully affirming something that was once held to justify Greek misogyny.

And yet there is some sense to the feminist attitude. Most obviously since the Victorian age, but really throughout history, female sexuality has been repressed by the authorities, denied, tamed, diabolized, such that women have been taught to be ashamed of it. Authorities have agreed with the Greeks and been afraid of its socially disruptive potential. The millennia-long campaign of repression was effectively challenged in the 1960s (as many times before) and entered a new phase, wherein the profit-making potential of women's sexuality was liberated while most women themselves were not. Thus, for example, you get some feminists now defending pornography because it encourages women to accept and explore their sexuality, which is *still* something they may be ashamed of. It's a sad situation when *pornography*, which typically reduces women to semi-human sex-objects, is viewed as one of the few available means of female "liberation." One sympathizes, there-

fore, with feminists who revel in, and want to propagate, the knowledge that women's sexuality tends to be wild and uninhibited—not least because one shares their desire to dismantle social hierarchies and upend idiotic conventional wisdom.

It's clear, though, that feminists are stuck between Scylla and Charybdis. Either they can counteract repression by glorying in the idea of women's base and frenzied sexuality—which can be used to justify misogyny—or they can argue that women are civilized, rational, and self-controlling—an idea that can be used to justify sexual repression (because supposedly it isn't really *repression* at all). In fact, feminism as a whole is plagued by such dilemmas, which is one reason for its schizophrenia since the 1960s, as every possible position has been advocated by some "feminist" or other. You can (realistically) affirm that women are different from men, which threatens to further the agendas of social conservatives, or you can deny that they're substantively different, which is not only unrealistic but may further the goal of sexual repression. There is no easy way out of these dilemmas; the best one can do is to be realistic but subtle at the same time. One should acknowledge women and men's innate differences but neither exaggerate them nor let others draw unwarranted conclusions from them. For instance, while I wouldn't say that female sexuality is something to be *proud* of (neither is male sexuality), its "base" nature doesn't justify Greek contempt for women.

*

Mistaken self-respect.— There is something childish about being proud of one's sexuality and sexual identity. It's not the sort of thing to be proud of. Sex is a bodily function, not one of humanity's higher capacities! Integrity, high creativity, compassion, and work ethic are things to be proud of; sex is something we share with reptiles. To identify yourself primarily with how you express yourself sexually is kind of sad. —On the other hand, if young women, many homo-

sexuals, and “trans” people find it empowering, fine, I wouldn’t want to deprive them of their empowerment or happiness. Just as it would be cruel to argue against religion with someone whose belief in God helps him or her to persevere, so it would be cruel to argue that the very basis of someone’s hard-won self-acceptance is silly.

*

Self-sexists.— When women insist on their right to dress as provocatively as they want, one’s inclination is to say, “Of course you have that right. It’s ridiculous and unjust for someone else to deny it. If you want to contribute to society’s reduction of you to a sex-object because you find that ‘liberating,’ go right ahead. For, whether you like it or not, scantily clad women always have been and always will be viewed sexually, and will attract stares from men and women. If that’s liberating and empowering, fine. But you should know you’re treating yourself in a rather sexist way and are encouraging sexism in others.” (One hears the feminist shriek, “Victim-blaming! You’re blaming the victims! You’re a misogynist!” There are several possible retorts to such infantilism. For one thing, it turns women into passive creatures who have no responsibility for how society or men treat them. Is that how feminists want women to be thought of, as merely passive victims? How “empowering” is that point of view? In any event, it’s a fact that few victims in history are *completely innocent*, and of course no perpetrator is innocent either. Both must take responsibility—especially the perpetrator, but the victim also insofar as he or she participates in systems of power and oppression, including self-oppression.)

*

Religious thinking.— The religious *want* to believe there’s a God...so they *do* believe there’s a God. Which is rather stunning, if you think about it. To quote Bertrand Russell, “it seems to me a fundamental dishonesty and fundamental treachery to intellectual integrity to

hold a belief because you think it's useful and not because you think it's true." More accurately, the religious think it's true ultimately *because* it's useful. A fact I can't comprehend. Likewise, it's obvious some feminists *desperately want* to believe there are no substantive innate differences between men and women...and so they manage to convince themselves that in fact there are no such differences. This belief is gratifying, so they believe it. Pretty amazing. One knows what to think of the intellectual integrity of people who are so close-minded about a particular issue that they can somehow explain away every piece of evidence that would force them to change their mind (whether the existence of fossils in the case of Creationists or hundreds of scientific studies in the case of feminists).

*

Self-refuting postmodernism.— The concept of "socialization" cuts both ways. If feminists want to argue that people are socialized into so-called patriarchal norms, I can argue that they, and other postmodernists, have been socialized and indoctrinated into rejecting science (insofar as it contradicts favored dogmas), deploring "phallogocentrism" or "phallogocentrism," and exalting Foucault or other postmodern "thinkers." That is, I can take their ideas to their logical conclusions: if our beliefs and scientific theories are mere products of power-systems, then postmodern beliefs, too, have no intrinsic rational validity but are only expressions of a certain kind of society. This reductivism of course conflicts with the implicit claims to *truth* that postmodernists make when they put forward their ideas. In other words, if their ideas are right, as they think, then they can't be right, because there is no such thing as rightness or truth or autonomous reason. Everything is supposed to be a mere expression or reflection of a particular state of affairs, and nothing is even remotely "autonomous"—a dogma, incidentally, that denies humans dignity, creativity, freedom, and reason. This kind of

(pseudo-)philosophical postmodernism amounts to a profound nihilism. Its extreme philosophical empiricism—much more extreme than, say, David Hume’s—is revealingly similar to B. F. Skinner’s radical behaviorism, which, likewise, effectively denied humans dignity and creativity by interpreting them in terms of mere conditioning, reinforcement, and stimulus-and-response. So, whether it’s behaviorism, or an empiricism that denies individuals contribute anything to their own development, or a postmodernism that says “Language speaks us” (i.e., we’re mere products of particular discourses or languages or power-systems or whatever), the Enlightenment values of autonomous reason and freedom have no place.

Nevertheless, there is some value to philosophical postmodernism: socialization does, after all, exist (though that has been understood for a very long time). Gender feminists, for example, *have* been socialized into their bizarre beliefs; they’re not as autonomous or rational as they implicitly, and self-contradictorily, think.

*

Postmodern irony.— Given the rigor of the scientific method, the conclusions of modern natural science are much less “socially constructed” than are the ideas of postmodernists who critique science as being socially constructed. Maybe these people should look in the mirror from time to time.

*

More postmodern irony.— One of the many ironies about certain types of feminists is that they’re arguably more “misogynistic” than some of those they accuse of misogyny. In effectively denying that women tend to have (*some*) different desires, interests, and talents than men, they’re assimilating them to men—using men as the standard of value—and showing a complete lack of interest in female psychology. They’re showing a lack of interest in women “on their own terms.” The whole enormous psychological, psychoanalytical, phe-

nomenological, and biological literature on the subject is implicitly being written off as “sexist” —a labeling that shows, incidentally, an indescribable intellectual laziness. “Anyone who disagrees with me is sexist, and his or her arguments can therefore be ignored.” Revealingly, this is the same rhetorical strategy used by most political conservatives to dispatch their “liberal,” “socialist,” “communist,” etc. opponents. *Ad hominem* attacks are always the recourse of the dogmatic and insecure mind that can’t face opposing arguments on their merits.

*

Feminist authoritarian minds. — Steven Pinker gives a telling anecdote in *The Blank Slate*. “Among many professional women,” he says, “the existence of [biological] sex differences is still a source of discomfort. As one colleague said to me, ‘Look, I know that males and females are not identical. I see it in my kids, I see it in myself, I know about the research. I can’t explain it, but when I read claims about sex differences, steam comes out of my ears.’”⁶⁶ That says it all. That *unreasoned rage* is, most of the time, the impulse that explains the absurd, irrational excesses to which feminists are prone—just as such rage largely explains (psychologically speaking) the incredible illogical depths to which political conservatives frequently stoop. Someone timidly suggests, “We should pass more effective gun-control laws to reduce the number of children killed by gunfire.” The conservative fires back, “You Nazi! You libtard! You’re worse than Hitler; you want to control society and take away all our freedoms! Go back to Russia, Commie!” It’s blind rage that has made the conservative unable to consider logic or view the matter empathically from another’s perspective. The Rush Limbaughs and Glenn Becks have for years stoked the hate that infests this person’s mind (resentment at his relatively low station in life, at his low wages while the bankers swim in profits, at the many setbacks that

⁶⁶ Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 351.

have happened to him, at society's having forgotten him and people like him while it still steals taxes from him), so he lashes out in his hatred at the presumably privileged, government-loving "liberal" — the "Other" — who wants to extend the Oppressor's reach even further and take away his remaining freedoms. This conservative doesn't hear arguments; he hears a hostile Other trying to justify his agenda to erode certain freedoms and take control of others' lives.

Similarly, though sometimes in a less extreme way, many feminists are unable to hear arguments. All they hear is a misogynist trying to justify women's oppression. Typically these feminists, coming from a different social stratum than the average conservative, have imbibed academic jargon and so are, superficially, fairly articulate. "You're naturalizing gender roles. Your use of binary oppositions shows how embedded you are in reactionary discourses." In other words, "Fuck you, you're an asshole/idiot" — the same content behind the conservative's retort. The feminist rhetoric is really just a way of legitimizing the subtle rage that is felt. Whatever argument has been offered isn't being directly engaged with on its merits; it's being dismissed. The feminist has in fact already dismissed it, instantly; what she (or he) says is only meant to justify the internal dismissal. And yet it's an effective debating tactic, for it shifts the debate away from the arguments and evidence the opponent has given to a more personal level of his having to defend himself. As soon as he's forced to deny that he's a misogynist — (what a magical word, so charged with meaning yet so vague!) — the feminist has won. Slander works well.

As always, the best way to argue with such people (if you must argue with them) is to try to defuse their knee-jerk anger and defensiveness by finding common ground with them. Reassure them, demonstrate that you agree with them about a lot, and slowly, delicately, coax them out of the realm of emotion and into that of reason.

*

Thoughts on common feminist arguments.— To object to a belief on the grounds that it's a cliché is not a compelling argument. Something can be a cliché and yet be true. Such is the case, for example, with the belief that big business has immense influence over politics. Nor is it a convincing argument to object to a belief on the grounds that it's offensive. Wall Street tycoons might take offense at the idea that they thrive off the systematic exploitation of millions of workers, but that doesn't make it any less true.

On the other hand, the argument that a belief is *morally* offensive cannot be so easily dismissed. But here the question immediately arises: how can *truth* be *morally offensive*? As David Hume argued, the realm of "is" and the realm of "ought" are radically distinct, such that a fact cannot be morally wrong or objectionable. It just *is*. And to believe what *is* is surely, likewise, not morally wrong.

And yet there are difficulties here. It seems morally offensive to believe, say, that white people are on average less intelligent than blacks, or men are less intelligent than women. But, *prima facie*, neither belief appears *necessarily* false. For all we know, nature might have designed things that way. So, if those are possible truths, how is it that they can seem morally objectionable?

Here it's necessary to clarify a few things. First, the concept of "intelligence" is scientifically useless, meaningless. Scientifically it can be fleshed out in an indefinite number of ways. So, the offending statements in the previous paragraph, being effectively meaningless, can in fact *not* be true. Consider, then, some variation on them. Suppose someone believes that men are on average less adept at empathic understanding of others than most women are, because of biological structures in the brain. (And suppose this belief can be "precisified" so as to have scientific content and be testable.) Is that belief morally objectionable? No, it isn't. Insofar as it has cognitive content and isn't merely an underhanded way of denigrating one sex or the other, it is nothing but a neutral hypothesis to be accepted or rejected.

In fact, it's only insofar as the element of *valuing*—or *devaluing*—is present that it can be morally wrong to believe something. The intuition that it's wrong to think whites are less intelligent than blacks is explained by our sense that the real *point* of that belief is that *whites are inferior*. The “value-judgment” aspect of the statement is what's offensive. If the concept of intelligence had scientific meaning and could be separated from its emotional overtones, it wouldn't be morally wrong to believe the statement, as long as one didn't invest it with emotional content or use it to justify the belief that whites are inferior. Morality, to repeat, has to do with the act of valuing or devaluing, not with simple statements of fact (or non-fact).

This is also what explains the intuition that even to *care* about certain questions is morally wrong. To care about the differences between the brains of black people and white people seems wrong because we suspect that the only reason anyone would care is if he or she were a racist, and so wanted to demonstrate that one race is inferior to the other. However, such an awful motive isn't necessarily what would lead someone to be interested in differences between the *sexes*, because sexual differences are much more substantial and biologically meaningful than racial differences. There are legitimate scientific reasons to investigate differences between men and women. Again, as long as one doesn't invest hypotheses or conclusions with emotional content, i.e., use them to justify denigrating some category of people, the act of believing them is morally innocuous.

Thus, it *can* be innocuous to believe that women, for example, tend, on average, to be more emotional than men, or more changeable in their moods, or more excitable, or whatever. It is by no means necessarily the case that someone who has these beliefs—and most people do, at least implicitly—thinks thereby that women are “inferior” to men or is only interested in the ideas to justify misogyny. For these statements may, after all, be true, given how little

science understands about the human species! (And no reasonable person would deny that evidence exists to support these clichés, and others.) On the other hand, inasmuch as publicly advertising such views, or giving evidence for them and seeking out biological explanations, may give aid and comfort to misogynists and social conservatives, one has to think long and hard before concluding that the possible scientific gains in understanding outweigh the possible moral costs.

It's unfortunate that humanity is so constituted as to be able to pervert and corrupt truths, or possible truths, into supposed justifications of immoral and even meaningless value-judgments. Because some people act this way, many feminists lash out at *anyone* who makes speculations about biology or psychology that can be perceived by misogynists and feminists as unflattering to women. Thus you get the totalitarian climate of political correctness, in which even making a mild, correct observation about male and female behavior in our society is enough to get you slandered as a "misogynist." Indeed, the very act of generalizing at all—even with qualifications—is typically seen as beyond the pale, given the aversion postmodernism has to general truths (preferring fragmentary understanding, particularity, obsessive acknowledgement of human diversity, etc.). "That's a generalization!" the postmodernist screams in outrage, unaware that generalizations can be true or approximations of the truth. Even stereotypes frequently contain a kernel of truth—one reason for their being stereotypes to begin with.

*

On the "vice" of "generalizing."— My dad recently offered a friendly criticism of me: he said I "always go from the particular to the general" when making judgments about things. So I retorted in an ironical tone that Schopenhauer considered this trait to be the

essence of genius. Which, if there's any truth to that, makes post-modernism the opposite of genius.⁶⁷

*

A truth from Schopenhauer.— He whose mind is virtually disinterested is going to have a hard time in life. His instinct to observe and explain will rarely ingratiate him with people, and the cast of his mind will predispose him to incompetence at life's practical pursuits. People will ridicule him, misunderstand him, demonize him, hate him because he exposes them, have contempt for him because he doesn't fit in—in short, treat him as Dr. Stockmann is treated in Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*. On the whole, it is a decided handicap to have an independent mind.

*

The lady doth protest too much, methinks.— Feminist eagerness to see "misogyny" in some act of chivalry, some little compliment, some glance and flirtation, or speculations on psychology and biology, is not only laughable, puritanical, and implicitly totalitarian; it is also, ironically, somewhat morally offensive. This cynicism and hypersuspiciousness about anyone who doesn't act in exactly the way you want reveals a none-too-charitable attitude towards humanity. It bespeaks a crabbed, ungenerous nature, paranoid and full of hate, ever-vigilant, quick to judge, reminiscent in some ways of the Puritans who fled licentious England. (Again, ironic, since modern feminism was born of the sexual revolution.) Nietzsche's thoughts on *ressentiment* are not irrelevant.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Needless to say, there are intelligent and unintelligent ways of generalizing. Most people do it unintelligently.

⁶⁸ It's a striking irony that contemporary feminists—like many leftists—often manifest traits of the "authoritarian personality." They can be highly prejudiced people, for "the mentality of the prejudiced subject is characterized by thinking in terms of rigidly contrasting in-groups and out-

*

Against value-judgments.— To say that someone or something is inferior to someone or something else is meaningless. “Men are inferior to women,” a radical feminist might say. But what does that mean? In what way are they inferior? Manifestly they’re inferior in some respects: for instance, men can’t give birth, whereas women can. The basis for the judgment has to be spelled out in order for it to have content.

The same applies to judgments that someone or something is bad or good. Stalin was not “bad, period.” He was bad in relation to such values as compassion, not-killing-millions-of-people, etc. He was good in relation to the opposite values. Badness and goodness do not inhere in things, as we’re half-consciously inclined to think (supposing, e.g., that Hitler’s “nature” was somehow badness or the meaningless quality “evil”); rather, we assign those qualities to things on the basis of values we hold. Value comes from *our attitude* towards something; in itself, everything just *is*, neither valuable nor worthless. We should always keep this fact in mind, to avoid attributing some sort of “absolute” or “objectively true” status to our value-judgments—an attribution that conduces to misguided certainty, fanaticism, and hatred. Ultimately value-judgments are merely subjective, though it’s true they can be “objective” in the narrow sense of invoking standards shared by others. (See chapter one of my *Notes of an Underground Humanist*.)

*

The feminine.— I find it faintly ridiculous when I hear men complaining about women’s childishness, fickleness, naïveté, and so on. Not only because men themselves are frequently guilty of similar faults; mainly because this behavior is symptomatic of the femin-

groups,” as so many feminists and other leftists do. (Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1969), 623.)

inity that attracts men in the first place. Men find young women alluring in part because they share some of the wonderful qualities children have: they laugh and smile much more often than men; their giggliness attractively highlights the contrast between the “masculine,” un-giggly man and the appreciative, receptive, coquettish woman; they tend to be much more excitable than men, i.e., they’re less detached, more “immersed in the moment”; they look to men for protection; they’re more emotionally charged and changeable than most men—which is just another way of saying that they’re attractively excitable.⁶⁹ All these appealing qualities are bound to manifest themselves negatively also, just as children’s—and men’s—personalities do. One should accept the negative with the positive, understanding that together they constitute an organic expression of femininity.

*

Social norms vs. natural instincts.— The power of socialization is shown by the fact that attractive young women can usually walk the streets safely. If men don’t casually come up and have their way with them, it’s largely because society has taught them not to. Morality is very much in tension with certain male instincts or desires; luckily it turns out that some instincts have little force in comparison with socialization, i.e., internalization of the other’s perspective.

*

Maleness and morality.— In her February 21, 2014 column in the *Washington Post*, titled “Sex after drinking and the war on men,” Kathleen Parker argues that men should be held to a higher standard than women. She’s right. Feminists might not like that

⁶⁹ The similarities between femininity and childlikeness help explain why pedophilia is not at all rare among men. It is but a (pathological) extension or mutation of men’s attraction to women.

statement, but it's implicitly what they themselves are saying when they declare that a man should exert self-control if he and a woman are drunk together. He should restrain himself, not take advantage of the woman's drunken receptiveness. Even if she says "Yes," he should act in her best interests—which, apparently, he is supposed to know better than she—and not initiate anything sexual with her. This, of course, is to say (rightly) that he should be held to a higher standard than she. In general, society should demand that men have greater control over themselves than women, since men's weaknesses can be more physically dangerous than women's. Also, men tend to be more psychologically "detached" or "sober" than women,⁷⁰ so it ought to be *easier* for them to exercise self-control.

With power comes responsibility. Men are more "powerful" (in several ways), so, by elementary moral logic, they are and should be more responsible.

*

"Comparative advantage" in human relations.— The sexes naturally define themselves in relation to each other. Men have a biologically given "comparative advantage" in physical strength, large size, height, and aggressive or even violent self-assertion, while women have the converse, complementary advantages. Not surprisingly, then, men—in all or nearly all societies—end up being defined as the relatively "dominant" sex, women as the relatively "receptive" one.⁷¹ (A kind of passiveness or receptiveness is of the essence of

⁷⁰ See Kierkegaard, Walter Lowrie trans., *The Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), the footnote on page 183. Much of what he says there cannot be countenanced, but he does show understanding of the essential psychological difference between femininity and masculinity. One can't talk about these things nowadays without being vilified, so I'll pass over them here.

⁷¹ One possible exception to this rule is the Chambri or Tchambuli people of Papua New Guinea, among whom Margaret Mead concluded that women

femininity.) These designations have nothing to do with “superior vs. inferior”; in fact, if one wants to play that game, one can easily argue that women on average are the morally superior sex, etc. But only an egregiously sexist person would make such judgments or care about them.

*

Necessary sexism. — John Keats’ poem “Woman! when I behold thee flippant, vain” has great psychological resonance. Despite its literary flaws—its mannerism, sentimentalism, exaggerations—and its condescension, it’s a wonderful and fresh expression of the masculine love for women. It’s profoundly sexist, but so is the masculine love for women (and the feminine love for men). Sexism is inescapable in human relations, but this is not the ugly kind of sexism:

...Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair;
Soft dimpled hands, white neck, and creamy breast,
Are things on which the dazzled senses rest
Till the fond, fixed eyes, forget they stare...

Ah! who can e’er forget so fair a being?
Who can forget her half retiring sweets?
God! she is like a milk-white lamb that bleats
For man’s protection. Surely the All-seeing,
Who joys to see us with his gifts agreeing,
Will never give him pinions, who intreats
Such innocence to ruin,— who vilely cheats
A dove-like bosom...

were dominant. See Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). Her interpretation is now in doubt, because of methodological flaws in her study.

Yes, it treats women as relatively passive and innocent, but it's time we stopped being dishonest and accepted that that's precisely what draws men to women—and vice versa. One wants to protect, the other to be protected. One to be impregnate, the other to be impregnated. Romantic love, after all, cannot be based on mutual equality in every regard—at most, that would get you mere respect, not love. There has to be a differentiation of roles, for it is *difference* that attracts. Each side seeks its complement. (Sane people have understood this since long before Plato's *Symposium*, right up until postmodern fantasies corrupted the rationality of the West's intellectual elite.)

As for sexism, most acts done in the presence of the opposite sex are suffused with it. And it would be odd if that weren't so. A man acting chivalrously is being sexist (because the premise of his behavior is commitment to a kind of sexual inequality). A man who acted around women the same way he acted around men—being rude, loud, vulgar, jocularly disrespectful—would be seen as incredibly inconsiderate, buffoonish, and cruel. One has to *respect* women, not treat them like men!

Many forms of sexism are awful. But, in a romantic context, not the Keatsian kind.

*

In (qualified) defense of feminism.— It's easy to ridicule feminists who don't want women to be treated differently from men *in any way whatsoever* because of the sexism that implies. You shouldn't "chivalrously" open doors for them, you shouldn't pay the bill at dinner, you shouldn't compliment them on articles of clothing if you wouldn't have complimented a man, and so forth. This ideological stance implies other bizarre notions, such as that women shouldn't be the customary "followers" in a dance, that they're demeaning themselves when they hold a man's arm while walking together (which is a self-subordinating act), that their frequent giggling—a

basically *receptive* thing—is degrading, that it’s terrible for a wife to adopt her husband’s last name, etc. Nevertheless, there is a perverse logic to the radical feminist position that, in order to be consistent, is forced to reject all this differentiation of roles. Treating women and men differently, after all, *is* sexist, if usually in very minor ways, and this mild sexism is a slippery slope. It can legitimize more overt, but still “flattering to women,” kinds of sexism, such as complimenting a beautiful woman on the bus or flirting with her, and the mentality it involves can slide into truly demeaning sexism. The feminist blanket condemnation of anything that even *hints* of sexism avoids any possible ambiguities.

One problem with it, of course, is that it’s impossible to realize in practice. Women and men often converse about different topics with their own sex than with the opposite sex; they frequently, and should, treat women more sensitively and respectfully than men; they adjust their behavior based on the values of the person with whom they’re interacting. No feminist acts in an un-sexist way (although he or she may act in a *less* sexist way than others). Awareness of sex so permeates the human mind that even imperceptible gestures, slight movements, intonation, a word here and a word there, a glance, can express “sexism,” i.e., commitment to the stereotypes connoted by the concepts “feminine” and “masculine.” Consciously one may disavow such stereotypes, but unconsciously that appears to be impossible, as revealed in the subtleties of people’s behavior.

The point, then, is just to avoid manifestations of the obnoxious and immoral kinds of sexism. The point, as always, is to be respectful—while acknowledging that being respectful requires acting differently with different people. Sometimes sexism is *necessary* to be respectful, as when taking greater care not to hurt women’s feelings than men’s. There are no universal rules on exactly how to behave all the time, since new situations are constantly arising and individuals have differing expectations and

values. The best rule of thumb is just to be empathetic and sensitive, and to recognize, for example, that behavior appropriate to a bar is not appropriate to the workplace. While feminism can be simpleminded and crude, buried in all its excesses are positive lessons.

*

Subversive common sense.— Nietzsche's self-appointed task of "re-evaluating values" isn't difficult. It requires only a slightly independent mind to see the silliness of conventional wisdom. For example, as I've said, to be "successful" typically means to conform well, not to have moral and intellectual integrity or to be a broad-minded and compassionate human being. Quite the contrary! Thus, financial and career success, in themselves, are contemptible (for many reasons, actually).

Or, being a man who "gets" a lot of women tends to have negative implications regarding your moral and intellectual worth. The Tucker Maxes of the world are beloved by young women, while the merely good or overly intellectual men are not. There is nothing admirable about being charismatic or seducing females by projecting "masculine dominance."

Or, to act morally, while always a good thing, is usually psychologically indistinguishable from acting so as to be thought well of by others. Even if you *want* to do something considered immoral or unkind, you take the easy way out and fit in with the crowd.

Or, most leftists conform almost as much as everyone else, only in a different milieu. To question Leninism in the International Socialist Organization will get you ostracized or expelled; to point out obvious truths about human biology and psychology to feminists will get you demonized as a misogynist; to offer slight qualifications to anarchism in some anarchist group will get you hated as an authoritarian; and hipsters are embarrassing. Ideologically defined groups are no credit to humanity.

Or, an “intellectual” can, to a good first approximation, be defined as an educated person who loves to hear himself or herself talk. Other criteria can be given: one should have no commitment to truth for its own sake, one should take others seriously as long as they have a few letters after their name, one should care far more about career goals than mentoring students, etc.

Or, being a soldier, that oh-so-noble vocation, requires a unique skill-set: being uniquely willing to submit to orders without question, being willing to kill others only because you’ve been told to, and being naïve enough to believe that there’s something called “my country” for which you should fight, because you’ve been told to.

Or, children are more interesting and independent than adults, who have matured into a propriety-worshipping, authority-respecting, penny-pinching old age.

Or, believing in God makes you *less* moral than atheists, because it supposedly means you act morally mainly for God’s sake (not humans’ —or only indirectly), and it’s a way of disrespecting the suffering of billions of people (God is just), and, most likely, it means you’re prejudiced in various ways.

Or, the U.S. government is second only to the Nazis in the number of people it has killed or helped kill. (Actually, in two hundred years, from the Indians to the Iraqis and beyond, we’ve surely taken first place.)

Or, the glorious “free market” means that starving people without money can’t eat, and public education or public transportation or social welfare doesn’t exist, and future generations don’t have a say in what kind of world we leave them (because they lack money), and nothing can interfere with the reduction of people and nature and life itself to *commodities*.

Or, the U.S. Communist Party, for all its faults, basically began the Civil Rights Movement in the 1930s, organizing whites and blacks to fight for their collective economic, political, and civil rights. Social welfare in the U.S. was born in response to Communist

agitation and stimulation of mass protest in the early 1930s. In the 1940s and '50s authorities crushed the new laborite institutions that had nurtured racial equality and solidarity, so the later Civil Rights Movement had to be organized mainly around churches rather than unions.

—See? It's not hard.

*

The anti-academic.— The academic fetish of discursiveness has led to the sorry state of affairs wherein a single paragraph of my writing has more content than most scholarly books.

*

The exception to Kantian morality. (A Nietzschean indulgence.)— A “great man” should not, and does not, treat himself as an end, but as a means. He has a violent, antagonistic relationship with himself: he exploits himself, enslaves himself, works himself to the bone. Every droplet of talent he has he wrings out, sweats out in exhausting self-floggings; and if his body cries out in fatigue he spits on it in contempt. And yet in another sense he is a perfect Kantian: *duty* is all that he respects. Duty to himself, the duty to become a god. Pity has no place in his morality.

*

On the sublime.— For people with spirit, a sublime experience is often less sublime if it's shared. The sublimity is concentrated in the solitude. The more people, the less profound. This is probably because the presence of others distracts from the intensity of one's aesthetic contemplation.

*

On stupidity.— One of the books I'd like to write someday is a comprehensive investigation of stupidity. Particularly stupidity in the

realm of thought. I want to demonstrate its ubiquity, from politics to philosophy and so forth, and then try to explain it in various ways, using biology, psychology, and commonsense reasoning. It's just astonishing how *bad* people are at most kinds of thinking (including empathy, etc.), and I want to understand this. In part it's a result of contemporary social structures, but in part there must be biological and psychological causes.

I'm not talking about things that require real talent, such as quantum physics or hyper-abstract philosophical reasoning or even being good at reading maps. I'm talking about common sense. Very few celebrated philosophers have philosophical common sense (for instance, they ask idiotic questions like "Can computers think?" or "Can computers understand language?,"⁷² etc.); radical feminists and postmodernists have utterly stupid ideas about biology's irrelevance to gender norms or the mind being a nearly blank slate; intellectuals have idiotic conceptions of how politics works, and they have no institutional self-understanding; Leninists think it's possible for "the working class" to take over the national state, while many anarchists are convinced that if only the state were abolished things would be great. And then there's the political right wing, and ordinary people everywhere. Wherever I turn, I'm suffocated by this miasma of stupidity.

The first task is to distinguish between the types of stupidity. As I said, I don't find a simple lack of talent to be particularly interesting. Everyone lacks some talents. I myself am a moron at activities that require visual-spatial intelligence or kinesthetic intelligence, and I'm pretty bad at mathematics. Such facts are in large part a function of one's genetic endowment, and so there is really nothing that needs

⁷² In recent decades an incredible amount of "research" in philosophy, the cognitive sciences, and artificial intelligence has been devoted to answering questions like these. As Chomsky says, it all consists of "confused attempt[s] to answer a question that has no meaning." Chomsky, *Powers and Prospects* (London: Pluto Press, 1996), 40.

explaining. A lack of social intelligence, which has much to do with a subtle deficiency in empathy, is a little more interesting: I've always been intrigued by people who talk about themselves endlessly, unaware of how boring they are. Or people who act awkwardly without knowing it. (Introverts, on the other hand, are often aware of their occasional awkwardness but can't do much about it. Sometimes they just don't know what to say, or they're *too* aware of themselves as viewed by others, and so end up being uncomfortably quiet.) But this isn't so mysterious: aside from its being obviously, in part, a reflection of straightforward genetic factors, social unintelligence is somewhat explainable by the fact that people are more interested in themselves than others. Necessarily so. With some, this manifests itself partly in a lack of sensitivity to other people's reactions. They enjoy talking so much more than listening that it can seem as though all you have to do is shove a person in front of them and, like a pigeon responding to a stimulus, they'll launch into an extended monologue.

Incidentally, a lack of "sensitivity" (physical, emotional, and cognitive) is of course one trait—even a defining trait—of broadly unintelligent people. Arthur Schopenhauer understood this when he said, in his curmudgeonly way,

The truly stoical indifference of ordinary persons to noise is amazing; no noise disturbs them in their thinking, reading, writing, or any other work, whereas the superior mind is rendered quite incapable by it. But that very thing which makes them so insensitive to noise of every kind also makes them insensitive to the beautiful in the plastic arts, and to profound thought and fine expression in the rhetorical arts, in short, to everything that does not touch their personal interest... Actually, I have for a long time been of the opinion that the quantity of noise anyone can comfortably endure is in inverse proportion to his mental powers, and may there-

fore be regarded as a rough estimate of them. Therefore, when I hear dogs barking unchecked for hours in the courtyard of a house, I know what to think of the mental powers of the inhabitant. The man who habitually slams doors instead of shutting them with the hand, or allows this to be done in his house, is not merely ill-mannered, but also coarse and narrow-minded. That “*sensible*” in English also means “intelligent,” “judicious,” accordingly rests on an accurate and fine observation.⁷³

Schopenhauer exaggerates here, but it does seem that, for whatever reason, the different kinds of sensitivity tend (though not always) to exist together in a particular person. Someone highly sensitive to physical stimuli will also likely be sensitive—or will have the mental potential to be sensitive—to artistic and/or intellectual stimuli, and to people’s reactions to him, and to the thoughts and emotions behind people’s facial expressions (a capacity that amounts to a kind of empathy). From what I gather, neuroscience isn’t advanced enough yet to explain why this may be so—if indeed it is so.

While the psychologist Howard Gardner has famously described eight or nine different kinds of intelligence, including musical, linguistic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and so on, people usually have in mind something more general when thinking “He’s smart!” or “He’s a little slow.” This broad impression that one gets of someone’s intelligence evidently involves various modalities, including his empathy or interpersonal intelligence, his intra-personal intelligence or awareness of his own feelings, thoughts, and motives, and his linguistic intelligence or ability to verbalize thoughts, memories, feelings, etc. Together, these seem to be the main determinants of our opinion of another’s general intelligence. Of course in specific contexts other things come into play; for instance, as I said a moment ago, someone might well conclude that I personally

⁷³ From *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. II.

am not very smart if he observed my absentmindedness or my forgetfulness.

But the general mental “slowness” of many people, such as the elderly or some working-class people you see in public buses, is mildly interesting. It must have to do with the brain’s slower processing of information, or a less efficient neural circuitry than in “intelligent” brains. What role does one’s social environment play in this? Surely poor education during youth may contribute to mental slowness, or a low IQ, later in life. Physical health is certainly important: research shows that malnutrition severely hinders cognitive development in children.⁷⁴ Insofar as people in the lower classes lack the money to eat as healthfully and buy as good an education as those in the upper class, they’re at a clear disadvantage. Nor are they helped by the frequent necessity of parents to work two or more jobs—intellectually stultifying jobs—or by the unhealthy and un-nurturing home environment that may result from this fact and other stresses of low-income life.⁷⁵ Moreover, with a low income one likely has less easy access to books, high culture, varied social experiences, and other intellectual stimulation than the middle-class

⁷⁴ See, e.g., Hasanain Faisal Ghazi and Syed Aljunid, “Eating for Intelligence: Breakfast and IQ among Iraqi Children,” United Nations University, <http://unu.edu/publications/articles/eating-for-intelligence-iraqi-children.html> (accessed April 1, 2014).

⁷⁵ Such stresses in themselves appear to affect intelligence, according to research. See Amina Khan, “Poverty can sap brainpower, research shows,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2013. As for the home environment, research confirms the obvious: “the family in general, and the mother in particular, need to provide a *varied* amount of stimulation, to allow exploration, play and varieties of perceptual experience... In rearing the child, the ‘climate’ seems important—democratic but demanding, a home which encourages resourcefulness and independence. These probably lead to clearer and richer concepts, not to mention a belief in one’s ‘self.’ This all strengthens the ability to ‘cope.’” David W. Pyle, *Intelligence: An Introduction* (Boston: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979), 58.

or well-off, which may cause innate potential to atrophy. Living in dilapidated, crime-ridden neighborhoods, or in culturally barren trailer parks or low-income suburbs, may foster certain types of intelligence but rarely the kinds valorized by mainstream society. – I’ll return to the “working class” in a moment, for, despite all these disadvantages, in some respects its members show more intelligence than their supposed betters.

What I’m most intrigued—and disturbed—by is not low IQ but rather three very common deficiencies: a lack of empathy, a lack of self-insight, and a deficiency in the capacity to reason or “think abstractly.” These deficiencies seem to be spread fairly evenly throughout the U.S. population and aren’t obviously distributed by class—with the partial exception of the empathy deficit, which appears to be more common among the wealthy than the middle class or the poor.⁷⁶ This particular finding is an example of science confirming common sense. People are influenced by their social environment, which, to a great extent, amounts to their class position, since one’s economic resources largely determine where one lives, whom one interacts with, what kinds of institutions one identifies with, etc. Or, from a different perspective, in order to rise in the ranks and become “wealthy” one is often compelled to act in a generally selfish and greedy way. However you look at it, therefore, the wealthy face many pressures to develop unsympathetic character traits like arrogance, greed, and a lack of empathy. The human tendency to rationalize everything one does and justify one’s social existence further tempts the rich into adopting Social Darwinistic ideologies, such that they may have contempt rather than compassion for the poor.

Conversely, it’s well-known that the poor are far more generous than their “betters.” They give relatively more to charity than the rich do, and studies have shown that they’re “more attuned to the

⁷⁶ See Daniel Goleman, “Rich People Just Care Less,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2013.

needs of others and more committed generally to the values of egalitarianism."⁷⁷ No surprise there: knowing hardship firsthand, the poor have more compassion for the suffering. And they may well live in a more communal environment than the rich, which itself fosters mutual understanding and concern—especially since this ethic of mutualism helps the poor survive. If empathy can be called a kind of intelligence—an emotional understanding of others, an ability to imagine oneself in their shoes and see the world through their eyes—then it would seem that in this respect the poor are more “intelligent” than the socially esteemed.

On a broad scale, the dearth of empathy and the pervasiveness of stupidity throughout history have often dumbfounded progressives and radicals. The socialist Einstein famously remarked, “Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity. And I’m not sure about the universe.” (Another fun quotation of his is, “The difference between stupidity and genius is that genius has its limits.”) One can be sure that he was, at least in part, thinking of Nazism, the very epitome of a lack of empathy. And its lack of empathy made possible—indeed, was a component in—its unbelievable stupidity. Its racist thinking exemplified one classic psychological source of the empathy deficit, namely humans’ categorization of particular others as *other*—and an inferior or hateful other at that. This affective labeling evidently interferes with cognitive functioning, such that one may become insensitive to rational considerations. No amount of science or philosophy could have convinced most fervent Nazis that their hatred of “the Jew” (or the Slav, the Communist, the Gypsy, the homosexual) was idiotic; their hate was a brutal and stupid primitive “structure of feeling” in their minds that caused them to act in brutal and stupid, primitive ways. Emotional impulses directed *against* people or types of people, as opposed to impulses of openness and compassion, seem to be dangerously sus-

⁷⁷ Paul Piff, quoted in Ken Eisold, “Why Are the Poor More Generous?,” *Psychology Today*, August 23, 2010.

ceptible to a disregard of facts and logic if they contradict the content of the impulse.

In short, it is surely the case that much of the stupidity, or inability to reason objectively, that Einstein lamented is directly related to an absence of empathy and openness, and a knee-jerk psychological defensiveness. Comments on the internet, for instance, frequently provide evidence for this. At the risk of repetition, these reflections of mine from a couple years ago give an example:

Chomsky recently wrote an article describing how the rights enshrined in the Magna Carta have been shredded in the last five hundred years. Naturally, in the “Comments” section under the article online are observations to the effect that Chomsky, that horrible Commie, wants to take us back to the year 1215. Etc. An eight-year-old would understand Chomsky’s point(s), but apparently these people can’t. They’ve been indoctrinated into a pre-eight-year-old level of intelligence and rationality. They can’t interpret statements from “Commies” except through a fog of “Fuck you.” Virulent hostility toward people who challenge them so colors their mind that they *can’t understand what is being said*. It becomes impossible to consider arguments on their merits; all that really registers (implicitly) in these people’s minds is that “This horrible guy is saying ‘Fuck you!’ to me—his very existence is a ‘Fuck you!’—so I have to defend myself [i.e., my opinions and sense of self] by attacking him.” It’s a fascinating phenomenon, which gives clues as to how Nazism and concentration camps are possible. Hatred of the Other, whether Commie or Jew or whatever, *consumes the mind*, so that any capacity for lucid reasoning is lost and the other’s humanity is barely recognized. The kind of mind susceptible to this descent into semi-madness must be deeply paranoid, anxiously sensitive, insecure, prone to feeling as if

it is beset by all kinds of demons that have to be destroyed. Commies, socialists, Muslims, terrorists, gays, big government, immigrants...the whole world is against me! All these evil forces have to be destroyed! Thus: far-right conservatives.

There's a continuum, of course; not everyone who hates Chomsky has a thoroughgoing fascist, authoritarian, paranoid mindset. But most have traveled some distance down that road. (Actually, everyone to some extent shares these traits—subtly categorizing certain people and disliking them as instances of that category, etc.)

Affective and cognitive capacities are thus inextricably tied together, to the point that behavior called "cognitive," such as abstract reasoning about politics, history, and societal functioning, incorporates and is grounded in affective attitudes—acts of valuing, of caring, of implicitly sympathizing with other points of view. The more broad-minded and inclusive one can be in these affective stances, the more objective, rational, and "intelligent" one will tend to be. (Even Nietzsche, the supposed arch-perspectivist, in the *Genealogy of Morals* recognized the possibility and necessity of such objectivity: "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing'; [but] the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity,' be.") The problem is that our society of atomized relations and bitter anonymity, in producing people who are not only isolated from opposing viewpoints but also lonely, unrecognized, hostile, and defensive, discourages inclusive affective stances. Shallow, stupid, dogmatic thinking, often in the form of cruel and anti-human ideologies, is the result.

There are also more straightforward causes of the stupidity epidemic. Powerful people and institutions don't want the masses to

empower themselves on the basis of solidarity and knowledge, so they use their considerable command over resources to fragment people and keep them ignorant. The ideal is that they act and think as irrationally as possible, for instance by voting against their own economic interests, refusing to unionize, and blaming their woes on people who are even worse off than they (such as blacks or undocumented immigrants). It isn't necessary to dwell on the ways that big business accomplishes its goals of social control; suffice it to say that when business has a virtual monopoly over government and the media, the kinds of information, entertainment, commentary, ideologies, and educational policies on offer will not conduce to rationality and social understanding.⁷⁸ Instead, submissive respect for authority, slavish-mindedness (not questioning what authorities tell you), conformism, thinking-by-emotional-impulse, jingoistic identification with the "home team" (in sports, politics, and other spheres), impatience with sustained analysis as opposed to sound-bites, and lack of interest in substantive issues will be strongly encouraged and valorized—especially in an age of hyper-consumerism and a smashed labor movement. A pronounced intellectual laziness and lack of curiosity about others' beliefs will be widespread, not least because of the self-fixated personality-type manufactured by late-capitalist social structures and consumerist values. And, to repeat, the human tendency to filter out information that contradicts what one believes or wants to believe is accentuated in a society that makes it very easy to surround oneself only with like-minded people and news sources.

It must be said, too, that what someone may unthinkingly interpret as "stupidity" or irrationality is in many cases only *ignorance*.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk Out of Democracy*; Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise*; Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011/1979); and Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

To an academic like me, who has easy access to data, critical studies of society, and left-wing viewpoints, people will seem unintelligent when they engage in the kinds of simplistic discourse that proliferate on the internet and in the media. Doubtless media figures often *are* unintelligent and dogmatic; but the ordinary people one talks to are frequently merely ignorant of certain facts and opposing viewpoints, because the corporate media do not propagate them. It's lazy and elitist to interpret such ignorance as unintelligence or an indication of it.

All this helps explain the disturbing phenomenon of mass irrational and anti-factual thinking, but I'm still not quite satisfied. Despite understanding these factors, I remain surprised and bewildered each time I encounter a new instance of stupidity. For example, it mystifies me that millions of people can think the 9/11 attack in New York was planned by George W. Bush and/or his associates. Even after hearing compelling arguments against the conspiracy theory, they cling to it. They're unmoved by the argument that even to *attempt* such an improbable and certain-to-be-leaked plot would require literal insanity; or that if the goal was to have an excuse to invade Iraq, it would have made much more sense to blame the attack on Iraqis rather than Saudis (especially since Saudi Arabia is an important ally of the U.S.); or that, in fact, there *was* no leak, which is an impossibility if the plot existed (because its complexity is such that many, many people would have had to be involved, and someone certainly would have leaked the story). Like so many other believers of odd theories, these people are *committed* to an idea and will let nothing stand in the way of their commitment. *What is it like* to have a mind like that? I want to understand how it's possible, but on some level I simply can't. All I can do is state truisms about these people being unable to reason dispassionately on a particular set of issues, or thinking in terms of faith rather than disinterested logic. But, in fact, that seems to apply to *most people*—ultimately to everyone, in certain ways, but some more so than others. Most people, for

reasons having to do with both their genes and their social upbringing (nature and nurture), evidently don't have a rigorously self-critical, logical, "broad-minded rationality"-governed cast of mind. The Chomskys are rare, the Sarah Palins common.

But you don't have to go to the extremes of Sarah Palin and Michelle Bachmann to find examples of a relative lack of interest in logical and evidence-based reasoning, or the kinds of "insensitivity" I mentioned in the context of the Schopenhauer quotation above. They're very common—throughout history.⁷⁹ I have to conclude that nature has designed humans, on the whole, to be creatures less of impartial reason and intellection than of emotion, sexuality, play, self-expression, sensitivity to personal interest, and brute *habit*. This appears to be a transhistorical fact, and thus, probably, is a biologically determined one. In particular, the priority of habit over reason and open-mindedness is striking. We get used to thinking and behaving in certain ways, and it becomes difficult to accept any change. In this sense, humans, like all other species, tend to be conservative, basing their existence on various forms of *repetition*. There is comfort and stability in routine, repetition, habit, the use of already-formed schemata to interpret experiences; and the brain itself evidently prefers to use old neural pathways instead of forging new ones, except when it must. Thus we're averse to changing our minds on an issue or adopting a new affective/cognitive stance—especially if the opinions we already hold have become integrated into our sense of self. In some cases, to change our mind might even necessitate changes in behavior or lifestyle, a very uncomfortable thing. In short, we *value* our beliefs; and to adopt new values, so to speak, isn't easy. Moreover, in this context it means admitting we

⁷⁹ To give a personal example: all through my years of schooling I was constantly frustrated by the academic dullness of my classmates. Their lack of interest in, and understanding of, everything from mathematics to history to classical music baffled me. Like most people, they were (understandably) more interested in socializing with peers, partying, etc.

were wrong about something or were thinking about it in a superficial way, an admission that can be painful, especially if one has a fragile sense of self (as many or most do, regardless of the brave show they put on).

Such considerations help explain why it's frequently so hard to change someone's mind on an issue. In fact, people's beliefs often have the character of lazily held *prejudices*, whether or not we call them prejudices in the narrow sense. Rarely have they been arrived at through processes of disinterested reasoning; more often they're products of socialization, indoctrination, peer-group pressure, and gradual exposure to new views that slowly come to seem less exotic and more familiar, hence "acceptable." For instance, according to Gallup polls, in 2009 only 40 percent of Americans thought that same-sex couples should have the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples; by 2014, that number had risen to 55 percent. The reason is probably just that more people got *used* to the idea—it seemed less strange and radical—as media coverage expanded and more states legalized gay marriage. Most of those who changed their mind, I suspect, were persuaded not by specific arguments—they didn't have an "Aha!" moment—but rather by a process of *acclimation*. The majority of people simply don't *care* about arguments very much, or even about ideas, in the sense of wanting to rationally evaluate ideas on their merits and so "disinterestedly" accept or reject them. They have other interests, typically revolving around sociality and self-expression. Their lack of interest is probably both a cause and an effect of a lack of intellectual ability/acuity/sensitivity, in part genetically and in part socially determined.

While I haven't seen any research on this, I suspect that what's usually involved in adopting a new perspective on a subject is a mostly *unconscious* process of acclimation and assimilation. One's *inclinations* or *predispositions* change, as it were. For people who are more intelligent and rational than others—that is, who are able to consider ideas relatively disinterestedly, divorced from any emo-

tional valences they may have—the process of “changing one’s mind” is correspondingly under more conscious control, such that they have more free will. But even for these people, once they have decided on a certain viewpoint, they are definitely inclined—“inertially,” so to speak—to persist in it. Their minds are *less* brutally and unconsciously inertial than others’, but no one is immune to these unconscious and inertial influences. We all have an implicit “web of beliefs” in our mind, an affective and cognitive framework of ideology-fragments, background assumptions about people and the world, intellectual and emotional residues of previous experiences, commitments to particular values and social groups. Insofar as this framework is semi-coherent, changing certain beliefs might necessitate changing many others. Besides, the whole “framework” itself, which in its totality is essentially the very cast of one’s mind, tends to be quite rigid (the more so as one gets older). The question is: to what extent is the mental framework with which one interprets the world factually grounded, rationally justifiable, and open to new influences? Given both the authoritarian nature of modern society and most people’s evident lack of intellectual interest and acuity, it’s hardly surprising that the usual answer is “not very.”

Recent research has led to conclusions that are especially unflattering to political conservatives. Supporting the findings of that classic work of social psychology *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), scientists are discovering that “liberals and conservatives disagree about politics in part because they are different people at the level of personality, psychology, and even traits like physiology and genetics.”⁸⁰ As several scholars write, “There is by now evidence from a variety of laboratories around the world using a variety of methodological techniques leading to the virtually inescapable conclusion that the cognitive-motivational styles of leftists and rightists are quite differ-

⁸⁰ Chris Mooney, “Scientists Are Beginning to Figure Out Why Conservatives Are...Conservative,” *Mother Jones*, July 15, 2014. Italics in original.

ent. This research consistently finds that conservatism is positively associated with heightened epistemic concerns for order, structure, closure, certainty, consistency, simplicity, and familiarity, as well as existential concerns such as perceptions of danger, sensitivity to threat, and death anxiety.”⁸¹ Liberals tend to be more open to new experiences and more empathetic, while conservatives care more about purity, authority, conformity, and in-group/out-group status. They are more sensitive to negative stimuli, such as disgust and danger, than liberals.⁸² Inasmuch as empathy, openmindedness, curiosity, and tolerance of uncertainty can reasonably be thought to correlate with high intelligence and rationality, it would seem, then, that liberals and leftists are on average more intelligent than conservatives. Indeed, research has consistently shown that the socially conservative tend to be less intelligent than the socially liberal.⁸³ Conservatives also seem more prone than liberals to believing *more strongly* in mistaken beliefs after being shown evidence that these beliefs are wrong.⁸⁴ On the other hand, subjects were more likely to be open-minded if they were first asked to do an

⁸¹ Quoted in *ibid.* The inclusion of “consistency” in this list is odd, since it is easy to demonstrate that rightwing and fascist ideologies are more or less incoherent.

⁸² John Hibbing, Kevin Smith, and John Alford, “Differences in Negativity Bias Underlie Variations in Political Ideology,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 37 (2014): 297–350.

⁸³ See Ronald Bailey, “Are Conservatives Dumber Than Liberals?,” *Reason.com*, June 13, 2014; Satoshi Kanazawa, “Why Liberals Are More Intelligent Than Conservatives,” *Psychology Today*, March 21, 2010; Rebecca Searles, “Intelligence Study Links Low I.Q. To Prejudice, Racism, Conservatism,” *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2012; John Cloud, “Study: Are Liberals Smarter Than Conservatives?,” *Time*, February 26, 2010.

⁸⁴ Marty Kaplan, “The Most Depressing Discovery About the Brain, Ever,” *AlterNet*, September 16, 2013. For example, “people who thought WMDs were found in Iraq believed that misinformation even more strongly when they were shown a news story correcting it.”

activity that made them feel good about themselves—a result that suggests the importance of a healthy, confident sense of self to rational and open-minded thinking. This supports the reasonable idea, referred to above, that dogmatic, irrational, and unempathetic thinking is at least sometimes caused by a deficiency in the sense of self. Thus, to repeat, it's likely that a society with less anti-social structures and values than our own would produce a more rational and intelligent—and informed—population.

Despite all this research critical of conservatives, liberals and leftists are perfectly capable of being dogmatic and irrational themselves. I've already given the example of 9/11 Truthers. Liberal supporters of Obama are another group of people with whom it is frequently futile to argue. They have such an "affective attachment" to Obama that confronting them with evidence and compelling arguments that, e.g., he has too often supported big business over people, presided over an incredibly dangerous expansion of the national security state, been content to *increase* the threat and presence of terror in the world through his global drone-killing campaign, done precious little to address global warming, etc., often only elicits silly rationalizations and *ad hominem* attacks. In these cases it's hard to avoid the conclusion that the liberal's affective commitments are making him insensitive to another, more rational perspective (more rational in that, given the liberal's basic values of freedom, democracy, and social welfare, a consideration of facts makes it more consistent to criticize Obama than to support him).

Of course no one is totally immune to stupidity and irrationality, because the human mind is not a rational machine. What's disturbing is the frequency of these things, not their existence. Consider intellectuals again. Upon perusing philosophical scholarship, for instance, an intelligent and rational layman is likely to be struck by the sheer perverseness of many of the ideas he comes across. The theories of extended mind, of eliminative materialism, of modal realism, of anti-realism in accounts of what 'truth' is (accounts that

reject the correspondence theory of truth), as well as the (incoherent) postmodern denial that there is such a thing as “objective truth,” and the common dismissal of the utterly obvious Chomskyan idea that the human capacity for language is a species-specific genetic fact, and countless other bizarre positions, show how difficult *sensible* abstract thinking can be for intellectuals. Earlier I mentioned the peculiar phenomenon of scholars in political science, history, economics, sociology, and other such disciplines denying the existence of class, or that the agendas of government and the media are overwhelmingly the agendas of the rich, or that materialism (as in Marx, Charles Beard, Thomas Ferguson, Walter LaFeber) is far more realistic and analytically powerful than idealism. And I needn’t repeat the arguments I’ve brought against certain feminist ideologies beloved by liberal academics.

To the question “How is all this woolly thinking possible?,” the answers are fairly obvious and have already been suggested. Their premise is that many or most people are somewhat easily indoctrinated and aren’t very acute thinkers, who can turn a critical eye on everything and “intuitively,” imaginatively analyze it in the light of objectivity. Certainly very few people have Chomsky’s razor-sharp logical vision, which somehow can quickly grasp the essence of a matter and parse it clearly. In the extreme form it takes with him, this is ultra-rationality: a minimal determination by (semi-)emotional states of mind, social and ideological conventions, *ad hominem* attitudes, mere *habit*, and a maximal ability to “step outside oneself” and see things in their proper relations to each other by taking—insofar as is humanly possible—a God’s-eye point of view, or something like it.⁸⁵ This Chomskyan hyper-rationality is a very

⁸⁵ This is the meaning, for instance, of Chomsky’s precept that we should apply to ourselves the rational and moral standards we apply to others—something that is rarely done—and try to view ourselves as others might view us. As for not being manipulated by emotions: it’s of course true that any passionate leftist can get quite emotional about politics. The point,

specific *talent*, which people have to varying degrees. Among most intellectuals, evidently, it isn't closely approximated.

Thus, these people have fairly pliable natures: they are taught and socialized to think and act in certain ways, and they willingly do so, assuming that these are the best ways and not devoting much time to critically examining their beliefs and ways of doing things. Or, if they do devote time to that, they must lack a particular *ability*. This seems like the best explanation of why some people, who have been subjected to basically the same influences as others, nonetheless manage to think in more sensible and rational ways.⁸⁶ Most philosophers, for example, think mainly on the level of *words*, not "the things themselves" (to quote Edmund Husserl). They discuss concepts and terms like perdurantism and endurantism, dualism and monism, functionalism and emergentism, playing with arguments and modifying them to make them more consistent...never trying to get *beneath* the superficial level of words and think in a deeper, more *intuitive* way.⁸⁷ Hence they end up with wildly implausible positions like denial of the private character of consciousness, or they argue endlessly over false and shallow alternatives without trying to "dissolve" the puzzles by showing how they arise out of mistaken ways of thinking.

however, is that the emotions (to the extent possible) have to come *after* the reasoning, so to speak. The latter should ground the former, not vice versa.

⁸⁶ Another factor may be that some people, through accident or mental independence or curiosity, at an early age are exposed to different and more rational ideas than the mainstream, and are to that extent inoculated against indoctrination.

⁸⁷ Saul Kripke is one of the few philosophers who appreciates the importance of intuition, as is clear from his books *Naming and Necessity* (1972) and *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (1982). Others include Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx (though not explicitly), Nietzsche, Frege, and the twentieth-century phenomenologists, whose method was intuitive and introspective.

In fact, the fixation on *words* rather than *substance* is a very common cause and manifestation of stupidity and irrationality. In the broader society it means not only shallow thinking, as with academics, but also such an extreme emotional attachment or aversion to certain words that clear thinking becomes impossible. All it takes is that one invoke terms like free market, conservative, liberal, socialism, communism, welfare, terrorist, big government, Democrat, Republican, Obama—or, among feminists, misogyny, sexism, victim-blaming, “mansplain”—and, as often as not, lucid thinking is thrown out the window. People accept or reject something on the basis of a mere label that serves as a disguised value-judgment, i.e., ‘Bad!’ or ‘Good!’ Emotional content effaces cognitive content. The human mind’s susceptibility to this phenomenon of emotional labeling has been incredibly useful to power-structures’ use of propaganda in the last hundred years, as a way to manipulate people into thinking irrationally.

I won’t give examples of *conservative* label-fixation, since they’re too obvious. (Some given thing or idea is automatically wrong and horrible because of its association with communism or homosexuals or atheists or black people, etc.) Slightly more interesting are those leftists who fall victim to the same pathology. For instance, after Richard Dawkins argued once that some forms of rape and pedophilia are worse than others, feminists and others among the political-correctness police flooded the liberal media with outrage at what a horrible person Dawkins must be in order to have said that. It didn’t matter that even a rational eight-year-old could have seen he was right: it’s obviously worse to, say, anally rape a child than to briefly touch his genitals and do nothing else (which is the example Dawkins gave); it’s worse to violently force oneself upon a screaming, protesting woman than to have sex with her when both partners are drunk and the woman two days later decides she was “raped.” But the words ‘rape’ and ‘child abuse’ are so charged that some people become *unable to make distinctions* when they hear them. They

reverse the meaning of Dawkins' statement, so to speak: while his real meaning was that some kinds of behavior are more horrific than others, they interpret him as saying that some forms of child abuse and rape are okay or not so bad. And then they protest, "No, child abuse is never okay!" and feel good about themselves for taking such a courageous moral stance. In reality, they're sub-rational morons, at least in that moment of being unable to understand a moral truism.⁸⁸

Anyway, these pathologies fortunately are not universal among the populace, being, probably, more common among the elite than the poor. Since it's the more educated and privileged sectors of the population that are most inundated by propaganda and indoctrination, it should be no surprise that some of the most rational and clear-headed thinking exists among the lower classes. The white lower class is a partial exception, to the extent that it identifies with the middle class and has contempt for those lower in status. But, in the U.S., low-income blacks and Hispanics, as groups, probably have a more defensible picture of society than any other socio-economic group does. For example, a recent poll found that blacks are—justifiably—increasingly pessimistic that progress is being made toward racial equality, an attitude that contrasts with that of the mainstream.⁸⁹ A study in 2013 found that higher percentages of minorities say global warming is happening and want the president to take action to address the issue.⁹⁰ In general, it's widely

⁸⁸ In fact, it's these people who are making the really offensive claim. For they're effectively saying it isn't worse to violently rape a five-year-old than to stroke the genitals of a fourteen-year-old (which, of course, is awful too). Such an opinion strikes me as obscene.

⁸⁹ Carol Morello, "African Americans are more pessimistic about racial progress, poll finds," *Washington Post*, August 22, 2013.

⁹⁰ Margarite Suozzo-Gole, "Fact Sheet: Polling the American Public on Climate Change," Environmental and Energy Study Institute, April 2013, http://www.eesi.org/files/FactSheet_polling_040213.pdf.

recognized that low-income minorities, and to an extent low-income whites, tend to have more progressive political views than the mainstream—and progressive views (with very few exceptions) are demonstrably more rational, evidence-based, and empathy-based than conservative views.

I still haven't said much about the third kind of unintelligence I mentioned above: people's lack of self-insight and their (or rather our) remarkable capacity for self-deception. To a degree this phenomenon can be explained by factors I've already invoked, such as low introspective ability, emotional or empathic insensitivity, and susceptibility to indoctrination. But in fact the question of self-deception is such a vast and difficult subject, which has inspired so much literature in philosophy and psychology, that it can hardly be touched upon here. Contrary to what Sartre argued, the mind is profoundly opaque to itself; in many respects we are constantly deceiving ourselves (without knowing it), telling ourselves stories to bolster our self-regard, passing lightly over incidents that might contradict our self-interpretations, refusing to probe deeply into matters that make us uncomfortable because we fear what they might reveal about us, and willingly accepting people's facile approval of us as confirmation of our value. We attribute noble motives to ourselves when a moment of intelligent self-reflection would show that money or power or sex is the deeper motive. We call others cowardly or greedy or selfish without "stepping outside ourselves" to acknowledge that our own behavior is so as well. We tell ourselves we feel a certain way about someone when our real feelings (as shown by how we treat him or her) are quite different. In general, we run on autopilot most of the time, living on the glib and facile level of sociability, not *thinking* about things but just *behaving*, persisting in habits, refusing to subject ourselves to the ruthless rule of reason. It's an understandable and tempting way to live, but not a productive or healthy one.

*

A note on Populism.— Despite my appreciation of America's Populist movement in the 1890s, I have to admit that insofar as its ideology was based on a *geographical* opposition to the East, to Wall Street and northeastern America, it was dangerous and bore the seeds of later semi-fascist unthinking conservatism. For geographical concerns cut across class lines and can easily become cultural or even racial. People can start hating not only big business but everything else associated with a particular region, such as civil rights, secular thinking, and "intrusive" government. Businessmen can be celebrated just by virtue of having originated in the "us" region (as opposed to the "them" region) and sharing some of its cultural values, such as Sam Walton did, the founder of Walmart.⁹¹ This sort of populism is easily manipulated by business and the public-relations industry, so that ordinary people wake up thirty years later to find that their working conditions at good ol' Sam's business are intolerable, they're paid little, and their communities are falling apart. —In short, the more a populist ideology strays from a focus on *class*, the more easily it can become fascist.

*

Nietzschean thoughts.— *Ressentiment*, or resentment of a person for his perceived superiority, success, vitality, etc., is a quintessentially feminine illness, and a modern one.⁹² Insecure self-consciousness, self-criticism, a distant cousin of "compulsive awareness of oneself as an object of someone else's observation," to quote the psychoanalyst R. D. Laing's definition of self-consciousness. Indeed, schizophrenia [which Laing discussed at length] is probably at least

⁹¹ See Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

⁹² On its feminine aspect, see Max Scheler's *Ressentiment* (New York: Schocken, 1972/1912). For example, "the strong feminine tendency to indulge in detractive gossip is evidence [of *ressentiment*]; it is a form of self-cure."

sometimes related to *ressentiment*, an extreme version of it. Perhaps generalized so as to be directed at all people. Acute insecurity, acute lack of self-confidence and self-identity, resentment towards reality as a whole (precisely because it is “whole”). Like schizophrenia can be, *ressentiment* is caused by a lack of (self-)confirmation from the other, from the world, from oneself. It can be analyzed in terms of a deficiency of recognition. And there are many ways to deal with it, for example the Christian way that Nietzsche writes about, or Sarah Palinian conservatism: “We rednecks are the true America, not those liberal elites in New York, and we’re proud of our simplicity, our traditions, our guns.” There’s *ressentiment* in that: turning one’s perceived inferiority (how the Other views one) into a strength, one’s greatest source of pride. “You think I’m ignorant? Well, fine, I’m proud of my ignorance!” Defining oneself in relation to the dominant other: *he is bad, so I, being different, am good*, rather than the more ‘masterly’ *I am good (obviously), so he, being different, is bad, i.e. contemptible*. One pathology this *ressentiment*-fueled insecurity can lead to is that of the authoritarian personality, whether fascist (which is most common), religious, feminist, Leninist, or even anarchist. One adopts a rigid, dogmatic, prejudiced, even *cruel* mentality in order to protect oneself from the pain of self-doubt, the undermining of one’s fragile—brittle—sense of self.

*

Sociology meets psychology.— The sociological concept of “relative deprivation” is useful and thought-provoking. One aspect of it occurs when “privation is felt to be painful only in reference to others who are seen as possessing the prized values.” (Desire is mediated by consciousness of the other, as Hegel would say.) When you’re unhappy you typically, albeit implicitly, want others to be unhappy. If equality of unhappiness is established, you’re not so unhappy anymore. And you have little or no *ressentiment* anymore. You want to be equal to or better than other people because self-

esteem is mediated by consciousness of the other's attitude (implicit or explicit) towards you. If the other doesn't respect you, it's hard to respect yourself—because in a sense you are the other, or rather the other is a part of you (such that you are *your own* other, you're aware of yourself as an other).⁹³

*

Anti-ressentiment.— “What I most resent people for is their *smallness*,” says the frustrated idealist, “because it makes me think that life itself is small.”

*

Against Nietzsche.— Nietzsche was indisputably brilliant, but his way of writing doesn't lend itself to the disinterested pursuit of truth. His impassioned, sarcastic, lightning-quick style is more like literature than proper philosophy or science. Indeed, if his ideas are distilled into their essence, divested of their decorative eloquence, they become no more than *interesting perspectives*—and there become fewer of them. (His writing is somehow dense and diffuse at the same time.) As for the content of his philosophy, I'll only make the obvious point that, like so many brilliant psychologists, he greatly overestimates the importance of psychology and underestimates the importance of institutional structures. He reduces everything to body and psyche, to an individual's physical health, mental character, emotional vitality, and the influence of such asocial elements as climate and weather. It doesn't occur to him that not everything is *affect*; it is possible, e.g., for thinkers simply to follow trains of thought that seem plausible to them, their affective or bodily needs having nothing to do with the matter. Reason *can be* relatively

⁹³ I don't mean that *other people* are literally part of you. I mean the “Other” is. Other people are instantiations of the abstract Other in you, which is an integral part of your self-awareness. But the Other is also outside you, realized in (or as) these people.

autonomous, and it's a treacherous task to read something into a person's psychology from the fact that he holds certain beliefs.⁹⁴ Nor does it occur to Nietzsche that people are so enmeshed in social structures that it is more often these, not individual psychologies, that determine beliefs, even much behavior. —Marxism is the way to go, though Nietzsche is a worthy adversary.

*

Against Freud.— To think that people desire *pleasure* more than *recognition* (validation) is ridiculous. Virtually every facet of society points to the priority of recognition over mere pleasure. Culture may be partly a sublimation of libidinal drives, but it is even more a manifestation of the human need for the other's esteem.

*

On the formation of the self.— It's significant that children refer to themselves in the third person before they do so in the first person. It shows they don't yet have a clear or full conception of their own subjectivity, which means there is not a clear opposition in their mind between self and other. Only after years of conflict between self and other, i.e., confrontation between one's own perspective and others', does one deeply internalize the viewpoint of the other and so attain full self-awareness as a self distinct from all others in the world. Selfhood is attained through, and is synonymous with, a kind of mental conflict and contradiction. This conflict intensifies and gives new meaning to the urge for self-confirmation that is in some primitive form present in all living things. (With regard to the vast majority of organisms, the concept of self-confirmation is more metaphorical than literal.)

*

⁹⁴ It can be done, but not in the promiscuous way Nietzsche does it.

The phenomenology of greeting someone.— Hand-shaking and hand-waving as greetings are amusing to think about. Two selves approach each other; they wave at each other, or they shake hands. What is happening there? What's the significance of these hand motions? Common sense says they signify recognition, and common sense is right. But the matter is deeper than some such glib statement. Two selves are together in the same room or the same elevator or the same area; until they show that they recognize each other as selves, a subtle tension is quite possibly in the air. Coming in contact with the other...but not acknowledging or being acknowledged by him or her (or them)...can produce a slight or mighty dissonance in the mind. The moment can be uncomfortable. So then someone breaks the silence and a mutual or collective sigh of relief is felt, and people joke together or engage in pleasant small-talk. The ice is broken. One has been confirmed as one has confirmed. One's implicit self-love has been at least weakly validated by the recognition of one as a self worth greeting. Similarly, with a hand-wave to another self in the distance...one moves one's arm and hand from side to side, shakes them back and forth several times—this seemingly comically arbitrary movement—to indicate “I acknowledge you as a person, a self with enough value to be worth acknowledging, in the expectation or knowledge that you so acknowledge me.” And with the hand-shake...two hands clasped together arbitrarily moving up and down two or three times...two selves are meeting in mental space on apparently equal footing. Countless such rituals have evolved throughout history to deal with the simple but fundamental circumstance in which *self meets other*.

*

On boredom.— Why is boredom painful? *What is boredom?* David Foster Wallace included some reflections on this question in his last novel. To quote a review of it, “Perhaps, he writes, ‘dullness [or boredom] is associated with psychic pain because something that’s

dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there,' namely the existential knowledge 'that we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back.'" Nope. That ain't it. Nice try, David. Such thoughts may come in moments of dullness, but they are side-effects and not intrinsic to the pain. The pain is primitive, not mediated by some awareness of life's meaninglessness. For me, the pain of something boring like filling out tax forms is associated with an impression of *unfreedom*. A *visceral* impression, not necessarily conscious. I'm being forced to engage in something that has only a negative relation to my sense of self and my spontaneous self-expressing; the tax form is impinging on my self-contained world. Not only does it not provide me with self-confirmation; it denies me, blocks my impulses and ignores them. It is impersonal and obnoxiously not-responsive-to-me. Thus, it flouts and insults my underlying self-regard, my urge toward self-activity. So I'm "bored," being prevented from asserting myself (from putting my self into the world and appropriating the world into my self).

"How can these hypotheses be tested?" you rebuke me, channeling the philosopher Karl Popper. "How can one evaluate Wallace's hypothesis versus yours?" You simply have to reason through the arguments, judge them in the light of what you know about human experience, introspect to detect thoughts that are implicit in your mind during moments of boredom, etc. Do you think it's likely that humans' fundamental impulse is to constantly seek things to distract them from the painful knowledge that "we are tiny and at the mercy of large forces and that time is always passing and that every day we've lost one more day that will never come back"? I don't. That strikes me as wildly implausible, for many reasons. So then you're led to my hypothesis, and you have to evaluate that one too in similar ways. Anyway, the truth of my ideas

is evident from the simple fact that “I don’t *want to do this!*” is implicit in my mind when I do taxes (or talk to people at a boring party, or whatever). I “want to do” *something*—I want to express myself in *some way*, real-ize my self-regard somehow—but not in *this way*, because this is a *denial* of my self-regard. It makes a mockery of it by mocking my desires, my impulses, my freedom.

*

Our natural habitat.— A typically effective cure for boredom is to step outside.

*

An email to Chomsky, on philosophy.— “I’m interested in your thoughts on the philosophical issue of causality. Do you think (with Hume and Kant, I suppose) that reason is inadequate to fully understand it? Is it just one of those inexplicable mysteries, comparable in that respect to free will? —For instance, it would seem that a cause has to be either temporally prior to or coincident with its effect. But with regard to the latter possibility, one is inclined to ask, ‘How can something *cause* something else if they happen at the *same time—together*, so to speak?’ And with regard to the former possibility, the question arises of what the time lapse is between the cause and effect. Even if it’s infinitesimal, though, the question can be posed: how can the cause give rise to an effect *after* the cause has ceased to function? Shouldn’t the effect be brought about while the cause is still functioning? But then we’re led back to the first question. In short, the whole issue is paradoxical.” He agreed that those were good questions but said he had nothing new or interesting to say about them.

It’s possible there is something sophisticated about the paradox, but I can’t quite put my finger on it. One thing that seems necessary is to distinguish between different kinds of causality.

*

Another email exchange with Chomsky.— Me: “I’m curious what you think about a subject that has always fascinated me, as it has many philosophers and scientists. Modern science teaches us that ‘secondary qualities’ [such as smell and color] do not inhere in external objects or ‘things in themselves,’ but that they are constructed by the brain through its manipulation of sensory data. The world we perceive is not the world in itself. I see a brown table, but ‘really’ what is out there are molecules, electromagnetic waves, etc., not the object I see. So, when I turn around, for example, and look somewhere else, the table is ‘gone’; what remain are the only elements that were always there, namely the colorless particles and waves that physics postulates. Thus, in a sense our brains are massively deceiving us, somewhat like Descartes’s demon, in causing us to think that the objects we perceive have real, mind-independent existence. The world in itself has almost nothing in common with the world we perceive.

“I don’t see any other way of interpreting modern science, but I’m curious if you disagree.”

Him: “Descartes would have pretty much agreed. His theory of perception was based on the idea that the internal structure of the perceptual system interacts with external data to determine what we perceive. Thus, to pick one of his examples, if I look at an audience in a talk, I perceive people, but I’m constructing that visual interpretation from very scattered and limited data, ideas that were developed significantly in the 17th century and beyond. I don’t see what alternative there is.”

All this seems profoundly obvious, but many philosophers have somehow managed to convince themselves that this “scientific realism”—which is surely the only view that can explain the success of science—is false. The logical positivists, for example, or earlier subjective idealists, or later postmodernists. These people aside, is it not astonishing that nature has, evidently, designed human brains to be so alike that each person perceives essentially the same world as

every other? The brain conjures a magnificent three-dimensional, kaleidoscopic, ordered world out of the colorless chaos of nature-in-itself—and every brain conjures that same world! In other words, we're basically copies of each other, with very marginal differences in "personal traits" and so on. We are truly miracles, and wonder is the most appropriate reaction to ourselves and our relation to the universe.

*

The subjective prison.— In asking what matter "is" in itself, what its "essence" is, we're basically, albeit implicitly, asking what its essential appearance is. We want to imagine it, imagine what it looks like—in itself. ("What does real, mind-independent, external matter look like?") But obviously that question contradicts itself: it presupposes a subject to which matter is appearing at the same time that it imagines away the subject, trying to get at the objective material world as it is in itself. "Essential appearance"? That's a contradiction in terms! So the very question is misguided. This shows how hopeless is the human attempt to truly understand the world, how hopelessly in the dark we are. We can't escape the subjective perspective.

*

Reflections on "meaning."— What would it be for life to have (a) meaning? What would life look like if it had meaning? It would be *purposive* in character: its cosmic structure, so to speak, would be oriented towards a purpose. There would be a fundamental purpose or design behind everything that happened. At the very least, all the events in an individual's life could be related—*would* be related—to a cosmic teleology. *Chance* would have no dominion. A person would get his just rewards. In short, there would be an intelligible reason for everything, including the existence of mankind and the world itself. Natural selection through random genetic variation

would not be the law of evolution; evolution would be teleological, or divinely ordained. The human way of behaving, which is based on *design* and *purpose*, would be the universe's way of behaving. They would go hand in hand.

But this alienated desire for “meaning” seems to have become a felt need only with the Hellenistic age, or a few centuries before it, during the Axial Age. (Every society, though, has its own pace of evolution.) Internationalization, urbanization, the breakdown of rural traditionalism and community. Hence the proliferation of religions, philosophies, and sects in the Hellenistic era. Christianity, in the end, proved particularly adept at addressing the social malaise that expressed itself in spiritual yearnings; therefore it was “functionally selected” among all the competing belief-systems. Its worldview and its concrete humanitarianism and charity work cooperated to give it a mass following.

What explains the common belief that life in a utopia would be meaningless? The perception that it would have no purpose. Everything would be perfect and pleasant already, so there would be no need for *projects* to improve things or seek greater understanding. We would be animals sated and fat in idleness—and so at the same time there would be no outlet for the desire for recognition. Humans seek recognition through their projects; these two expressions of the human spirit (the desire for recognition and the desire for a purpose, a project, something to work toward) are closely linked. In fulfilling a project, one is implicitly recognizing oneself and can be explicitly recognized by others. That's why Gotthold Lessing was right that it would be a terrible thing to completely understand the world—because then there would be nothing left to do.

Spontaneous, genetically determined expressions of the human spirit: curiosity, creativity (closely connected to purposiveness), and the drive for recognition (which includes erotic love). Each of these is essentially *affirmative*.

*

Clues in etymology.— The word ‘significance.’ Sign-ificance. “Life has no sign-ificance.” Same with ‘meaning.’ “Life has no mean-ing.” It’s extremely revealing that these two words both involve the concept of ‘sign.’ To say that life isn’t significant literally means that it isn’t a sign of something else, of another layer of reality. Events in our world don’t *mean* something else, don’t *refer* to something, don’t *sign-ify* something. You can see in the very structure of these words that the concept of existential meaning or significance arose under the influence of a transcendental religion like Christianity, which interpreted, especially in the Middle Ages, worldly events as signs of heaven or God’s will. Everything was a mere sign (or symbol); everything referred to heaven and derived its sign-ificance from that. Think of the physical structure of Gothic cathedrals—reaching up towards heaven—or the hierarchical structure of the Church, etc. If Amaury de Riencourt’s *The Soul of China* (1965) can be trusted, the Chinese traditionally had a similar understanding of worldly events as being signs of “heavenly” events, or rather the “flip-side” of such events. But they didn’t emphasize the transcendental aspect as much as Christians did, and apparently in the Chinese language the modern characters used for “existential meaning” have no relation to the character(s) for “sign.” This supports Max Weber’s idea that historically the West—under the influence of Judaism, he thinks—has been uniquely obsessed with the separation between the earthly and the transcendent.⁹⁵ Anyway, all this hints at the extent to which we’re still under the influence of the Middle Ages and early Christendom in our social structures and even the ways we think.

*

Irony no. 734.— In a nihilistic age, it’s the nihilism-hating fanatics who finally become the greatest nihilists of all.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ See Ralph Schroeder, *Max Weber and the Sociology of Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

⁹⁶ E.g., fascists and al-Qaeda terrorists.

*

Our downfall.— The movie *Der Untergang*, about Hitler's last days, dramatizes divine retribution. Nazism happened in Germany, and then Germany was destroyed. A grievous chastisement rained down from the sky. The most horrifying thing in history could not be without consequences for its perpetrators. Nazism in its essence was an implosion of everything true, good, and beautiful; its logical conclusion was World War II, and logically its conclusion had to boomerang back to its true believers. When you watch the scenes of bombs pulverizing Berlin and think of Dresden's destruction, you realize that that was all implicit in Nazism itself. The ideology was fulfilled. Nazism, as a negation of moral and intellectual culture, was *precisely* what happened to Germany (and all Europe); in that sense, it ended as the most fully realized ideology in history.

This combination of perfect racism, perfect nationalism, perfect anti-intellectualism, perfect Social Darwinism, perfect authoritarianism, and perfect militarism amounted to perfect nihilism, and thus *was* what it both *deserved* and *received*: perfect negation. It was also the culmination of the dark side of Western history (which continues, however). Maybe, after all, it was inevitable that someday there would come to power a fusion of imperialism, nationalist and racist hatred, and ultra-bureaucratism—all on that most explosive and authoritarian of foundations, industrial capitalism. Maybe Europe just had to get it out of its system, at least temporarily purge itself. The transition from a feudal and absolutist social order to a mature capitalist and liberal democratic one was never going to be easy. Is the stage of world-conquering nihilism going to happen again as we progress from capitalism to post-capitalism? Let's hope not.

*

The second Thirty Years' War.— It makes sense to think of the period between 1914 and 1945 in Europe as effectively one long but inter-

rupted war. It was a state of periodically-active and periodically-suspended war. Thinking of it in this way is illuminating, since it highlights the fundamentally similar causes of both European wars, namely nationalism, racial thinking, industrial capitalist competition (in a nationalist framework), imperialist policies and cultures, social atomization making possible the rise of demagoguery, virulent class conflict and mass resentment being sublimated into racial and national hatreds, and the final clash between a dying society (landed aristocracy and peasantry) and a rising one (industrial capital and labor)—a clash not manifest in any clear way but obviously, through mysterious chains of historical causation, integral to the war(s) anyway. For example, the gradual expulsion and destruction of the peasantry that resulted from the growth of capitalism entailed the accumulation of millions of insecurely employed, low-status, superfluous people in European cities, who could easily be swept into nationalist, racist, imperialist, and fascist parties and movements. The remaining peasantry, too, and the millions of petty-bourgeois who hadn't yet been proletarianized by competition with big business, were easy prey for nationalists and fascists who promised to protect their property from expropriation by Communists and save them from the dreaded fate of falling into the class of wage-laborers (thereby losing economic independence). From another perspective, the militaristic ideology of "blood and soil," which contributed so much to Europe's warlike climate in the early twentieth century, wasn't only a product of capitalist imperialism; it also grew out of the residual culture of the landed aristocracy (e.g., the German Junkers), which incorporated an earlier ideology of "pure bloodlines" and ties to the land. Of course this residual feudal culture was made incomparably more pernicious when reinvigorated and transformed by the race-thinking of imperialism.⁹⁷—Anyway, the fact that

⁹⁷ In *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2005), Tony Judt argues that the legacies of feudal society were relevant to the two world wars in other ways as well. I'll quote from a book review I wrote: "One of *Postwar's*

the second Thirty Years' War resulted from such specific conjunctures as these gives us reason to hope that no World War III will happen, because many of the causes of the first two world wars no longer operate.

themes is encapsulated in the observation that between 1914 and 1945, the old Europe of 'overlapping languages, religions, communities and nations,' with cities such as Trieste, Vienna, and Sarajevo that were 'truly multi-cultural societies *avant le mot*, where Catholics, Orthodox, Muslims, Jews and others lived in familiar juxtaposition' —Judt quotes a Polish writer who refers to 'the incredible, almost comical melting-pot of peoples and nationalities sizzling dangerously in the very heart of Europe' —all this was 'smashed into the dust' (pp. 8, 9). The catastrophes that occurred between 1914 and 1945 destroyed a civilization, and the Europe that emerged 'had fewer loose ends. Thanks to war, occupation, boundary adjustments, expulsions and genocide, almost everybody now lived in their own country, among their own people.' Europe after the Second World War and the decade of social reconstruction and economic development that followed was *cleaner*, so to speak, more coherent in its social structures and ethnic composition, than it had been earlier; most of the residues of feudalism, political absolutism, pre-modern petty-bourgeois production, and medieval 'pre-nation-stateness' were gone. Evidently it was impossible for Europe to achieve stability without first achieving some kind of coherence in its civil society, a coherence that surely could not have been accomplished without upheavals similar to those that occurred in the decades following 1914. One can even interpret the unprecedentedly peaceful and integrated industrial-capitalist Western Europe of the 1950s—or, by the 1990s, Europe in its totality (with the partial exception of the Balkans)—as a 'culmination' of five hundred years of transition from the economic, social, and political structures of the Middle Ages to those of full modernity, organized *stably* (or relatively so) around industrial capitalism. In retrospect it isn't surprising that such an epic transformation, overturning class structures, social hierarchies, patterns of urbanization and agricultural organization, forms of religious worship, and establishing durable nation-states, would have as its penultimate phase an orgy of violence, confusion, and group-hatreds—i.e., World War II."

*

The horror. The horror.— Joseph Marzah’s testimony in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Charles Taylor of Liberia, Marzah a military guy. Describing matter-of-factly how at the orders of Taylor he and his colleagues slit open hundreds of pregnant women’s bellies, smashed babies’ heads against the wall to kill them, drowned old men, buried a pregnant woman alive, amputated thousands of limbs, burned people, pulled out intestines and stretched them across the road to scare passersby, stuck heads on spikes and car bumpers, carved out the heart of an enemy and ate it, cooked and ate many people (flavoring them with salt and pepper)—he was ordered to—raped thousands of women, etc. He denied having regrets; didn’t even seem to understand the question. He had to do as he was told, otherwise he and his family (24 children) would have been executed. He saw a pregnant woman once, radioed his superiors to ask if he should cut out the fetus because “it’s an enemy.” In his testimony Marzah seems strangely like a child, totally naïve about moral issues—a partial result of his tribal upbringing, perhaps? Are most men in “traditional” societies potentially like that, moral children? Certainly they can’t be as individuated as people formed under the pressures of modern civilization. He followed instructions more implicitly even than the Nazis. Did everything he had to, taking it all for granted. And yet I don’t get the impression that he enjoyed it, although he may have. He’s just an amoral machine—the kind of thing probably anyone can descend to under the right circumstances, especially if they haven’t been socialized into civilized morality.

*

Philosophizing with a knife.— Questions about “the meaning of life,” or about God, seem ridiculous and self-indulgent when one reflects that millions of men, women, and children have died in agony. What right have we to ask about *the meaning of life* when that kind of

suffering happens? Even to pose the question is immoral! Indicative of an astounding self-centeredness and lack of appreciation of others' pain. Even if in all history a *single* pregnant woman's fetus had been cut out of her belly, everything would be rendered thereby meaningless. *That happened*: okay, game over. The question about life's meaning has been answered, and there is no longer any moral sense in asking it. We now know if there's a God or not. We now know if humanity is here for a purpose. We now see the essence of nature and life. All that's left for us is to spend every waking moment alleviating the world's agony for existing at all—alleviating the pain of every living thing.

*

Life's "meaning" from the perspective of nature.— Richard Dawkins' famous book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) has been criticized on many grounds—for example, in his paper "The Objects of Selection" (1997) Ernst Mayr argues, persuasively, that individual organisms, not genes, are what natural selection "acts on"⁹⁸—but its basic idea that animals are effectively "survival machines" for their genes seems obviously true. Rather than DNA's somehow being the tool of the organism, as we're inclined to think, the organism is the tool of its DNA. The DNA constructs a gigantic elaborate system, the org-

⁹⁸ Dawkins argues that genes are the units of selection, i.e., the things that are selected in the Darwinian processes of evolution, but, as Mayr says, it's the phenotype, not the genotype, that directly interacts with the environment. And so it has to be phenotypical features, not genes, that are selected or eliminated. Of course *indirectly* genes, or rather particular clumps of the individual's genotype, are selected when their phenotype is. But "naked genes" don't exist: not being "independent objects," genes are not "visible" to natural selection. (In a sense, the whole debate in evolutionary biology about what the units of selection are seems misguided, because, surely, more than one kind of thing is selected/eliminated by evolution. Entire phenotypes are selected, as are particular advantageous features of phenotypes, as are, indirectly, genotypes and sub-sections of the genotype.)

anism, to enable it to interact with the environment such that it can replicate itself in indefinitely many generations. The only reason we exist, in short, is to enable our genes to survive in an unforgiving natural environment and to pass themselves on endlessly. We're *tools*, that's all. From the perspective of nature, to lament humans' lack of moral dignity is therefore absurd: who ever heard of a dignified tool?! Dignity has nothing to do with it. –Nevertheless, Dawkins is right that, alone among all species in our planet's history, humans have the ability to rise above nature and rebel against its amoral imperatives. We can refuse to be mere "tools."

Incidentally, I would add that we can also refuse to be the mere tools of *institutions*—which, in different ways than genes, function so as to perpetuate themselves and/or increase their own power. To achieve freedom and dignity we have to act autonomously vis-à-vis both natural and institutional pressures.

*

"*Thank You, God!*"— I just watched Matthew McConaughey's 2014 Oscar speech, which reminded me of something. "First off," he said, "I want to thank God, because that's who I look up to. He's graced my life with opportunities that I know are not of my hand or any other human hand." The idiocy of thinking that "God" takes special interest in you is obvious. But it's not only idiotic; it's incredibly obnoxious—or would be, if God-believers just considered the implications. When Syria and Iraq are being torn apart, millions of people are being raped and killed in the heart of Africa, a billion children are living in poverty, and humanity is in danger of ending itself, it's simply astonishing to thank God for what he has done for *you*, or to think he cares about you at all. What you're saying is that all those unfortunate people and humanity's very existential crisis are less important to God than *you*, whom he has bestowed with blessings that indicate his love. "[God] has shown me that it's a *scientific fact* that gratitude reciprocates." Okay, Matthew. Evidently

the billions of people living in misery are simply not grateful enough, and if they would only be a little more grateful their lives would improve. Their suffering is their own fault, and God is just waiting for them to show some gratitude to justify his intervention on their behalf.

Religious convictions are relatively understandable among people who are desperately clinging to any ray of hope. But it's contemptible when privileged people use them to justify their privilege, to argue that it's deserved because they're "grateful" or "hard-working" or "humble" or "devout" or whatever other fancy enters their head.

*

Semi-religion in the service of life.— Though God doesn't exist, in some ways you should act as if he does. *Pretend* there is a God, a superior, wise, compassionate being whose approval you seek. Maybe then you'll act honorably and be less demoralized by people's stupidity, or by your own lack of recognition.

*

The writer.— For whom do I write? Not really for myself, since I want an audience. But not really for other people either, since I don't have in mind anyone in particular when I'm writing, and knowing that my works are read doesn't give me much pleasure. Besides, I don't have a high enough opinion of most people for their approval to mean a lot. What I'm writing for, then, is something abstract, not concrete. I have in mind, obscurely, an "abstract" audience. Most immediately, the abstraction in question has to be the abstract Other in my consciousness, the "other" in the "self-other" structure that defines human consciousness. My mind is permeated by otherness—I'm aware of myself as an other to myself—and it's this that drives me to create. Getting recognition from concrete people is slightly satisfying because it entails some small recognition from the

Other in my mind, and so from myself. Ultimately, then, it's *myself*—but in a mediated way—to whom I want to prove my worth, or the supposed “objective justifiability” of my self-respect.

But since the Other that accompanies me (and makes possible human self-consciousness) is abstract, it really can only correspond to another abstract entity. Thus I'm led to imagine things like God or humanity or posterity, universal things “out there” whose recognition or appreciation of me would truly confirm my value. Recognition from them would be as “objectively real” as it can get, and so would basically satisfy me. I create for these things, and I pretend that they exist and aren't just figments of my imagination. Since they *don't* exist, I'll never be satisfied, never certain of my objective worth (the notion of which, in any case, is meaningless). Still, I have to keep striving, impressing myself on the world, imagining that I'm writing for posterity and all humanity, imagining that I'll be immortal...

*

The enduring truth of Hegelian mysticism.— The paradox of the self, or human consciousness, is that it's a concrete abstractness, or an abstract concreteness. It's incoherent: it's a fusion of the universal and the particular, abstract otherness and concrete individuality, and it is never at one with itself. It seeks to coincide with itself, to bring the otherness and individuality together so that its self-otherness is abolished and its individuality, its self-love, is fused with objective reality—thereby confirmed and made *real* (no longer only “imaginary”)—but it is doomed to fail. (This is where Hegel went wrong. He was optimistic, but there is in fact no transcending of the self-distancing inherent in self-consciousness.)

*

A youthful reaction to Dave Eggers' A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius.— Reading this book by an unconscious literary semi-

Hegelian obsessed with self-obsession and fame and self-confirmation or the (imaginary) *real-izing* of one's self, the voice of a 1990s culture that has no higher goal than to overcome anonymity through whatever means necessary (MTV's *The Real World* or starting an ill-fated literary magazine or whatever)⁹⁹ because that's how you validate your existence even though it's quixotic for nearly everyone (and in a deeper sense, for *everyone*), brings home to me how ingenious is my own solution to the problem. You know what it is. The not caring about *present* fame, the being born posthumously. It's an illusion perfectly symmetrical to the illusion of imprinting oneself immortally on the world, which is what is sought by the author and his culture in the *present*, self-defeatingly (because the present is gone the next moment, but for other reasons too). My illusion is perfectly calculated to achieve my goal, in fact makes its lack of achievement impossible—because if posthumously I'm not celebrated it won't matter, since I'll be dead. So I go through life not being disturbed by my anonymity (at least on one level). Millions of others not so intensely aware of Absurdity as I am suicidal, suicides, while I "do my thing" quietly and patiently, guided by faith. In myself.

*

God-yearning speck of dust.— In dark moments I'm still tormented by this thought: *If you can't be everything, why be anything?*

⁹⁹ Irony: validating yourself, making yourself "real," by means of reality shows that are in fact less real than anything else (although they are also *more* real insofar as they're at the center of culture, i.e., the public reality). And the public recognition that comes from them, or from any media-centered activity, is similarly unreal, meaningless. The only "real" things in life (i.e., the things that make you real) are your family, your friends, your lover, and so on, although these are also (perceived as) unreal in that they're not the center of the public world, which is seen as the only real world—though it is in fact, as I just said, the fakest.

*

The romantic.— A romantic like me sometimes finds it hard to motivate himself to do things if he doesn't have a "soulmate" to inspire him. A beautiful person he deeply loves and respects, a woman who challenges him to achieve his potential. He might lose interest in things or not take anything very seriously because unconsciously his mind is not at one with itself. He will possibly fixate on the pointlessness and unhappiness of everything, projecting his dissipated thoughts and energies into universal truths. If he has great inner strength he might survive and even accomplish many things, but it will all be rather hard and he'll feel deeply lonely. He'll talk to wonderful women like the Italian he met tonight with a dull pain in his chest knowing that she's married and wouldn't be interested in him anyway, and he'll try to forget about her.

*

Regrets

I feel as though I gave too little
and kept too much;
and so too much was lost
and little will last.

*

Life-fatigue.— One of the advantages in being worn down by life is that you lose the vigor necessary to sustain anger and bitterness. You come to accept everything; you reach a kind of negative equanimity. The only thought that still excites you is the thought of sleep, and nothingness.

*

The superfluity of being.— How is one supposed to be “happy” in a world that is utterly senseless?

*

Love.— Max Scheler’s *Ressentiment* (1912), while dated and silly in some respects, is worth reading. Scheler is a semi-Nietzsche in his psychological and phenomenological insights, though also in his misguided contempt for the masses. But he thinks Nietzsche misunderstood true Christianity, as he implies, for example, in the following comparison between the ancient and Christian conceptions of love:

[With the Greek and Roman philosophers and poets,] logical form, law, justice—in short, the element of measure and equality in the distribution of goods and evils—are superior to love. Even though Plato, in the *Symposium* for example, establishes great differences in value between the various kinds of love, in Greek eyes the whole phenomenon of “love” belongs to the domain of the senses. It is a form of “desire,” of “need,” etc., which is foreign to the most perfect kind of being. This view is the natural corollary of the extremely questionable ancient division of human nature into “reason” and “sensuality,” into a part that is formative and one that is formed. In the sphere of Christian morality, on the other hand, love is explicitly placed above the rational domain—love “that makes more blessed than reason” (Augustine). This comes out quite clearly in the parable of the prodigal son. “*Agape*” and “*caritas*” are sharply and dualistically separated from “*eros*” and “*amor*,” whereas the Greeks and Romans...rather see a continuity between these types of love... The most important difference between the ancient and Christian views of love lies in the *direction of its movement*. All ancient philosophers, poets, and moralists

agree that love is a striving, an aspiration of the "lower" toward the "higher," the "unformed" toward the "formed," "appearance" towards "essence,"...a "mean between fullness and privation," as Plato says in the *Symposium*... [Expressions in metaphysics:] Already Plato says: "We would not love if we were Gods." For the most perfect form of being cannot know "aspiration" or "need." Here love is only a road to something else, a "*methodos*." And according to Aristotle, in all things there is rooted an upward urge towards the deity, the Nous, the self-sufficient thinker who "moves" the world as "prime mover."... The universe is a great chain of dynamic spiritual entities, of forms of being ranging from the "prima materia" up to man—a chain in which the lower strives for and is attracted by the higher, which never turns back but aspires upward in its turn. This process continues up to the deity, which itself does not love, but represents the eternally unmoving and unifying *goal* of all these aspirations of love...

[In the Christian conception] there takes place what might be called a *reversal in the movement of love*. The Christian view boldly denies the Greek axiom that love is an aspiration of the lower towards the higher. On the contrary, now the criterion of love is that the nobler stoops to the vulgar, the healthy to the sick...the good and saintly to the bad and common, the Messiah to the sinners and publicans. The Christian is not afraid, like the ancient, that he might lose something by doing so, that he might impair his own nobility. He acts in the peculiarly pious conviction that through this "condescension," through this self-abasement and "self-renunciation," he gains the highest good and becomes equal to God... God is no longer the eternal unmoving goal for the love of all things... Now the very *essence* of God is to love and serve. [Scheler says that "the later theological thesis

according to which God has created the world 'for his glorification' is foreign to the spirit of the Gospel. It is an element of ancient philosophy which has entered Christian theology."] An event that is monstrous for the man of antiquity, that is absolutely paradoxical according to his axioms, is supposed to have taken place in Galilee: God spontaneously "descended" to man, became a servant, and died the bad servant's death on the cross! Now the precept of loving good and hating evil, loving one's friend and hating one's enemy, becomes meaningless. There is no longer any "highest good" independent of and beyond the *act* and movement of love! Love itself is the highest of all goods!... Indeed, the achievements of love are only symbols and proofs of its *presence in the person*... But there is another great innovation: in the Christian view, love is a non-sensuous act of the *spirit* (not a mere state of feeling, as for the moderns), but it is nevertheless not a striving and desiring, and even less a need. These acts consume themselves in the realization of the desired goal. Love, however, *grows* in its action... Whenever I see badness in another, I must feel partly guilty, for I must say to myself: "Would that man be bad if you had loved him enough?" In the Christian view, *sensuous* sympathy—together with its root in our most powerful impulse—is not the source, but the partial *blockage* of love. Therefore not only positive wrongdoing, but even the failure to love is "guilt." Indeed, it is *the* guilt at the bottom of all guiltiness.

Thus the picture has shifted immensely. There is no longer a band of men and things that surpass each other in striving up to the deity. It is a band in which every member looks back toward those who are further removed from God and comes to resemble the deity by helping and serving them.

Brilliant analysis. One sees how society would logically progress from the ancient to the Christian interpretation of love as the social structures of Greek and Roman slavery, elitism, imperialism, undemocratic government, and misogyny partly disintegrated in the centuries after Jesus. The ideology of the "masters," which tries to justify a lack of regard for the poor and enslaved and valorizes the leisure activities of elite men (philosophy, science, athletic contests, the art of conversation, and politics), succumbs to the ideology of the lower classes, namely compassion for the suffering, charity, communalism, and empowerment of the poor. The ancient institutional and social sanctions against helping the poor, or against ideologies that justify doing so, erode as the economic and social basis for these sanctions collapses in the third, fourth, and fifth centuries A.D. With the elite losing its former power and security, its reactionary elements are less able to prevent the spread of Christianity and other anti-elitist ideologies, especially as they provide a possible basis for preserving social and political cohesion. So the old world and its pagan philosophies die, while the new rise first interstitially and then by political will (with the help of Constantine and others).

Admittedly, as the new religion is institutionalized and allied with established power-structures it loses much of its early revolutionary spirit, ultimately becoming just another elaborate ideological defense of authority, hierarchy, and inequality. But the radicalism of its original content always holds out the possibility of popular movements to return to the spirit of the Gospels. (No wonder Church authorities for a long time forbade the uninitiated to read the Bible! Independent thought is dangerous to authority, especially when the thought in question has access to so revolutionary a message as that of Jesus.) It's no surprise that such movements have burst forth repeatedly, most recently with the Social Gospel, the American Civil Rights Movement, and liberation theology in Latin America.

Considered on their merits, there is value to both the ancient and the Christian notions of love. The latter's value is obvious: it is little but the epitome of morality. Morality is grounded in respect, compassion, and empathy for others, things taken to their logical conclusion in a St. Francis-like type of love. Profound love of the dignity and holiness of life demands that one devote oneself to care of the poor and despised, not the rich and respected, because it is in the situation of the former that dignity is most insulted. By acting in a St. Francis-like way, one is best embodying and furthering the dignity and holiness of life. (Cf. Albert Schweitzer's autobiography *Out of my Life and Thought* (1933): "As a being in an active relation to the world, [man] comes into a spiritual relation with it by not living for himself alone, but feeling himself one with all life that comes within his reach. He will feel all that life's experiences as his own, he will give it all the help that he possibly can, and will feel all the saving and promotion of life that he has been able to effect as the deepest happiness that can ever fall to his lot." Schweitzer thought his philosophy of Reverence for Life was the essential kernel of Christianity.)¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, the ancient notion of love has value too, both descriptively and prescriptively. One idealizes one's beloved and tries to make oneself worthy of him or her. One should always try to raise oneself up to one's idols and ideals; indeed, the Christian conception of love is precisely a way of doing so. Love can and should go in "both directions," from the lower to the higher and from the higher to the lower. One should love and pursue beauty, truth, and goodness, or exemplars like Mozart, Shakespeare, Einstein, Kant,

¹⁰⁰ Strictly speaking, life itself doesn't have value, since that idea is meaningless. Life is just a natural phenomenon like any other, not "good in itself" (because what would that even mean?). But we can and should adopt the attitude that it is good in itself, since that is to affirm oneself and others, to be moral, to achieve the highest potentialities of the human personality, and to will happiness.

and Schweitzer, while simultaneously loving and raising pupils, children (ironically also an ideal), the poor and despised. Such is to realize one's full humanity, the very goal that the Greeks set themselves.

*

Juvenile fragments on genius (from 2006).— The word 'genius' has a magical sound. *Genius*. "He is a genius." It's redolent of the divine, or at least the über-human. A genius isn't quite human; there is something mysterious, almost mystical, about him. People speak of him in reverend tones. Einstein is the prototypical example. All his eccentricities, his absentmindedness and childishness, and even his selfishness, are forgiven him, for he was a *genius*. "What is it like to be a genius?" "It must be so hard to tolerate people!" "The genius is immortal."

In an interview once, David Foster Wallace recalled a day in college when a professor of his had told him he was a genius. It was the happiest day of his life. "I thought I'd never have to go to the bathroom again," he said. In my younger days, I myself used to take pleasure in basking in thoughts of self-flattery. I would read Schopenhauer's many passages in which he waxes rhapsodic about the genius, describing him in rich detail and contrasting him with the average dullard. The genius, he says, is like a child, emotional, fickle, prone to alternating bouts of joy and melancholy, absent-minded, fascinated by the world, self-absorbed, sensitive, lonely, careless with money, good-natured but easily disappointed in people. I was pleased that every facet of his descriptions was true of me. My absentmindedness, for example, has always been comically severe. Sometimes I accidentally try to brush my teeth with a pen I've picked up from the counter, or I try to drink a yoghurt I've just taken from the refrigerator, assuming it's a cup of juice. And I'm incurably lackadaisical about practical things like money, in which I have no interest whatever.

As I grew older (21, 22), I came to understand the silliness of Schopenhauer's thoughts about the extraordinariness of the genius. For those of you not acquainted with his ideas, I should say that he thought geniuses had some kind of privileged access to the thing-in-itself, the inner essence of the world. In ecstatic moments of artistic contemplation other people can sometimes approximate this, but not to the extent that the genius can. He literally has intuitive "knowledge" of the way the world is in itself. –Pretty fanciful, eh? The funny thing is that our ordinary linguistic usage accords well with what Schopenhauer said. We half-consciously think of the genius as possessing some sort of divine insight into reality—or, if he is an artist, as possessing a half-divine, half-mad sympathy with beauty/creativity. The word itself has these conceptual overtones.

To glance over the concept's history is enlightening in this regard. The ancient Greeks didn't have a word for genius, but they understood the difference between a merely talented artist and a supremely gifted one. In his dialogue *Ion*, Plato had this to say about the great poets:

None of the epic poets, if they're good, are "masters" of their subject; [instead] they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets if they're good: just as the Corybantes are not in their right minds when they dance, lyric poets, too, are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed by some Bacchic frenzy. ...A poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. ...The god himself is the one who speaks [through him].

Thus Plato originated, or at least popularized, the theory that the creative genius is a vessel for some higher force, something over which he has no control—that during his creative episodes he experiences a kind of madness. Many artists have latched onto this conception (no doubt because they find it flattering); Percy Bysshe Shelley, for example, was sympathetic to the Platonic vision, ostensibly because he himself felt as if his poems came from “outside” him, or from an unconscious source. And Nietzsche described his experience of writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in a similar vein:

Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called *inspiration*? If not, I will describe it.— If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one’s system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation, in the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes *visible*, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down, that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form,—I never had any choice. A rapture whose tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears, now the pace quickens involuntarily, now it becomes slow; one is altogether beside oneself, with the distinct consciousness of subtle shudders and of one’s skin creeping down to one’s toes; a depth of happiness in which even what is most painful and gloomy does not seem something opposite but rather conditioned, provoked, a *necessary* color in such a superabundance of light... Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divi-

nity... The involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all; one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor, everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression. It actually seems, to allude to something Zarathustra says, as if the things themselves approached and offered themselves as metaphors...

Aristotle emphasized the kinship of genius with madness. "No excellent soul is without a tincture of madness." This brings me to the historical connection between the concepts of genius and the demonic. The latter has a complex history. Even in ancient Greece, the word 'daimon' already had multiple connotations. While it *denoted* a semi-divine being who interfered in human affairs, often with destructive ends, its *connotations* were more controversial. Aeschylus, for example, interpreted the daimon as essentially tragic and destructive: in *The Persians*, the Queen attributed Xerxes' ruinous hubris, his delusions, to a daimon that had taken away his judgment. But even in Aeschylus there are ambiguities, for in the same play a ghost (a daimon itself) says that Xerxes' daimon is his hubris, his hubris that led him to defy the gods. Heraclitus had this same psychological understanding of the demonic element: it arises from man's own self. "Man's character is his daimon" (fragment 119). And, like Aeschylus's daimon, it determines man's tragic fate. Socrates, on the other hand, conceived of the daimon as a positive power, a supernatural element that keeps man within the fold of rational self-determination. It is an "inner voice" that warns him whenever he is about to do something irrational or harmful. In his paper "The Demonic: From Aeschylus to Tillich" (1969), Wolfgang Zucker summarizes the conflict between Socrates's benevolent conception and Aeschylus's tragic one:

For the tragedies, the daimon's distinctive power is the result of man's alienation from the objective world order; therefore

the demonic appears as an avenging and hostile force. For the rational philosopher in an age of demythologization, the demonic appears as a benevolent helper toward his self-realization, consenting to man's autonomy as long as he does not lose himself to his passions or contentiousness. The Latin interpreters showed a perfect understanding of what Plato had in mind when they translated the word as "genius."

We see here that 'genius' denotes a benevolent spirit, the guiding or tutelary spirit of a man. In Roman mythology, every man had a genius. Originally, the genius was an ancestor who watched over his descendants, but over time the concept evolved to denote a personal guardian spirit that granted intellect and prowess. The distant origins of the modern word are evident.

In any case, the Socratic understanding didn't last long. I won't trace the entire history of the word 'demon,' but during Christian times it signified a devilish spirit, a manifestation of evil. This is what it meant throughout the Middle Ages. Finally in the eighteenth century the concept regained some of its original, Greek meaning. I'll quote the whole passage from Zucker:

...The rediscovery of the demonic as a force that cannot be measured in terms of good and evil was due to the anti-rational cult of genius at the end of the eighteenth century. It was the expression of a fundamental opposition against the Enlightenment, against the utilitarian middle-class concept of order, and against the prevailing moralistic and intellectualistic theology. Such expression needed as its social precondition the breakdown of the old social system and the emergence of a new marginal class of artists who were no longer merely skilled artisans. It is at this time that the designations *artiste* and *Künstler* came in use, designations

which did not mean simply specific occupations, but a way of life outside the hierarchy of social and economical values.

At the same time, poets began to see their kinsmen and associates in the visual artists and musicians rather than, as before, in philosophers and scholars. Precisely because secular and clerical princes lost the means for guaranteeing employment and income for the painters and musicians of their households, the practitioners of the various arts became free agents and developed their own ideology of genius.

According to this new viewpoint, the artist was no longer a man who simply had learned the use of brush and chisel or could play different musical instruments, but he now was gifted with some supernatural power; he had genius, or even he himself was "a genius." A genius is not an ordinary human being; he belongs to a different order and can neither be understood nor judged by society. His acts do not conform to the norms of accepted behavior, but also his work has a superhuman quality that makes it incomparable with the work of other men. Thus the artist can neither share the comforts and rewards of socially useful occupations, nor does he feel compelled to submit to the restrictions and prescriptions of social conventions.

The essential point, however, is that this extraordinary, this marginal position of the artistic genius is not the result of free choice, but the effect of being possessed by a semi-divine power, namely "genius." The exercising of an artistic endowment is therefore not an achievement, an action of man, but a painful suffering, a passion. Therefore the usual categories of good and evil, of useful and useless, do not apply to the genius. What he does and what he suffers is his fate. He is not a genius because he is an extraordinary artist; rather, he is an artist because he is possessed by a genius. Raphael

would be the great artist he was, even if he had been born without hands.

Raphael was possessed by a demon, a genius. Goethe's famous interpretation of the demonic unequivocally associates it with geniuses (the people, not the spirits). The creativity of great men is demonic; the personalities of men like Napoleon and Byron are demonic; nature itself has elements of the demonic; fate is demonic. Thus the genius is intimately related to fate, to the cosmic order. In his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Goethe describes the demonic as "[representing] a power which is, if not opposed to the moral order of the world, yet at cross-purposes to it; such that one could compare the one to the warp, and the other to the woof. ...[People who exemplify the demonic] are not always men superior in mind or talents, seldom do they recommend themselves by the goodness of their heart. Yet, a tremendous power goes out from them; they possess an incredible force over all other creatures and even over the elements; nobody can say how far their influence will reach..." While the word 'genius' isn't mentioned, clearly Goethe would classify demonic men as, in some sense, geniuses, due to their unconscious, supernatural power. And when discussing demonic men he always refers to people like Mozart, Byron, and Caesar—i.e., "geniuses." At other times Goethe, like most Romantics, attributes to the genius special rights, exemptions from duties to which the mass of men must adhere. Ordinary morality doesn't apply to him. Geniuses are "permitted" to be selfish, immoral, cruel, for the sake of realizing themselves, simply because this is what they are *driven* to do. They *have* to do it; they have no choice in the matter. Nietzsche (who ironically was critical of Romanticism) elevated this myth into a philosophic vision, namely that of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* can act immorally in the name of a higher morality, viz. that of the will to power. Realizing one's will to power is *the* imperative in life; the genius has a qualitatively greater will to power

than the average man, so he has a qualitatively “higher” morality. (See, for instance, the section in the ironically named *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “My conception of the genius.”) –It’s a tribute to the power of all these Romantic writers that their ideologies still captivate us in our unguarded moments, and that, to an extent, their ideas have seeped into the very meaning of certain words.

Such beliefs in the genius’s extra-ordinariness tie into the association of genius with madness. Madness, after all, is not ordinary. This should also remind us of the ancient idea that insane people, or people under the influence of drugs, have insights into the divine, the inner essence of the world. Oracles were in fact susceptible to moments of “insanity,” or at least were “beside themselves” in their oracular moments. Perhaps we moderns are not entirely free from this pagan deification of madness.

Be that as it may, we have to admit that creative “geniuses” (scientific, artistic, and philosophical) have tended to be psychologically unhealthy and unsatisfied. –This brings me to the men of genius themselves, as opposed to the ideology. We have gained some idea, hopefully, of the nature and origin of the myth; now we have to see how well the myth accords with reality. To what extent are so-called geniuses extraordinary? What does it *mean* to call them “great”? If in fact the notion of genius is misguided, where does that leave us who idealize it?

To answer the question of whether geniuses are really “different” from ordinary people, we have to ask how it is that someone is labeled a genius in the first place. And here we encounter the first premise in the debunking of the myth. For the process by which people are labeled geniuses is not at all scientific. Even if we leave aside such secondary uses of the word as “Bill Clinton has a genius for politics” and concentrate on people famous for their *creativity*, there is nothing like a consistent standard in applying to someone the coveted label. The application results from a series of cultural accidents; deserving people are often denied the label while un-

deserving ones get lucky. For example, in part because of accidental historical circumstances (such as the opposition of the Church), Charles Darwin is called a genius, despite the fact that his main theoretic contribution was the single, simple idea of “natural selection by means of random variation”—which isn’t nearly as impressive as Archimedes’ or Max Planck’s or Ernest Rutherford’s achievements.¹⁰¹ (Darwin wasn’t the first to propose the theory of evolution.) Yet Rutherford is not commonly called a genius, despite his amazing accomplishments. [...]

It will be objected that this argument shows only that popular recognition is sometimes mistaken, not that the *real* geniuses don’t deserve their title. Besides, there are many examples of public recognition that is both widespread and justified. In literature: Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Goethe, Heine, Nietzsche, Faulkner, Joyce, and so on. —But then what are we saying in calling these men geniuses? What do we mean? And what are the criteria?

The ideology of genius that I’ve outlined is premised on the belief in a qualitative, categorical difference between the ingenious and the merely talented. That is, they can’t be differentiated merely by *quantity*, such as the genius’s greater productivity or his somewhat greater creativity—unless, of course, the quantitative differences are so great that they amount to a qualitative difference. I doubt, though, that anyone would want to defend the Romantic ideology anymore. People might say simply, “A genius has extraordinary creativity and great intuitive powers.” But in fact I think that this definition, which does adhere to the word’s ordinary usage, itself implies that there are “qualitatively distinct” attributes of genius. “A

¹⁰¹ The biologist Thomas Huxley’s reaction to Darwin’s idea was appropriate: “How extremely stupid not to have thought of that!” It’s just an *obvious* theory, almost a truism. (Essentially it says: those variations that increase the likelihood of an animal’s survival will tend to survive and be passed on.) Incidentally, Alfred Russel Wallace conceived of it around the same time Darwin did, but few people think of him as a genius.

genius is a *great human being*, 'higher' than the rest of us." My goal in the following will be to refute this conception—that is, to show that nothing in particular distinguishes "geniuses," or "great men" in general, from everyone else. Later I'll suggest why this issue is significant.

Incidentally, I'm using the word 'genius' as it was used by the Romantics, and as it's still used in most contexts. It is now also taken to denote people like Marilyn vos Savant, who have extremely high IQs but are not known for their creativity, or people like Kim Peek, who have astonishing memories. I have no quarrel with this usage, because it's relatively empty and doesn't involve the notion of *greatness*. It doesn't incorporate a value-judgment—"This person is more valuable than the rest of us"—as does the other conception. It's basically the idea of greatness that I'm arguing against. To do that, I'll first argue against the meaningfulness of the concept 'genius,' and then I'll extend my critique to the notion of 'greatness.'

Not only philosophical and scientific, but even artistic geniuses are held to have great powers of intuition. So what is this thing that everyone praises? What is intuition? Briefly stated, it is a non-visual form of seeing. A non-discursive insight. A non-tactile mode of perception. It somehow involves imagination, though not all imagining is called intuiting. Maybe it should be, but both terms are so vague, virtually indefinable, that a demand for perfect consistency in their use would be misplaced. Moreover, I think there are subtle differences in how we use the words. For example, in many contexts, 'intuition' seems to connote that its object is *truth*, in some non-verbal form. One can supposedly intuit another's state of mind or the solution to a problem, intuitions that aim for truth. The contrast with 'imagination' is obvious.

Be that as it may, the power of imagination is at least a prerequisite for the power of intuition. Geniuses are said to have both. Because their imaginations are so active, their intuitive powers are remarkable. Mozart, for example, is said to have had a unique

musical imagination, as well as an ability to *intuit* his music. In his self-descriptions he says that he could somehow hear an entire piece in a single moment, all jumbled together in his mind. This idea makes (partial) sense only if we interpret it metaphorically: he isn't hearing all the individual notes together, which would be an intolerable dissonance; he is "imaginatively" understanding the thematic development of the piece, its structure and outline. A parallel would be the philosopher's intuition of a particular theory—say, Saul Kripke's intuition of the fact that proper names are "rigid designators." (See his book *Naming and Necessity*.) Or Hegel's intuition of the fact that the self is self-consciousness. These two men, in having great philosophical imaginations, can experience potent intuitions.

To give a precise definition of intuition is impossible, because the word itself is very imprecise. Very nebulous; hard to get a grasp on. When I introspect, I experience my own philosophical intuitions as a distinctive manifestation of imagination, an unconceptualizable "seeing" of the truth (or what *seems* to be the truth), unmediated by words. I really can't say much more about them. A good way to describe them, perhaps, is to call this type of intuition *intentional perception*, as opposed to *phenomenal* perception (such as physical sensations). This definition, vague though it is, at least emphasizes the elements of *depth* and *force* in intuition, as well as the element of mental perception. When I have a quick thought about a person who isn't present I don't feel particularly as if I'm experiencing a perception, an *intuition*. I just interpret myself as *thinking* about him, that's all. When I purposely empathize with someone, on the other hand—when I "place myself in his shoes," by imagining my reactions if I were in his situation—the intuitive element is present. I'm having an intuition in the full sense, for my empathic insight *strikes* me, with a certain force. There is a "suddenness" to this kind of intuition.

Since there are not clear boundaries between the various types of intuition (insofar as there are such types), my distinguishing a part-

icular class of thought is inevitably going to be somewhat arbitrary. It's useful, though, and necessary, for when people attribute to the genius intuitive abilities, they're tacitly doing the same thing. They're demarcating a class of "full" intuitions from the commonplace thoughts we all have most of the time, which themselves have intuitive features. This fact itself should make us wary of positing a categorical difference between the genius and the ordinary person. But at the moment I want only to emphasize that, even under the restrictive definition I gave in the last paragraph, "ordinary people" commonly have intuitions.

I suspect the reader will grant me this. He may say, though, that geniuses have intuitions more often. However, he has already significantly weakened his defense of the genius by admitting that the average guy on the street can have one of his supposedly defining experiences, namely that of intuition. By claiming that geniuses have intuitions more often than others, he has reduced his case to the belief in a merely *quantitative* difference between the two types of people. And the conclusion has to be that there is no fixed, "essentialist" difference, in this respect at least. There is but an unclear, blurry merging between the two "categories" – which effectively refutes the Romantics' conception, and thus the implicit significance of our conventional linguistic usage. Even great personifications of genius, like Mozart, Kant, and Newton, are in this respect merely uncommon examples of ordinary people, in that they have the ordinary experience of intuition relatively often.

Of course it will be objected that, in giving a *phenomenological* analysis of intuition, I've ignored what is really unique in the genius's intuitions. While his *experience* of them may be similar to the ordinary person's experience, their *content* is different. For example, while the philosopher Derek Parfit's intuitions may, for him, feel similar to the way Kant's intuitions felt to him, Kant's were more fruitful, pithy, etc. This is why he is called a genius, while Parfit is not.

This objection is perceptive, in that it links intuition to creativity, which is another criterion in the definition of the genius. A man like Kant has intuitions with more creative potential than a man like Parfit. Consider the following quotation from Henri Poincaré, who was a mathematician of undisputed genius, in which he describes the experience of profound mathematical creation:

...Most striking at first is this appearance of sudden illumination, a manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work. The role of this unconscious work in mathematical invention appears to me incontestable, and traces of it would be found in other cases where it is less evident. Often when one works at a hard question, nothing good is accomplished at the first attack. Then one takes a rest, longer or shorter, and sits down anew to the work. During the first half-hour, as before, nothing is found, and then all of a sudden the decisive idea presents itself to the mind. It might be said that the conscious work has been more fruitful because it has been interrupted and the rest has given back to the mind its force and freshness. But it is more probable that the rest has been filled out with unconscious work and that the result of this work has afterwards revealed itself to the geometer just as in the cases I have cited... These sudden inspirations never happen except after some days of voluntary effort which has appeared absolutely fruitless and whence nothing good seems to have come, where the way taken seems totally astray. These efforts then have not been as sterile as one thinks; they have set agoing the unconscious machine and without them it would not have moved and would have produced nothing...

This is quoted in Hans Eysenck's book *Genius: The Natural History of Creativity* (1995). Eysenck summarizes the passage: "This quotation

well describes what countless mathematicians, scientists, writers, artists, and composers have described somewhat less clearly. There is the preliminary labor; the incubation period; the sudden integration, owing its existence to inspiration rather than conscious logical thought, and finally the verification or proof, perfectly conscious..." (Chapter 5.)

It would seem that most people rarely experience this kind of intuition, the kind that results from sustained conscious and unconscious work. Correspondingly, they're called less creative than people like Poincaré. The creativity of the latter is closely related to the content and origin of their intuitions; otherwise they would, supposedly, be merely *talented*. The talented person may be industrious and productive, but his work is less instinctual or unconscious than the genius's, and this results in its relative mediocrity. (The obvious hidden premise is that, for whatever reason, if significant unconscious work—and consequent intuitive illumination—is involved, the product will likely have more value than if the work all takes place on a conscious level.)

But here the question arises: is it the nature of the activity or the worth of the work that determines who is a genius? If the former, then whether the final product is intrinsically valuable is irrelevant; the point is that it has been arrived at through a process akin to that described by Poincaré. If the latter, on the other hand, then the nature of the creative process is irrelevant; what matters is only the intrinsic value of the work. Neither option seems very satisfying, though. Poincaré might respond, "Both aspects are important: you can't have the intrinsic value without the unconscious, intuitive creative process." But is this right? There seems no way of knowing.

Perhaps it's best just to stipulate—for the sake of definitional clarity—that the class of *true* geniuses includes only those people who are creative in a Poincaréan, intuitive and unconscious way. This appears to capture the essence of our ordinary use of the word 'genius,' since, after all, it isn't a contradiction to say that a particular

man was a genius who unfortunately produced only mediocre work. He had the *potential* for brilliant work, due to the nature of his creativity, but he failed to realize it. Thus, the direct criterion for true genius is not the value of the work but the fecundity of the mind—a fecundity revealed by the nature of its creative process.

Even apart from the further testimony of “countless mathematicians, scientists, writers, artists, and composers,”¹⁰² that claim is justified by the intellectual character of the most uncontroversial geniuses, such as Shakespeare, Byron, Mozart, and Einstein. We’ve already seen what Mozart said about his creative process; Einstein has written somewhere that in the moment of his decisive insight into the theory of relativity, he felt as if something had “snapped” in his mind. He was overcome by elation; his momentary intuition, after countless hours of conscious work, was the most powerful experience of his life. As for Byron and Shakespeare, one has only to read their works to see that their unconscious is responsible for them. (*Don Juan*, for instance, is ridiculously brilliant. It’s a poem unlike any other in the English language—in *any* language—surpassing even Pope’s *Dunciad*. Clearly no merely conscious manipulation of words could have created it.)

In short, we’re back to Plato, Shelley, and Nietzsche, albeit made a little more precise and quasi-scientific. The creative genius is defined as a person whose mind is fertile in such a way that much of its work is done on an unconscious level, and that once the unconscious work is finished, the result intuitively appears to the conscious mind and is then crafted and manipulated. I think that this argument, and this definition, is the strongest one possible in support of the claim that geniuses really are categorically, “*substantively*” different from ordinary people. For it claims that implicit

¹⁰² See, e.g., Coleridge’s description of the circumstances under which he wrote *Kubla Khan*, and A. E. Housman’s statement to the effect that sometimes, when he goes for a stroll outside, an entire stanza of a new poem suddenly appears before his mind, fully worked out.

in our ordinary linguistic usage is the notion that there is an *essence* to the genius, an essence that other people lack. This is what the Romantics argued, and it is what I am denying. The definition links intuition and creativity in a plausible way, thus uniting the two main criteria in people's understanding of what genius is. (Geniuses are, of course, held to have other qualities, various personal idiosyncrasies, but these are not *criteria*.)

So my task is to show why that argument is mistaken. I have to show that our admiration of "true" geniuses is misguided. First I'll point out that even on the restrictive definition I've given, the class of geniuses has a far greater extension than is commonly supposed. There are thousands or hundreds of thousands of so-called geniuses in every generation in the U.S. alone. Many or most poets, novelists, mathematicians, theoretical physicists, and others qualify, because their creative process is essentially the same as Poincaré's. It's wrong, then, to think that geniuses are spectacularly unusual, that there are only several in any given generation. This fact in itself serves as an argument against the attribution of semi-divinity implicit in our use of the term.

Similarly, there is nothing particularly remarkable about the behavior of a genius. People tend to associate certain stereotypes with the concept, such as: irritable, impatient, eccentric, absent-minded, half-insane, depressive, self-absorbed, socially naïve, or having an unkempt appearance. These stereotypes heighten the concept's mystique. They do seem to have *some* empirical basis, but, first of all, if we're assuming approximately the definition I gave above, it may well be that most geniuses do *not* exhibit these traits (any more than the average person). Secondly, even the ones who do—such as Einstein, Van Gogh, Byron, Beethoven, Wittgenstein—don't exhibit them to the extent that myth suggests they do. In his lifetime, for instance, Byron enjoyed the reputation of being full of passion at all times, a Don Juan pining for love and happiness. His poems were the basis for the myth. And while it flattered him, he

had enough intellectual integrity to remark that the myth was absurd: no one is as passionate as he was reputed to be. The vast majority of the time, he said, he was utterly ordinary, as passionless as anyone else; it was only in rare moments that he felt lonely or intensely in love, and it was then that he wrote his poems. Similarly, if you had followed Van Gogh around every day, or Einstein, you would have seen that there was nothing especially sublime about them. Van Gogh, you might think, was kind of a bore, a little too gloomy at times, while Einstein was just a fairly pleasant man with unusual hair. Perhaps moody, perhaps a bit odd in some respects—but who isn't? Everyone has idiosyncrasies. The main reason it seems as if "geniuses" have more than most people is that people pay more attention to their behavior than to that of others. People write about their experiences with the "great man"; every unusual act of his is recorded, and the consequent impression is of a unique and fascinating person. But if you met him without knowing who he was, the odds are overwhelming that you wouldn't find him particularly memorable. —Napoleon was right that "no man is a hero to his valet." Familiarity breeds contempt.

It may be true, though, that people called geniuses have tended not to be "well-adjusted." Many of them have been narcissistic, schizoid, (manic-)depressive, or simply lonely. Some have ended up insane. Others have committed suicide. Artists in particular appear to suffer from erratic mentalities. They're often overly sensitive and unhappy, except, perhaps, in moments of creation. One wonders why. What is it about this kind of creativity that makes the creative person susceptible to mental illness? The most obvious factor is loneliness. When your innate aptitudes are different from most people's and your interests are not theirs, you're going to feel different from them and hence lonely. It will be rare that you find a true companion. Eventually you'll learn that you feel more "ful-filled" and happy when you're being productive than when you're with other people, so you'll spend much of your time creating work

in solitude. And while this will, in a sense, make you happy, it will also probably contribute to your unhappiness, since what humans desire more than anything else is “recognition” (love, etc.). No matter how good your work is, as long as you live and work in relative solitude you will be unsatisfied, possibly neurotic and depressed.

So, part of the problem is simply that the highly creative person often doesn’t feel comfortable with most people, which means that the part of him that craves validation and affection is frustrated. He may therefore have a fragile sense of self, which depends too much on people’s reactions to him and his work, and his self-esteem might be inadequate even as he becomes somewhat egomaniacal due to his isolation, his comparing himself with past great men, and his self-righteous conviction that “despite what they all think, I am a genius, I am ahead of my time!” (which conviction is partly a defense-mechanism against psychological insecurity—i.e., an attempt to give himself the recognition he doesn’t receive from others). He will finally come to see the justification of his existence in his work, because his work is the only thing that allows him to recognize his sense of self in the world—to see it objectified and thereby confirmed.

The issue can be approached from a neurological perspective too, namely by asking what are the neural causes of the connection between certain types of creativity and mental illness, but the foregoing suggestions are sufficient to show that the so-called genius’s pathological state of mind is thoroughly earth-bound, with fairly ordinary causes. It isn’t (only) that he sees so much ugliness in the world that he despairs, having a soul so noble that he pines for Beauty while the cruel world crushes his hopes. There is nothing particularly sublime about his “madness.”

So all the mystique that hovers around the “genius” because of his supposedly eccentric behavior is based on illusions. People misunderstand both themselves and geniuses by attributing to the latter

exceptional personal qualities. In general, this idolization is almost as unfounded as the idolization of celebrities: it reflects the peculiar human tendency to pick out a certain person or group of people and look up to them, model oneself after them, praise them and seek their affection, attribute to them supposedly unique qualities many of which are in fact possessed by everyone. This tendency first shows itself in childhood, when one admires one's parents as if they were perfect all-knowing beings; later it takes other forms, such as hero-worship and the idealization of unusually creative people.

Doubtless John Dryden was partly right when he said, in *Absalom and Achitophel*,

Great wits to madness sure are near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

This idea is quite interesting, insofar as there is some truth to it. Aside from their both sometimes being absentminded, socially awkward, withdrawn, tormented, and so on, the exceptionally creative and the "insane" can have deeper similarities too. For instance, they both tend to interpret reality differently from how others interpret it, e.g., by perceiving logical and causal connections where others wouldn't. Likewise, obsessive thinking is a common experience in some types of insanity. People suffering from a psychosis may have compulsive thoughts, delusions of grandeur, hallucinations, severe depressive tendencies, paranoid thoughts—all of which have been associated with genius. Creative people often think compulsively about themselves and are driven compulsively by their creative urge. If they're in the process of creating something, they'll feel strangely "haunted" or "bothered" until it's finished. It will feel like their lives have been put on hold until they're satisfied with their creation, because they just can't stop thinking about it—about getting it *right*, about the absolute necessity of getting past their doubts and moving on with life. (See §93 of Nietzsche's *The*

Gay Science: "...But why, then, do you write? –A: Well, my friend, to be quite frank: so far, I have not discovered any other way of getting rid of my thoughts. –B: And why do you want to get rid of them? –A: Why do I want to? Do I want to? I *must*."

But, of course, whatever seemingly unusual quality one wants to assign some category of people is to a degree possessed by many others as well. Even such meritorious traits as having an impressive work-ethic or a wide-ranging curiosity or great intellectual integrity are dispersed widely through the population. High creativity itself is universal, inasmuch as it is human nature to be astonishingly creative—in the use of language, for example, or in thinking of new ideas, or in interpreting new experiences, or in pursuing whatever talents one has. It may even be misleading to speak of someone's "exceptional creativity"; it seems exceptional to us because it takes a slightly different form than it does in most people, but others are, in their own ways, probably just as creative. We attribute too much creativity to some people and too little to the rest of us—especially given that, in many cases, the difference is simply that the former are more privileged than the latter, having more money or leisure time or a job that allows them to indulge their creative side more than most jobs do.

Anyway, we have to reject the argument that there is an *essence* to genius, because people use the word in too many disparate contexts for it to have a single, coherent definition. Its denotations and connotations are associated through "family resemblances" (to quote Wittgenstein) rather than "necessary and sufficient conditions." That is, its uses merely *resemble* each other; they don't have some clear definition in common, as do, say, the uses of the word 'bachelor.' Even with regard to the *creative* genius, common use of the term doesn't justify defining it in some such essentialist way as the Poincaréan definition I gave above. People disagree on who counts as a genius, and they disagree on what it is about someone that justifies pinning the label on him. The label, in fact, is really little

more than an honorific, whose application depends largely on accidental circumstances, the vagaries that determine popular recognition. As we saw earlier, it is merely an *ideological construct*, not a scientific one, and so suffers from a basic meaninglessness at its core.

“Fine!” you say. “I’ve agreed with your conclusion all along! Now tell me why I should care.” First of all, I think that questions about the nature of genius (or lack thereof) are interesting in their own right. But more importantly, I want to extend my critique to the idea of greatness. I think that this idea is even more meaningless than the other one, and for similar reasons. For one thing, we use the word in so many contexts that to extrapolate a satisfactory definition is impossible. A great person is one who, through whatever circumstances—not all of which redound to his credit—has managed to achieve something that impresses society, causes his name to trickle down through the various social classes. The criteria for attributions of greatness differ from person to person; the concept is so vague that nothing really substantive or “definite” determines its use. The person called great isn’t somehow “above” the rest of us (whatever that would mean); he isn’t “better” than us. The most that can be said in his favor is that certain qualities are, perhaps, more well-developed in him than in most people, while others are probably less so. Often his “greatness” is due to his flaws, whether they be childishness, narcissism, arrogance, or selfishness. Charles de Gaulle is sometimes considered a great man, but he was arrogant, vain, ridiculously conservative, self-deluded—all of which qualities made possible his “strong will” and thus his rise to power. Napoleon was selfish and brutal. Albert Schweitzer, on the other hand, was just an intelligent, good man who understood that humans, as such, have obligations toward each other, and acted on that knowledge.

People called great are often surprised at their reputation. They know they’re basically ordinary; they think that all the adulation they receive is silly, though they may play along with it because of vanity. Goethe, for example, insisted he was “extraordinarily ord-

inary,” just as human and flawed as everyone else. But because he wrote and talked well, people thought that he himself must be comparably great. That’s the main confusion: people confuse a person with his objectifications. They confuse Mozart with the *Jupiter* symphony, Byron with his passionate poems, Martin Luther King, Jr. with his powerful speeches. These people are as human as the rest of us, but their distinctive talent makes them seem extraordinary, namely because we look at a few objectifications and think we see the entire person. If certain objectifications seem more impressive than those of most people, we think that the person responsible for them must be that much more impressive as well. But really, the inner, subjective differences, and the biological differences, responsible for the different objectifications are minuscule. And, as I said, they often include traits that are considered weaknesses. –Humans are more or less similar. They’re fundamentally equal, however their self-expressions may occasionally suggest otherwise.

Incidentally, everything I’m arguing here is, in a sense, merely an articulation of what has become implicit in societal conditions, in social relations. The structure of late capitalism, with its submersion of the individual in the mass, its commodification of the human personality, its worship of science, and its puerile pop culture, is such that ‘greatness’ and ‘genius’ have become empty words, ludicrously romantic and anachronistic, to which people nonetheless continue to pay lip-service. Anyone who still truly believes in the possibility of greatness—the sort of hallowed immortality that people still reflexively attribute to, say, Lincoln, FDR, or Gandhi—is behind the times. People are molded by their circumstances far more than they can ever mold them. Greatness, this strange midpoint between the earthly and the divine, is a myth, just as the divine itself is a myth. The Great Man theory of history is dead; the spirit of Thomas Carlyle is foreign to the spirit of late capitalism.

The history of languages proceeds on the basis of social evolution: new concepts emerge, new modes of communication appear on the basis of new institutions, new modes of life and production. And once particular concepts or ideologies have arisen, they will remain in circulation until *after* concrete social relations have made them obsolete. Only gradually will society slough off ossified ways of thought and communication, namely when it can no longer postpone its “ideological” adaptation to new circumstances. This is why the notions of greatness and genius are still taken as semi-seriously as they are. They’re relics of a more romantic, idealistic age than our own, though when they’ll effectively die out is impossible to say.

In some respects this state of affairs is desirable, but in others it isn’t. Human life has need of *some* illusions, after all. They need not be as patently delusive as, say, Christianity, but they have to function as tonics, as things that make life bearable. Nietzsche, for example, thought of art as such a tonic, a sort of Platonic lie that is, however, believed in by its *creators* more than anyone else. (Nietzsche thought that artists are mostly actors: through their work, they lie to themselves and others, by idealistically pretending to be something they’re not.) The belief in great men and geniuses has a similar function—not, admittedly, for most people, who have family, love and, in some cases, religion to make them happy, but for the less well-adjusted, who cling to the illusion of greatness desperately. Nietzsche, ironically, was an example. As are many artists. Their commitment to the illusion is a symptom of the unhappiness I mentioned above—the loneliness, the self-fixation. “If our contemporaries don’t recognize us,” they think, “well then, posterity will! We’ll have the last laugh! (After we’re dead, though.)” Such people are frequently more committed to their works than to life itself, or even to the lives of their children. Consider Montaigne’s observations:

Now once we consider the fact that we love our children simply because we begot them, calling them our second selves, we can see that we also produce something else from ourselves, no less worthy of commendation: for the things we engender in our soul, the offspring of our mind, of our wisdom and talents, are the products of a part more noble than the body and are more purely our own. In this act of generation we are both mother and father; these 'children' cost us dearer and, if they are any good, bring us more honor. In the case of our other children their good qualities belong much more to them than to us: we have only a very slight share in them; but in the case of these, all their grace, worth and beauty belong to us. For this reason they have a more lively resemblance and correspondence to us. Plato adds that such children are immortal and immortalize their fathers—even deifying them, as in the case of Lycurgus, Solon and Minos.

...Few devotees of poetry would not have been more gratified at fathering the *Aeneid* than the fairest boy in Rome, nor fail to find the loss of one more bearable than the other. For according to Aristotle, of all artists the one who is most in love with his handiwork is the poet.

Such people can be so in love with their works, and the potential immortality that lies in them, that they exhibit total despair upon losing them:

[The enemies of Labienus, a man who “excelled in every kind of literature,”] prosecuted him before the Roman magistrates and obtained a conviction, requiring several of the books he had published to be burnt. This was the very first case of the death penalty being inflicted on books and erudition; it was subsequently applied at Rome in several other

cases. ...Labienus could not bear such a loss nor survive such beloved offspring; he had himself borne to the family vault on a litter and shut up alive; there he provided his own death and burial. It is difficult to find any example of fatherly love more vehement than that one...

A similar misfortune happened to Cremutius Cordus, who was accused of having praised Brutus and Cassius in his books. That slavish base and corrupt Senate (worthy of a worse master than Tiberius) condemned his writings to the pyre: it pleased him to keep his books company as they perished in the flames by starving himself to death.¹⁰³

It seems that a certain kind of person, blessed with a Protestant ethic, will always see more merit in his "works" than in his "faith" — precisely because his works are what make possible his faith (in himself). He has to creatively "objectify" himself—project himself into the world, see his sense of self reflected and confirmed outside himself. Everyone needs this, but some people evidently need it more, or rather in different ways, than others. Accordingly, they will use their talents, perhaps to the point of obsession, to get the self-confirmation they desire—because knowledge of their talents has become the most essential component in their self-regard.

But what is this identification with "great" objectifications if not identification with greatness itself? The objectifications are what raise the creator (in his own eyes) from the level of the mundane, which he hates, into the level of the semi-immortal. Without them he is just ordinary, and so his sense of self—which is committed to his extraordinariness—is not confirmed or recognized. But *with* them he is this being that can put beauty and profundity into the world. He so invests himself in his objectifications that he is able to live, in a way, *outside* himself; he doesn't have to face the fact that he is just a

¹⁰³ Montaigne, *The Essays: A Selection* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 165, 166, 167.

human among humans, as mortal and earth-bound as everyone else. He can ignore his obviously animal nature. Schopenhauer and Wagner can be seen as the prototypes—those two brilliant, deluded men. Schopenhauer did more than any other thinker to propagate the myth of genius, the conception of which he basically modeled after how he perceived his own personality: the genius is the man whose intellect is so powerful and energetic that it has been effectively detached from its service to the will (i.e., to the individual's practical interests, his will-to-live), which in the average person is its sole function.

...The gift of genius is nothing but the most complete *objectivity*, i.e., the objective tendency of the mind, as opposed to the subjective directed to our own person, i.e., to the will. Accordingly, genius is the capacity to remain in a state of pure perception, to lose oneself in perception, to remove from the service of the will the knowledge which originally existed only for this service. In other words, genius is the ability to leave entirely out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims, and consequently to discard entirely our own personality for a time, in order to remain *pure knowing subject*, the clear eye of the world... For genius to appear in an individual, it is as if a measure of the power of knowledge must have fallen to his lot far exceeding that required for the service of an individual will; and this superfluity of knowledge having become free, now becomes the subject purified of will, the clear mirror of the inner nature of the world. This explains the animation, amounting to disquietude, in men of genius, since the present can seldom satisfy them, because it does not fill their consciousness...¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ *The World as Will and Representation* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1969), 185, 186.

Such panegyric passages go on for pages in Schopenhauer's books; and while I enjoy reading them, they're obviously fantasies. Wagner didn't think so, though. Like so many other Romantics, he adored Schopenhauer and his philosophy because it flattered him—specifically because of the privileged place that Schopenhauer accorded music. This art, he said, is superior to all others, since it is the most immediate and abstract manifestation of Will, i.e., the essence of reality. This theory gave Wagner the philosophical justification he needed to think of himself as the most monumental and metaphysical of geniuses, a self-conception that comforted him amidst all the suffering and toil that went into his composing. As Nietzsche remarked,¹⁰⁵ it's likely that Wagner needed his self-idealism, which he enshrined in his philosophical essays, in order to create. But in this respect he was just an ordinary "genius" taken to the extreme.

Self-idealism is ubiquitous, though it isn't usually taken to the excesses that Wagner took it. The very illusion that one is a substantial self—"Chris Wright," "John Smith," "Nancy Jones"—rather than merely a piece of matter with consciousness and memory-fragments is an example of self-idealism; so is love, which ascribes great value to the beloved; so is the attribution of some sort of importance to oneself. Everyone, of necessity, shares these illusions. Human life would not be possible without them. The brain naturally manufactures them, and they're what keep one interested in life. Scientific understanding, as Nietzsche and Max Weber saw, does not itself give rise to values, and indeed tends to show they don't have the "objectively justifiable" status we think they do but are mere projections of our own subjective attitudes. Nevertheless, we need values, we need self-love and self-idealism, and we need to idealize others. The notions of genius and greatness are ultimately senseless,

¹⁰⁵ "Let him [i.e., Wagner] have his intellectual tempers and cramps. Let us, in all fairness, ask what strange nourishments and needs an art like [his] may require to be able to live and grow..." *The Gay Science*, §99. (Kaufmann's translation.)

but they can be of inestimable value in stimulating certain people to action, such that it can be very cruel to try to prove to someone that his idolization of a “hero” or so-called genius is a delusion.

The example that comes to mind is that of the young, talented person whose idealization of some hero gives him the inspiration to create. The young Nietzsche is his spokesman:

Your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be. Your true educators and formative teachers reveal to you what the true basic material of your being is, something in itself ineducable and in any case difficult of access, bound and paralysed: your educators can be only your liberators.¹⁰⁶

This hero-worship is another of the illusions in which human life consists. Without it, a lot of young people would find life boring and pointless. *I* certainly would have. My idolization of particular “great men” gave substance to the (self-)ideals without which I would have found life dull. If I had thought that everyone is basically similar and equal—if, that is, I had truly, intuitively understood humanity—such that I hadn’t looked up to anyone as superior to the rest of us, it’s doubtful that I could have had my ideals. It would have seemed futile to strive for anything if I weren’t basically striving for the approval of past great men. How *boring* it would be to strive for the approval of the average person!—or of someone like me! No satisfaction would come from that kind of recognition. I had to think there were people greater than I, whose judgment I trusted more than my own. Whether I had value as a human being depended on whether they would have thought I had value. —On an *intellectual*

¹⁰⁶ Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, Part Three, “Schopenhauer as Educator.”

level such people may recognize they're the victim of an illusion, but implicitly they still have to believe in it.

Incidentally, if they actually met the person whom they idolize, they would likely be disappointed. Not necessarily because he wouldn't measure up to their expectations, but just because he is as human as they themselves. Similarly, people who meet a celebrity are sometimes taken aback that he is just an ordinary person. "He's easygoing and pleasant. He even goes to the mall! Just like everyone else!" The reason they're surprised is the reason why the hero-worshiper may be disappointed upon meeting his idol: they've come to identify the famous person with his *name*, the *idea* of him. They see him not as something concrete and ordinary but as a sort of abstract concept, a *principle* as it were, just like the abstract Other in consciousness that drives us to seek self-confirmation. This famous person has become (for them) ingrained in the structure of reality, of social reality; he, or his "concept," is a component in the cultural or psychological background against which they live their lives, like a philosophical or aesthetic idea—with the decisive difference, though, that *this* "concept" is also a *self*. Bill Clinton, say, or Barack Obama, or some other famous person, is part-*self* and part-*concept*—part-*other* and part-*object*. His otherness, or selfhood, means that he is the kind of thing from which one wants validation, namely a human being; his "objecthood" (his being a cultural concept) means that he is more permanent than the rest of us, as though he is a part of reality itself.¹⁰⁷ The result is that he is implicitly perceived as more than human. In being recognized by him—or in identifying with

¹⁰⁷ A better way of saying it may be that he is effectively a concrete version—an especially valued or "impressive" one—of the abstract other from which one is always seeking recognition/validation; hence the excitement of meeting him. His social importance creates the aura around him of a kind of "self-certainty," a particularly powerful kind of substitute self-confidence, a *reality*, recognition from which/whom can prove one's own reality, i.e., the validity of one's implicit self-love.

him or with some past “great man”—one is recognized by or is identifying with a part of (social) reality itself, which of course is very affirmative of one’s sense of self.

These fragmentary reflections, I hope, help explain humans’ odd fascination with genius, greatness, and fame. My main concern, though, has been to show that the former two qualities are mere projections of the admiring person’s attitude, not substantive, coherent properties in and of themselves. Widespread appreciation of this fact would facilitate a healthy equality among people.

*

The last word.— Our opinion of another pertains not to the person himself but only to our image of him. We value and devalue in the space *between* each other, and our judgments are conditional, relative, one-sided, simplistic, and mistaken.

Part Two

Chapter Two

Robert Brenner on Recent Economic History

I've decided to tackle Brenner's *Economics of Global Turbulence* (2006), a true masterpiece, practically a work of genius. Perry Anderson goes so far as to say, "it is plain that here, as in no other body of work today, Marx's enterprise has found a successor. To have developed as coherent, detailed, and deep-going an attempt to understand the history of the world market—where Marx left off in *Capital*—since the Second World War must be regarded, by any standards, as an extraordinary accomplishment."¹⁰⁸ If I don't take notes I'll forget everything. So here goes...

According to Brenner, there have been two periods in recent international economic history: prosperity from the late 1940s to 1973, and slowed growth and economic turbulence from 1973 onwards. *Why?* Orthodox economics doesn't know, barely even acknowledging the trajectory. "The major existing alternative [to orthodox neoclassical economics]...finds the source of the shift from long boom to long downturn in the increased power of and pressure from labour exerted against capital, itself the result in part of the long extension of the postwar economic upturn. But, with the benefit of hindsight, this thesis would seem to have been definitively undermined by the failure of the decisive [neoliberal] weakening of labour vis-à-vis capital during the 1970s and 1980s to bring about the restoration of system-wide economic vitality." Many commentators would argue that after the 1970s there *was* a restoration of international economic vitality, but one of the purposes of Brenner's book is to show that they're wrong. Despite appearances, the global economy has basically been in a sickly state since the early 1970s.

Brenner sees *profitability* as key to the whole story.

¹⁰⁸ Perry Anderson, *Spectrum* (New York: Verso, 2005), 258.

The realized rate of profit [he writes] is the direct measure of firms' ability to derive surpluses from their plant, equipment, and software. It is also the best available predictor of the rate of return that firms can expect on their new investment. As a result, the rate of profit is the fundamental determinant of the rate at which the economy's constituent firms will accumulate capital and expand employment, therefore of its output, productivity and wage growth, and, in turn, of the increase of its aggregate demand, both investment and consumer. From this point of departure, an initial account immediately follows. What made possible the inauguration and long perpetuation of the postwar boom in the US, Europe, and Japan was the achievement, over the period between the late 1930s and late 1940s, of elevated rates of profit and their maintenance during the following two decades. What brought the postwar boom to an end was a sharp fall in profitability for the advanced capitalist economies taken individually and together between 1965 and 1973, focused on the manufacturing sector but extending to the private economy as a whole, beginning in the US but soon encompassing Western Europe and Japan. The reason that, as of 2000, there had been no clear revival of the global economy is that there had been no decisive recovery of the profit rate system-wide, or in the US, Western Europe, or Japan considered separately. [Brenner's analysis throughout the book focuses on the US, Germany, and Japan, as representative of the three poles of the advanced capitalist world.] The challenge posed by these results is, of course, to account for the pattern of profitability itself—both for the system as a whole and for its various regional and national components... To respond to that challenge is, simply stated, the project of this book.

Why does the rate of profit have a tendency to fall? Because of the anarchy and competitiveness of capitalist production, which “require individual capitals [i.e., businesses] to cut costs in order to survive by introducing fixed capital embodying ever more efficient technology, but to do so not only without reference to the reproductive requirements of other businesses, but by threatening their profits and indeed their very existence. The outcome in aggregate is, on the one hand, to bring about the unprecedented development of the productive forces. But it is, on the other hand, to prevent firms with higher-cost methods of production frozen in their already-existing plant, equipment, and software from realizing their fixed capital investments. This manifests itself in over-capacity and, in turn, reduced profitability.”

Okay, so, a lot of theory. How do you connect it to reality? Through an intermediate conceptual link, which gives a reason for thinking that capitalist economic expansion will take the form of uneven development. Namely, Brenner argues that there will be an early-developing bloc of capital (the U.S. in this case, immediately after the Second World War) that is technologically and socio-economically more advanced, and later-developing blocs of capital (in Western Europe and Japan) that are at first backward but are “able to exploit the potential advantages of coming late and of cultivating new, hitherto less developed regions.” Eventually, the later-developing blocs challenge the earlier-developing “by combining lower-cost inputs [such as labor] and equal or more advanced technology, making for an intensification of inter-capitalist competition that undermines the ability of large masses of fixed capital investments to realize themselves, leading to the onset of over-capacity and declining rates of profit.” This intensification of competition occurred between 1965 and 1973, and led to falling profitability system-wide.

But if that explains, in summary form, why the downturn started, why has it lasted so long? Especially given that firms, assisted by

governments, have sought to restore their profit rates “by means both of the obsessive reduction of costs, above all direct and indirect labour costs, and the transformation of their ways of doing business.” Hence attacks on the working class and the neoliberalizing of the global economy since the 1970s. E.g., firms “shifted capital out of high-cost, low-profit manufacturing lines, especially into financial services, and turned increasingly to speculation.” All this was meant to cope with the problem of reduced profitability. But somehow it couldn’t prevent the performance of the advanced capitalist economies from *worsening* as time went on.

So what is the explanation of the length of the downturn? Simply that private sector profitability didn’t recover, due to the “paradoxical persistence of chronic over-capacity in international manufacturing.” What happened is that, “on the one hand, in response to falling profit rates, firms had to slow the growth of investment and employment, while seeking to reduce the level of their costs, particularly labour costs, in the multifarious ways indicated above. The outcome, in the face of the persistent failure of profitability to recover, was a chronic and worsening problem of investment, consumer, government, and therefore aggregate demand. On the other hand, contrary to expectations, the great firms of the advanced capitalist world sought only tardily and with the greatest reluctance to respond to their profitability problems by withdrawing their capital stock from oversubscribed lines of production. Instead, they defended their positions in the world market as long as possible by improving their competitiveness by expanding investment as much as they were able, even in the face of reduced rates of return.” At the same time, more countries in East Asia, such as Taiwan and South Korea, entered the world economy, as Western Europe and Japan had earlier. This led to more problems: increasingly sophisticated manufacturing products were poured into already over-supplied world markets, which increased still further the stress on world manufacturing profit rates.

Nevertheless, the intensification of over-capacity in world manufacturing markets (which resulted from both the unexpected persistence of incumbents from the advanced capitalist world and the unprecedented ingress of entrants from the developing world, especially East Asia) in the face of a deepening problem of insufficient aggregate demand (which resulted from universal cost-cutting and the slow-down of investment and job-creation consequent upon the decline of profitability) did not lead, as might otherwise have been expected, to a large-scale shakeout of high-cost, low-profit means of production by making for serious recession or depression. [This “shakeout” is what used to happen in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when depressions got rid of unprofitable businesses *en masse*.] This was because the governments of the advanced capitalist world, led to an ever-increasing extent by the US, made sure that titanic volumes of credit were made available, through ever more varied channels, direct and indirect, both public and private, to firms and households to soak up the surplus of supply over demand, especially in the wake of the serious cyclical downturns that periodically threatened stability. Rather than system-shaking crisis, we therefore witnessed the continuation, stretching over three decades, of persistently reduced rates of profit that made for ever-decreasing economic vitality on a global scale, along with ever more destructive asset price bubbles and financial implosions, and increasingly severe cyclical downturns. The upshot was the predicament facing the world economy as it entered the new millennium: namely, the still further continuation of the long downturn against a background of over-supplied lines of production, decelerating aggregate demand, and a mountain of over-priced paper assets, all made

possible by the accumulation of private and public debt at unprecedented speed and at historic levels.

On one level, then, it amounts to too much supply, not enough demand. But it's not quite that simple, because if real wages had been allowed to rise in the decades after 1973, the rate of profit would have been even lower than it was. So, from one perspective—it seems to me—it was and is useful to business and economic growth to take more and more from labor, since that increases profitability. On the other hand, suppressing demand *too much* has disastrous consequences. So it's strange: a reduction in real wages (or in the growth of real wages) can be both bad and good for the economy. But ultimately, I guess, it's bad. For individual firms it's a good policy to reduce wages, but for the economy as a whole it's bad, at least in the long run, because then the masses won't have enough purchasing power to buy the goods that are being produced. So profit-rates will decline, which will cause investment to decline, which will result in laid-off workers and reduced wages, which will further decrease aggregate demand, etc.

“The contention, so dear to the hearts of business advocates and neoliberal politicians, as well as some neoclassical economists, that the turn to ever-freer markets and ever-deeper austerity must bring, and has brought, ever-greater economic vigour is in defiance of the evidence. The fact is that, for the advanced capitalist economies taken singly or together, economic performance has worsened, business cycle by business cycle, since the end of the postwar boom in terms of all of the main macroeconomic indicators: the growth of GDP, capital stock, labour productivity, and real compensation. Economic performance was less good during the 1990s than the 1980s, which lagged the 1970s, which was, of course, far worse than the economic performance of the 1950s and 1960s.”

“Between 1970 and 1990, the manufacturing rate of profit for the G-7 economies taken together was, on average, about 40 percent

lower than between 1950 and 1970... As I shall try to demonstrate, the major decline in the profit rate throughout the advanced capitalist world has been the basic cause of the parallel, major decline in the rate of growth of investment, and with it the growth of output, especially in manufacturing, over the same period. The sharp decline in the rate of growth of investment—along with that of output itself—is, I shall argue, the primary source of the decline in the rate of growth of productivity, as well as a major determinant of the increase of unemployment. The declines in the rate of growth of employment and productivity are at the root of the sharp slowdown in the growth of real wages.

“To explain the origins and evolution of the long downturn through an analysis of the causes and effects of changes in profitability is thus the objective of this study.” My italics.

“The fall in *aggregate* profitability that was responsible for the long downturn was the result of...the over-capacity and over-production that resulted from intensified, horizontal intercapitalist competition. The heightening of intercapitalist competition was itself brought about by the introduction of lower-cost, lower-price goods into the world market, especially in manufacturing, at the expense of already existing higher-cost, higher-price producers, their profitability and their productive capacity. The long downturn, from this standpoint, has persisted largely because the advanced capitalist economies have proved unable to accomplish profitably sufficient reductions and reallocations of productive power so as to overcome over-capacity and over-production in manufacturing lines, and thereby to restore profitability, especially given the growing presence of East Asia in world markets.”

Having *outlined* the theoretical framework and objectives of the book, Brenner goes into more detail on the theory. He starts out by critiquing what he calls “supply-side” explanations of the downturn, which explain it in terms of declining labor productivity in the

1970s combined with a failure of real wage growth to adjust downward in tandem (due to workers' supposedly excessive political power, as well as to tight labor markets). Thus, rates of profit have declined because productivity growth has declined more than the growth in workers' wages has. There has been a squeeze on profits. Even many Marxists and radicals subscribe to this theory. Brenner characterizes it as Malthusian, because Malthus (and Ricardo) thought that in agriculture there is a long-term tendency to declining growth of labor productivity. Ultimately the upshot of this was supposed to be economic stagnation or crisis. Luckily Malthus was wrong: modern science came to the rescue by making possible various agricultural technologies that increased productivity. Nonetheless, many economists (on the left and right) are still attracted to the general "supply-side" idea that a secular, or long-term, decline in productivity growth can and does cause a fall in profitability. Even Marx himself embraced the idea (according to Brenner), despite his aversion to Malthus. His explanation for the tendency of the profit rate to fall was that as mechanization increases, more and more capital inputs and fewer labor inputs go into producing a commodity, which means that less surplus-value is embodied in the commodity. (And profits, says Marx, arise from surplus-value.) As Brenner paraphrases Marx, labor productivity actually increases with mechanization, but *overall* productivity—taking into account both capital and labor inputs—declines.

Anyway, the point is that "Marxists and radicals have joined liberals and conservatives in explaining the long downturn as a 'supply-side' crisis, resulting from a squeeze on profits, reflecting pressure on capital from labour that is 'too strong' [because of strong unions in the 1960s and '70s]. In so doing, they have characterized the current crisis in terms just the opposite of those that have often been used to characterize the long downturn of the interwar period [between the two world wars], a crisis widely viewed as a 'demand-side' or 'under-consumption' crisis, resulting from an

overly high profit rate, reflecting pressure from labour that was ‘too weak.’” This demand-side interpretation of the Great Depression, of course, is the classical Keynesian one—although, incidentally, Marxists and other socialists were putting forward this argument before Keynes was.

So why are the supply-siders wrong about the post-1960s downturn? First, while it’s true that full employment tends to result in higher wages (which squeeze profits), it also leads to higher sales, hence more profits. The latter effect may offset the former. Second, the acceleration of real wage growth tends to cause firms to substitute labor-saving capital for labor, which increases overall productivity. Third, because of the high demand for labor, immigration from abroad will probably increase, thereby reducing the tightness of the labor market. At the same time, capital will be exported to regions of the world where labor is cheaper.

But let’s suppose that full employment (and higher pay) does occasionally cause a significant fall in profitability. This still won’t cause a *long-term* reduction in the profit rate, because firms will inevitably respond to their reduced profitability by reducing investment. “As a result, sooner rather than later, the labour market will loosen sufficiently” to allow for the restoration of profitability. –In response to this argument, supply-siders maintain that the postwar political power of labor (through unions, unemployment insurance, etc.) was such that the labor market couldn’t function properly. Profit-squeezing wages have therefore been able to persist alongside high levels of unemployment. Brenner counters that in *given* firms or industries for *given* periods of time, labor’s entrenched power might skew the operation of the labor market. But it cannot so squeeze profits as to cause a *long-term, system-wide downturn*, simply because firms can always choose to invest in some area where workers have less institutionalized power. And if they don’t so invest, they’ll go out of business, because other firms *will* so invest.

In any case, the fact that supply-side theorists explain the long downturn in terms of the operation of institutions and impact of policies means that they have to explain it in historically and nationally specific ways. But how can such explanations account for a *universal, simultaneous and long-term* downturn? Clearly they can't.

After his demolition of the supply-side account, Brenner introduces his own approach in a very abstract and dense theoretical discussion. The main point is that, contrary to the received wisdom, when a new firm that uses cost-cutting technical advancements enters an industry—or rather a “line”—dominated by firms with relatively high costs of production and sells its products at a lower price than they do (because of its lower costs of production) so as to increase its market share, the old firms *cannot* be expected to take action immediately by either adopting the new techniques of the innovating firm or leaving the line as a result of their reduced profitability (which is due to competition with the innovating firm). The reason is that *if they have fixed capital* they will, first of all, not want to leave the line immediately as long as they can continue making profits that are at least above the costs of their circulating capital (which is “the investment in labor power, raw materials, and semi-finished goods that is required to put their fixed capital into motion”). Their fixed capital is “sunk.” They’ve already paid for it, so they might as well keep using it as long as they can get at least some profit from it. As for why they won’t immediately adopt the new techniques of the innovating firm, that’s because the technical interrelatedness of their plants makes it difficult to adopt specific new inventions without changing the whole structure of the plant, or scrapping it all. And the cost of doing that may be prohibitive, especially if the plant is still basically efficient. Furthermore, even *between* plants and other units in a given productive system it may be “difficult to innovate in one part without changing some or all of the others.” Thus, productive systems are “inertial,” which increases

their vulnerability to new, lower-cost production based on new techniques.

But I haven't said the most important thing yet: because the new, innovating firm lowers the price of its products to steal market share from other firms, it actually does not make a higher rate of profit than those firms did before it entered the market. And once it has entered, the older firms have a *lower* rate of profit than they did because their market share is lower. So what has happened is that the average rate of profit in the line has fallen. This lower rate of profit can be expected to adversely affect profits throughout the whole economy, for complex reasons I won't go into.

Brenner thinks of fixed-capital investment throughout the economy as taking place in "waves," or being "embodied in large, technically interrelated, developmental blocs." "This occurs because each investment tends to depend on others to provide the demand to its output and the inputs for its production process. Think of the interrelated rise of railroads and shipbuilding, coal mining, iron and steel production, and machine-tool production in the middle third of the nineteenth century, or the interrelated expansion of automobile, steel, iron, coal, and petroleum production, along with highway construction, in the US economy in the years following World War II." These developmental blocs are inertial, hence vulnerable to new, more productive, developmental blocs that may appear. But these large-scale processes of technical change and cost-cutting will not appear in some sort of continuous, unilineal way. Because of barriers to entry in markets, cost-cutting investors will tend to arise in new geographical regions (e.g., postwar Japan and Germany) where they don't face immediate and vicious competition with already-dominant firms. Moreover, production can be cheaper in such late-developing regions because "producers have the potential to emulate the advanced techniques of their rivals from the old bloc while availing themselves of less expensive labour and paying lower rents than in developed areas where living standards have increased

in accord with the growth of labour productivity." Also, sometimes producers in these new regions have the advantage of trade protection, beneficial state intervention, etc.

In the long run, capitalists in these late-developing regions will improve and expand their productive capacity to the point that they can profitably enter already occupied markets. New blocs of capital will thereby come into competition with the old. And so the average rate of profit will decline, etc., in accord with the scheme outlined above. High-cost firms in the old bloc might well respond to the new situation by counterattacking, defending their markets by investing in new fixed capital. This strategy will tend to provoke the original cost-cutting innovators to accelerate technological change themselves, "further worsening the already existing over-capacity and over-production" (which is "over-" in relation to the previously and still prevailing rate of profit; i.e., it drives the profit-rate down). As rates of profit fall, the growth of investment, of employment, and of wages necessarily falls as well—i.e., demand falls—which makes it more difficult for firms to change to new lines. And productivity grows more slowly too, because of decreased investment. "It becomes harder to find alternative lines in which old levels of profitability can be maintained for the simple reason that such lines are emerging and expanding less rapidly."

To make things even worse, still lower-cost producers might enter the market.

Just as the mere over-supply of a line of production cannot be counted on to force enough exit to restore its profitability, that same over-supply is insufficient to deter further entry that could bring down its profit rate further. On the contrary. The initial fall in profitability that results from processes of uneven development bringing about over-capacity and over-production can be expected to intensify the world-wide drive for even lower production costs for the same

products through the combination of even cheaper labour with even higher levels of technique in still later-developing regions. To the extent this drive succeeds...it only intensifies the initial problem.

Firms will tend to respond to the hard times by taking out loans so as to increase investment or just to survive until things get better. This growth of borrowing facilitates the survival of low-profit firms and so exacerbates over-capacity and over-production, slows the restoration of profitability, etc.

Additionally, the fall in profitability *itself* generates further downward pressure on the profit rate by causing a reduced growth of productivity (due to the reduced growth of investment)—and lower productivity, of course, means lower profits.

In the rest of the book, Brenner applies these ideas to the history of the international economy after World War II. Here's a short summary.— From the early 1960s, due in part to the “dramatic reduction of trade barriers at the end of the 1950s,” Germany and Japan took increasing shares of the international market at the expense of the U.S. and U.K. U.S. manufacturers found that their prices were under significant downward pressure, which meant that their rates of profit suffered. Partly because of the enormous size of the U.S. economy, aggregate profitability of the advanced capitalist economies fell in the years between 1965 and 1973. “Meanwhile, between 1969 and 1973, as part and parcel of the same processes of intensifying competition that brought down profitability in the US, the explosion of Japanese and German current account surpluses and US current account deficits—catalyzed by the rise of record US federal deficits—precipitated the collapse of the Bretton Woods system and with it a major devaluation of the dollar, leading to a dramatic restructuring of relative costs internationally in favor of US producers. The mark and the yen sustained major increases in value against the dollar, and, as a result, some of the burden of profit-

ability decline was shifted away from the US economy and the international crisis was extended to both Germany and Japan.”

“Rather than leave their lines, U.S. manufacturing corporations, aided by the even further devaluation of the dollar, sought to improve their profitability and competitiveness by launching a powerful wave of investment during the 1970s and radically reducing the growth of wage costs, direct and indirect.” Given cheaper U.S. goods on the world market, German and Japanese manufacturers did the same thing as U.S. ones had, namely cut their costs, took out more loans, and *didn't* change production to different lines. Later, newly established producers in East Asia entered markets, perpetuating the downturn into the 1990s. Nonetheless, a series of major recessions did not lead to depression because of the massive growth of public and private debt, “made possible largely by the enormous expansion of government borrowing.”

From the end of the 1970s, the epoch-making turn from Keynesian debt-creation [in the postwar period] to monetarist credit restriction and intensified austerity did accelerate the destruction of redundant capital, especially in manufacturing, but it simultaneously made more difficult the necessary allocation of investment funds into new lines. Meanwhile, from the mid 1980s, on the basis of another round of massive dollar devaluation against the yen and the mark, there began a major new shift in the locus of the most competitive manufacturing production—in favor of the US and against Germany and Japan. In the US, while growth remained slow, profitability did begin to rise, dramatically so towards the mid 1990s. This was in part because wage growth was so effectively held down and the dollar so heavily devalued against the currencies of Germany and Japan. But it was also in part because the US manufacturing sector achieved a certain rationalization and revitalization,

largely through shedding redundant, ineffective capital and intensifying labour.

Nevertheless, in large part because the growth of domestic demand in the advanced capitalist economies was curtailed by restrictive macroeconomic policies and other causes, “there was no transcendence of the underlying problem of reduced system-wide manufacturing profitability.” Advanced capitalist economies oriented themselves increasingly toward growth in manufacturing exports as domestic markets grew much more slowly. Thus, over-capacity and over-production continued.

Now for more detail. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, “in one key industry after another”—textiles, steel, automobiles, machine tools, consumer electronics—Germany and Japan forged ahead of the U.S.

After World War II, the U.S.’s labor movement, unlike Germany’s and Japan’s, was strong enough to push up wages rapidly, “especially when cyclical upturns pushed down unemployment, as at the time of the Korean War.” Wages in Germany and Japan were much lower because of large industrial reserve armies and the labor movement’s suppression with the advent of the Cold War. Hence, higher profit rates. Conservative trade unions in fact gave top priority to the needs of capital accumulation. Thus, “the postwar boom in both countries was predicated more on the defeat of labour than on its recognition, more on the explicit subordination of labour than the consolidation of any putative ‘capital-labour accord.’” To say it differently, “it was the long postwar expansion itself which made possible labour’s substantial material gains and its ulterior (partial) socio-political integration through the emergent trade-union bureaucracies—not vice versa.” German and Japanese workers hinged their fates to that of ‘their own’ firm. Through enterprise

unions and works councils, they facilitated their firms' achievement of international competitiveness.

In the U.S., on the other hand, rapid economic growth from the late 1930s to the late 1940s "raised barriers to further improvement by leaving in its wake masses of fixed capital capable of deterring further entry and investment, by using up factor supplies, especially surplus labour, and by facilitating labour resistance." Also, the great manufacturing corporations and international bankers had an interest after World War II in helping other countries rebuild, because that's where many of the best opportunities for profit would be. So these forces got the U.S. government to support "a policy of free flow of goods and investment funds that would allow the multinationals and international bankers to make direct investments and loans abroad and allow imports to flow back into the country." Besides, U.S.-based exporters needed to allow their prospective customers abroad to sell goods to the U.S. in order to earn the currency they would need to buy U.S. goods. For these and other reasons, the government opened up the U.S. market to exports from its economic rivals while accepting their own protectionism. "It thereby helped to create the conditions for the secular decline of competitiveness of U.S. domestic manufacturing." In other words, it made possible the export-driven economic growth of Germany and Japan, which eventually undercut the markets and profits of U.S. domestic manufacturers.

One of the morals of the story is that it *wasn't* "new [Keynesian] arrangements for keeping domestic demand up with production" that were responsible for the extraordinary growth rates of Germany and Japan. Their economic miracles were based on *supply-side* advantages, including various institutional and policy advantages, not on *demand-side* facts. Indeed, their governments held down the growth of domestic demand (by imposing balanced budgets and relatively tight credit) in order to achieve low inflation in the interest of overseas sales.

In the long run, Germany's and Japan's growth of exports was self-undermining, for several reasons. An important one is that its obverse side was the "tendential decline of U.S. manufacturing competitiveness, the tendential rise of U.S. external deficits, and the tendential decline of the U.S. currency. Implied was the declining capacity of the U.S. market to absorb its allies' and rivals' goods and thus to serve as the 'motor of last resort' of their economies. The very processes by which the German and Japanese economies achieved rapid growth during the postwar boom tended to destroy the foundations of their success."

Brenner briefly argues against Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy's theory of capitalist stagnation arising from the predominance of monopoly capital. (See their book *Monopoly Capital: An Essay on the American Social and Economic Order* (1966).) It's true, as they say, that the U.S. economy grew more slowly as the 1950s progressed. But their main ideas, Brenner argues, were merely reifications of temporary and specific aspects of the U.S. economy in the 1950s. The *world* economy was not at all stagnant at this time, and the U.S. economy was only *relatively* stagnant compared to Germany and Japan. Moreover, its stagnation was simply a result of the fact that the U.S.'s "manufacturing sector offered relatively limited opportunities for profitable investment compared to those available in manufacturing outside the U.S." Firms thus invested abroad in order to generate profits, resulting in relative stagnation in the U.S. It's true, too, that in certain restricted senses "oligopolistic competition" fettered investment in the 1950s and 1960s. And as we've seen, high wage-rates decreased profitability as compared to the low wage-rates that permitted high profitability abroad.

"The slow growth of investment [in the U.S. in the 1950s] may well have been partly responsible for the reduction in the growth of labour productivity in manufacturing." I should note, incidentally,

that Brenner backs up every statement with extensive empirical data.

“While the powerful surge of manufacturing productivity growth of the immediate postwar period petered out in the 1950s, wage growth failed to follow suit. The 1950s was the true golden age for the American worker... *If there was a major squeeze on profits by the action of labour at any point during the postwar epoch, it took place in manufacturing in the course of the 1950s.*” (Brenner’s italics.)

“With wages rising, with slow investment growth helping to push down both labour and capital productivity growth, and with capacity utilization declining, the 1950s understandably witnessed a very major decline in manufacturing profitability. Between 1950 and 1958, the manufacturing profit rate fell by 41 percent...” As if all this weren’t enough, the American economy experienced inflation in the latter part of the decade as employers tried to pass on wage increases in the form of price increases. U.S. prices rose above those of its competitors.

Recessions occurred in the U.S. at the end of the 1950s. But the economy recovered in the first half of the 1960s. Manufacturing output grew fast, GNP grew fast, etc. Why? Because of a spectacular rise in the rate of profit. “Between 1958 and 1965, profitability in manufacturing rose by no less than 80 percent, in the private business economy by 45 percent. Increased profitability brought about increased growth by spurring a powerful boom in investment.” Critical to the rise in profitability was an employer offensive against labor, made possible in part by the rise of unemployment due to recession that had itself been partially brought on by high wages’ squeezing of profits. Employers defeated their workers in several large strikes, and they resisted extensions of unionization increasingly successfully, often by building new plants in the ununionized south and southwest of the country. Unions won workplace elections less frequently, rates of unionization began to fall, there was a stepping up of supervision on the shop floor, etc. “All of

these trends have continued to the present, and one cannot but conclude that the decade from the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s marked a turning point for the U.S. union movement, the beginning of a long and precipitous process of decline." The upshot of the employer offensive was a significant lowering of the rate of wage growth. Investment therefore increased, productivity increased, and exports increased.

The recovery couldn't continue forever, though, because the trends of reducing wage growth on which it was largely based could be carried only so far. And the German and Japanese economies were still growing. In fact, even in the mid-1960s the U.S. saw its share of world manufacturing exports fall from 18.7 percent to 15.8 percent.

Let's look at Germany. Its impressive growth after the war was due primarily to its export dynamism, made possible by the fact that "it could use its very cheap labour and historical endowment of very highly skilled labour to emulate, and in some cases surpass, U.S. production methods and, on that basis, seize markets formerly held by U.S. manufacturers." Incidentally, the Korean War was important in jumpstarting, after a severe recession caused by a deflationary monetary policy, Germany's export-driven boom (since American demand shot up). In general, the growth of demand in the American economy, "and particularly the stabilization of demand there by means of large-scale military spending," contributed mightily to the expansion of Germany's export-oriented economy (which was itself founded on anti-Keynesian policies—i.e., budget surpluses, tight credit, and high interest rates).

In causing high demand for labor and nearly full employment, why didn't the boom lead to significant wage increases and corresponding pressure on profits? Because of the large reserves of labor in the German countryside and abroad. Also, mass emigration of skilled labor from East to West Germany helped keep the labor market loose.

“During the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the U.S. economy temporarily broke from its long-term pattern of relatively slow growth, the German economy sustained an interruption of its momentum.” From the mid-1960s, the economy regained some of its former dynamism. But what caused the downturn between 1960 and 1965? Two things: “first, the rise of manufacturing producers across the advanced capitalist world prepared to challenge German producers for markets and, second, the self-limiting character of a German form of economic development that was structured to stimulate the growth of manufacturing exports at the expense of the domestic market.” From the late 1950s, the German economy’s costs of production rose in relation to those of its increasingly competitive rivals France, Italy, and Japan. In 1961 a revaluation of the mark exacerbated the problem by increasing relative labor costs. The growth of relative costs in turn sharply reduced Germany’s capacity to export.

As for the self-limiting character of export-led growth: such growth was “buttressed by macroeconomic policy aimed at restricting the growth of demand so as to keep down prices,” as I mentioned above. But the consequence of this was major current account surpluses, which in turn created strong pressures to revalue (i.e., raise the value of) the mark, as was done in 1961. Mark revaluations, in turn, undermined competitiveness, for they tended to entail higher relative unit labor costs. “Germany’s competitiveness thus threatened to self-destruct by bringing about an increase in German relative prices,” either through inflation or through mark revaluation.

Now Japan. In 1950 it had very low manufacturing productivity but even lower wage rates. Cheap skilled labor was key to its post-war economic boom. It’s true that the labor movement was very strong immediately after the war, as it was in Germany, Italy, France and elsewhere, but with the start of the Cold War it was crushed by political means. Between 1950 and 1960, Japanese manufacturing

output grew at an astonishing pace, on the basis of equally astonishing growth in investment and hence productivity. "What made it possible to sustain such rapid growth was, as in Germany, the Japanese economy's ability to prevent the investment boom from bringing about the too rapid growth of costs." Wage pressure was minimal throughout the whole period. As a result, the profit rate soared.

Market forces, however, were not in themselves responsible for all these successes. Crucial were horizontal networks in manufacturing, to plan, reduce risk, etc., and the effective merger of finance and industry. Banks heavily involved themselves in the operations of their manufacturer-debtors, which enabled the latter to finance themselves to an unusual extent on the basis of debt rather than equity, which was good because stocks typically require higher rates of return than loans (due to their higher risk). "Firms were thereby [and for other reasons as well] relieved of the need to pay large dividends," which meant that they could channel more of their profits into investment than American and other competitors could. "They were allowed, moreover, to orient their operations to long-run returns, subject only to their ability to satisfy their banker-financiers."

The state, too, played an important role in Japanese economic growth. "Largely at the expense of workers and consumers, it provided desperately needed investment funds, either directly or through the banks, to Japan's leading corporations and effectively guaranteed their continuing existence. By making financial advances contingent on how these funds would be used, the state was able to go far in determining the direction of the explosive process of growth that its patronage made possible." The state also made sure that interest rates were kept low for the great manufacturing corporations. And it made huge investments in infrastructure, and gave huge tax breaks on capital investment, and established massive protectionism across almost the whole manufacturing sector, and so

on. The successes of all these measures, incidentally, demonstrate the bankruptcy of neoclassical orthodoxy, which of course denounces everything that interferes with “free markets.”

One of the reasons why wages didn’t increase so as to squeeze profits is that, as in Germany, a large part of the laboring population was still in agriculture. But also, the labor movement was oriented to the needs of capital accumulation. Japanese unions, “enterprise unions,” were organized on a firm-by-firm basis. After the suppressing of labor’s militancy at the start of the Cold War, “workers saw little choice but to hitch their fate to that of their firms, and to seek to improve their condition by improving their firms’ profitability.” This system of collaborative labor relations actually served workers well, since they accrued steady wage increases (in absolute, not relative, terms) and had excellent job security. –However, only the labor force employed by leading manufacturing corporations was unionized.

Brenner sums up his discussion of the “long boom” by criticizing Keynesian explanations of it.

[He admits that] the increased steadiness in the growth of demand [from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s], resulting from the permanently increased size of the state sector in most of the advanced capitalist economies, must have helped endow these economies with greater stability than in the past. It may also have made for increased confidence on the part of capitalists, encouraging them to invest and innovate. But in Germany and Japan, where the most rapid growth took place, supply-side conditions were clearly responsible for economic dynamism. In the US, by contrast, the economy grew slowly during the 1950s, despite the subsidy of demand by public deficits and the growth of the wage share, and its brief takeoff during the first half of the 1960s was

made possible largely by holding down the growth of wages and increasing productivity by means of intensifying labour.

Where the autonomous growth of demand *did* operate powerfully to augment investment, growth and stability, it did so, paradoxically, less within national boundaries than across them. German and Japanese manufacturers derived much of their dynamism by means of appropriating large segments of the fast-growing world market from the US and UK, while beginning to invade the US domestic market...

Now for the downturn. "The origins of the long downturn in the advanced capitalist world are to be found in the US economy in the years after 1965. Between 1965 and 1973, the rates of profit in the manufacturing and private business sectors fell by 40.9 percent and 29.3 percent, respectively." Obviously, then, the fall in profitability that set off the long downturn cannot have been caused by the oil crisis of the 1970s, as is commonly thought. So what caused it? The answer, again, is not high wages or lower labor productivity growth but increased downward pressure on prices reflecting intensified international competition. The data Brenner presents against the idea that increased workers' power, especially as embodied in a decline in labor productivity growth, led to the decline in profitability are decisive. For example, in the manufacturing sector labor productivity growth actually increased between 1965 and 1973, when profitability started declining. Nor did *capital* productivity fall in this period. It's true that labor costs increased a little in manufacturing in these years, but the main problem was that companies were not able to raise prices sufficiently to wholly offset the growth in costs. The decisive fact, then, which needs explaining, is that they were prevented from raising prices enough.

The foundation of the explanation is that from the mid-1960s, world trade dramatically increased. Manufacturing exports shot up. One consequence of this was especially rapid international economic

growth, at least in Germany, France, Italy, Japan, and the U.K. Another consequence, however, was newer, lower-cost producers based in such regions as Germany and Japan taking ever larger portions of markets that had previously been dominated by U.S. and U.K. producers. This was made possible, for example, by exceptional rates of labor productivity growth in Japan. Also, high government deficits, from the Vietnam War and the Great Society programs, caused an outbreak of inflation in the U.S. after 1965. "The sharp relative increase in US costs of production [relative, that is, to those in Germany, Japan, etc.] stimulated a further acceleration of manufacturing investment overseas by US multinational corporations, accentuating the already established trend." In short, U.S. manufacturers started to lose markets abroad and at home. But even in the markets they retained, they were prevented from raising prices to as great an extent in proportion to costs as they had been accustomed to doing, "with unavoidable consequences for profitability."

The eruption of labor militancy that took place in the late 1960s and early 1970s was not so much a cause of declining profitability as an indirect result of it. In response to pressure from abroad, employers had stepped up their offensive against labor from the mid-1960s on. Union bureaucracies initially didn't respond very vigorously, so the rank and file stepped into the breach with wildcat strikes and so on. Finally in the late 1960s union leaderships organized a major wave of strikes, with limited results, however.

As for Japan and the European G-7 economies, "the final stage of the postwar boom paralleled the onset of the profitability crisis in the US." They benefited, of course, from U.S. producers' problems, by taking increased shares of their markets. "The transition to international economic downturn can thus be said to have begun, somewhat paradoxically, at a point when most of the advanced capitalist world was in full expansion, at the height of its postwar

dynamism." The U.S.'s diminished vitality was about to spill over into the other G-7 economies.

In the mid-1960s the U.S. government increased its already substantial spending in order to keep the economy moving. But it failed to stimulate a corresponding increase in domestic investment and supply because of firms' declining rates of profit, relatively high costs of production in international terms, and an overall deteriorating business climate. Instead, Keynesian stimulus measures—and major tax cuts in 1964 and 1965—called forth more rapidly rising inflation and imports. This was bad for America's international position and the dollar. The Federal Reserve tried to stop inflation in 1965 by tightening up credit, but then it reversed that policy (until the end of 1967) when a recession threatened. In 1968 the Fed again raised interest rates, "but by this time a major crisis was maturing." America's trade balances with Germany and Japan were falling rapidly, and "in 1971 the US experienced its first trade deficit of the twentieth century."

As all this was happening, "the money market inevitably placed renewed downward pressure on the dollar and upward pressure on the mark and yen" in the late 1960s. As speculators attacked the dollar, the Bretton Woods system, based on the dollar's strength, threatened to collapse (and did so in the early 1970s). In the meantime, Germany's spectacular current account balance in 1968 led to huge speculative inflows, which swelled the money supply. Thus, Germany began to experience "imported inflation." Finally in 1969 the government succumbed to the inevitable and revalued the mark, which threatened the continued growth of German exports (due to the effective increase in their prices). Japan experienced the same inflationary pressures as Germany, but it tried to avoid revaluing its currency, "inviting a wave of inflation that would eventually dwarf that of Germany."

In 1968 and 1969 the U.S. government instituted a variety of deflationary measures that briefly stabilized the international mone-

tary situation but caused the recession of 1970. Unwilling to accept the political and economic costs of a serious anti-inflationary policy, Nixon reversed it in 1970. America's exporting of inflation therefore resumed, as short-term speculators fled the dollar because of its low interest rates. Eventually "the pressures for a reordering of international rates of exchange became unbearable," and in 1971 the mark, yen, and other currencies were revalued against the dollar. But fixed exchange rates, as in the Bretton Woods system, were still used, and that couldn't last in light of the unstable monetary situation. Inflation continued to rise in the U.S. because of expansionary policies; finally in 1973 the advanced capitalist countries established floating exchange rates, definitely ending Bretton Woods. The upshot was that between 1969 and 1973, the German and Japanese currencies appreciated against the dollar 50 percent and 28.2 percent respectively. This, of course, was good for American exports because it made them and their costs of production relatively cheaper. "The reductions in US relative costs made possible by the devaluation of the dollar, along with the gains in capacity utilization secured with the recovery from recession, had a galvanizing effect on the US economy." Profit rates increased a little, etc. Germany and Japan, on the other hand, "now began to shoulder the burden of the world crisis of profitability."

German manufacturers had to accept lower prices on their exports in order to retain market share, even as labor militancy led to rising labor costs and so even lower profit rates. Japan's story is complex, but basically manufacturers ended up facing a similar situation to German ones. The growth of the world market had slowed, and Japanese producers faced intensified competition from abroad because of yen revaluation, etc. But ultimately it was the fact that so many manufacturers around the world were producing similar goods, leading to overproduction and "over-competition," that caused the downturn in the world economy.

Short summary of the long downturn:

The oil crisis of 1974-1975 exacerbated economic difficulties. The cost of oil rose everywhere, especially in Japan. "Since wages and technology did not immediately adjust to the rise in energy costs, rates of profit fell further, and inflation accelerated. At this point, many governments had little choice but to put on the brakes, raising interest rates and limiting the supply of credit. A sharp deflation thus followed immediately upon the inflationary crisis, bringing about another step down in profitability and the greatest recession since the Depression of the 1930s." With investment growth, hence the growth of capital stock, sharply reduced, the growth of labor productivity naturally declined as well. And, "given the reductions in productivity growth and profitability, real wage growth was bound to be constrained and fell far more rapidly than did output per person. With the growth of both investment demand, especially in manufacturing, and consumer demand so much reduced—as an expression of the slowdown of the growth of the capital stock and of the growth of wages—the growth of output had to fall too; as it did, the manufacturing sector shed much labour, and unemployment increased precipitously. Between 1973 and 1995, the unemployment rate in the G-7 economies averaged 6.5 percent, more than double the average of 3.1 percent for the years 1960-73." The growth of international trade decreased too.

From the start, of course, employers and their governments tried to offset the fall in profitability at the expense of workers. "To reduce indirect labour costs, as well as to soften up labour resistance, governments across the advanced capitalist world launched severe austerity drives—tight credit to drive up unemployment and reduced social services to weaken workers' safety net." But this didn't restore profitability. Actually, for the economy outside manufacturing such measures did allow the maintenance of high profitability—which corroborates Brenner's thesis, because the non-manufacturing sector deals with non-tradables, so that international

over-capacity and over-production cannot have a direct effect on that sector, while they can on the manufacturing sector.

The main problem, to repeat, was that manufacturers across the advanced capitalist world stubbornly refused to leave product lines that had become less profitable. Historically this is how problems of overproduction have been solved—by the collapse of unprofitable firms, the development of new lines, etc. That didn't happen here for many reasons I'll describe later. It's worth noting now, though, that in Germany, Japan, and other economies (but not the U.S.), "the problem of eliminating redundant productive forces from over-subscribed manufacturing lines was made all the more difficult to the degree that this entailed transferring means of production into the service sector." The reason is that levels and rates of productivity growth were much higher in manufacturing than in services, which means that if a transfer from the former sector to the latter were to take place without a loss of profitability, reductions in wage levels and wage growth would be necessary. But for various reasons it was hard for employers in many countries to reduce service-sector wages more than they had already been reduced. "One therefore witnesses [in Germany, Japan, and even the U.S.] a striking shift into finance, insurance, and real estate, where productivity and profitability were evidently on the rise, but difficulties of profitable entry into service-sector lines where productivity was low, such as retail trade and hotel and restaurants." By contrast, in the U.S., where employers were able to reduce wages significantly, they had an easier time recovering profitability and reducing unemployment than their competitors elsewhere.

As I stated above, too, the tremendous expansion of debt played a large role in stabilizing the world economy but prolonging the downturn (by preventing a decisive "shakeout" of unproductive and redundant capital). "Keynesianism," that is, "made the downturn both milder and longer." After its experiment with monetarism in the early 1980s, "the Reagan administration undertook the great-

est programme of Keynesian pump priming that the world had ever seen. Through its record budget deficits, the US federal government massively raised demand so as to bail out yet again not just the US, but also the Japanese and German, economies from the recession of 1979-82 and to keep the whole system turning over during the 1980s."

Now for more detail on the long downturn. In the 1970s, "because profitability failed to recover, the [government] subsidy to demand [through high budget deficits and so on] that kept the system turning over could not but bring about the same succession of developments as in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the build-up of increasing numbers of high-cost, low-profit firms that in the absence of the subsidy would have gone under; a reduction in the growth of output that could be obtained by any given increase in demand due to firms' reduced access to surpluses and correspondingly reduced ability to invest; the corresponding acceleration of inflation, as any given increase in demand brought a smaller response in terms of supply than previously when profit rates were higher; rising interest rates and tight credit policies to combat inflation; and, ultimately, a new cyclical downturn. Another round of the same sort of stop-and-go cycle that had issued in the recessions of 1971 and 1974-75 thus culminated in the recession of 1979-82 and testified to the persistence of the economy's underlying problems."

In the 1970s Japan's export growth continued but at the cost of a spectacular collapse of manufacturing profitability. Because of international competition (from new East Asian firms too) and yen revaluation, firms had to keep their prices relatively low, which meant lower profits. Which meant lower investment growth, etc. But labor productivity actually increased at a respectable rate because of organized labor's self-discipline and various measures employers used to reduce labor's cost and increase its commitment to work.

At the same time, Japanese industry was restructuring itself. Because of the oil crises that hit it particularly hard, as well as all the other factors I've mentioned, the economy moved away from (or, alternatively, rationalized) heavy, energy-intensive, and labor-intensive lines and into high value-added industries like cars and "mechatronics" lines (industries that combined electronics and machinery). This process of economic restructuring was coordinated largely by the state and consortia of private companies, and was helped enormously by firms' close relationships with banks (which gave them much better access to finance than their overseas rivals).

Nevertheless, despite all these positive developments, "the Japanese economy could achieve only a limited recovery in the years after the oil crisis. This was because its expansion became even more reliant than previously on the growth of manufacturing exports, in a period in which international over-capacity and over-production were increasing as a consequence of the sharp deceleration of world trade and in which Japan's own overseas sales were proving increasingly self-undermining because inextricably bound up with the build-up of Japanese external surpluses."

Near the end of the decade Japan and Germany experimented with Keynesianism at the behest of the U.S., but, again, this was partly counterproductive in allowing high-cost, low-profit firms to remain in manufacturing and in making it more difficult to control wage costs. It tended to result in inflation more than sizable expansion of the economy. Eventually powerful interests like bankers and multinational corporations grew tired of the U.S.'s inflationary Keynesian policies that weren't even doing much to restore profitability but caused instability in currency markets, and a switch to the opposite policy occurred. The order of the day was now austerity, to rein in inflation.

An obvious implication of Brenner's argument is that when an economy starts to go bad, Keynesian policies are exactly the oppo-

site of what governments should enact. Either they should coordinate a transference of capital from unprofitable to profitable lines, or they should allow, indeed encourage, the economy to collapse into depression—at least if their goal is long-term recovery. (And *then*, later, the government could go Keynesian.) Presumably these are the only two ways to get rid of redundant, unproductive capital. Or no, maybe there's a third option: instead of the U.S.'s "military Keynesianism" in the 1980s or an effectively half-hearted Keynesianism, the government could launch a *massive* spending program, a complete mobilization of society's resources to build up infrastructure, construct new industries, stimulate and *direct* a titanic level of investment. With the half-hearted Keynesianism of, say, the Vietnam War, the main result is a rise in prices rather than a large rise in productive investment because profit margins remain relatively low, not high enough to justify major new investment.

The course that the U.S. government chose in the 1980s was, first, effectively to encourage the destruction of unprofitable capital by restricting credit and government borrowing between 1979 and 1982, and then, second, to embark on a sustained program of military Keynesianism, which partially revived the economy. The problem with monetarism was the opposite one of Keynesianism: it indiscriminately reduced demand, such that, while it did encourage the elimination of unprofitable capital, it discouraged firms' entrance into new and more profitable lines. That is, it hit profitable and unprofitable capital equally. By reducing aggregate purchasing power, it set off a deflationary spiral that was hard to control. Thus, while helping to rationalize the U.S. economy through its setting in motion an extended process of "industrial shakeout," it triggered the worst recession since the 1930s, "pushing the U.S. economy in particular to the brink of collapse." The German and Japanese governments (and others) continued through the 1980s and beyond with tight credit and fiscal austerity (with a few major lapses) so as to reduce domestic costs and thereby increase exports, but the U.S.

government went from monetarism to nearly the opposite extreme—in *fiscal* policy at least. (The Federal Reserve moderated its monetarism after the early 1980s.)

“The supply-side programme which accompanied monetarism in the US, highlighted by record tax cuts, did succeed in transferring enormous sums of money into the hands of capitalists and the rich from the pockets of almost everyone else. But it did not lead to the upsurge of investment and entrepreneurship expected by its advocates for the simple reason that, given the generally poor investment climate, tax reductions could not create the anticipated incentives. Yet, precisely because the tax cuts totally failed to vindicate their advocates’ predictions that they would pay for themselves by bringing about higher growth and thus higher tax returns, they produced the highest federal deficits of all time. This was in a way fortunate, for major deficits were evidently necessary to bail out the US, and revive the rest of the world economy.” But only partially, because the underlying problem of international over-capacity and over-production persisted, with the result that competition for (over-supplied) manufacturing markets continued to be a zero-sum game. The U.S. could gain only at the expense of its rivals and vice versa.

The combination of Reagan’s (and others’) Keynesianism with tax cuts and the Fed’s monetarism actually exacerbated the underlying problem of reduced returns on investment by leading to record-high real interest rates. “This was because the rise in demand for credit coming from governments was very much amplified by that coming from corporations and workers, and was accompanied by the slow-down in the supply of credit that resulted from monetarist restrictiveness [in the Fed’s supply of money, which continued to follow monetarist thinking], as well as the reduced rates of savings that were the unavoidable result of low profitability and low wage growth.”

In the first half of the 1980s, high real interest rates and resultant dollar appreciation “spelled disaster for broad sections of US manufacturing.” Exports fell, imports rocketed, etc. The service sector, on the other hand, “exploded” because of its low wages and so on. As did financial speculation.

But the competitive advantage that the high dollar gave the U.S.’s economic rivals was bound eventually to come to an end as it had in the early 1970s because, in undermining U.S. production, further driving up the U.S.’s external deficit, and pushing down the dollar, the relative value of currencies would eventually be reversed. And so in the mid-1980s the dollar’s exchange rate plummeted, which caused export growth in America and decline in Germany and Japan. Moreover, dollar devaluation effectively implied a fall in international demand.

To sum up the 1980s in the U.S.: on the basis of federal deficits, the economy did achieve a long peacetime expansion from 1982 on. Nevertheless, investment growth was low, productivity growth in the private business economy was very low (partly as a result of the slowness of investment growth), and, in general, despite talk of a “Reagan boom,” the economy “showed less vitality than in the much-maligned 1970s, especially when one takes into account the two major waves of high oil prices that undermined growth in the 1970s and the collapse of oil prices that promoted growth in the later 1980s.” This lack of vitality was also in spite of the unprecedented attack on labor, which of course helped business enormously.

By the way, I’ve often wondered in what sense high government deficits “crowd out” private investment (as economists like to say). The obvious answer is that they tend to cause higher interest rates (because they raise the demand for credit), which discourages investment. Also, government deficits mean that private investors are investing in government bonds instead of the economy. Of course these objections to deficits are stupid if the government itself is undertaking more productive investments than business is.

In the 1990s profitability in the American economy finally began to approach and then surpass its level in 1973, largely as a result of decades of slow or nonexistent real wage growth combined with high exports due to dollar devaluation. Investment and productivity didn't improve much at first, but the prospects were good. Meanwhile Clinton retreated from decades of Keynesianism by pursuing balanced budgets, as he had to in light of the political and economic environment. (This had the effect of exacerbating Germany and Japan's economic problems, since these—and other—countries had relied on U.S. deficits to sustain their anemic economic growth.) The Fed continued to stick with its austere monetarist policies because growth by the mid-1990s was thought to be gaining "excessive momentum," despite the six-percent unemployment rate. The question, therefore, is why fiscal and monetary policy in these years was so austere even though the economy was growing (by 1996) at only a mild rate. The answer is that "a mild economic expansion was just what the political and economic establishment wanted." The U.S. economy that had emerged in the 1980s and 1990s was very different from in the 1970s and before:

US capital had become profoundly dependent on close to zero real wage growth, as well as low inflation. Employers required the repression of real wage growth inside manufacturing to help counter intense competition from their leading international rivals; they required it outside of manufacturing so that they could increase their profit shares and profit rates, despite the snail-like pace of non-manufacturing productivity growth. US capitalists needed low price increases as well as low wage increases because they had profoundly increased their involvement in finance and in speculation on the stock market, and thereby had become exquisitely sensitive to rises in prices that would undercut

their returns from lending or further push up their costs of borrowing for purposes of financial manipulation.

Brenner explains in detail how this new economy emerged, but much of what he says is an elaboration of what I've written above. "During the 1970s, it will be recalled, US manufacturing corporations, encouraged by a devalued dollar and sharply reduced wage growth, as well as declining real interest rates, had launched an impressive wave of investment aimed at restoring competitiveness and profitability. Their failure to bring about significant improvement in the rate of profit by the end of the 1970s must have done much to discourage the continuation of such a strategy. In any case, under the combined impact of the deep recession of 1979-82, the very high real interest rates which largely persisted throughout the decade and into the next, and a new, if temporary, rise of the dollar, US manufacturing corporations had little choice but to cut back and change their modus operandi if they wished to survive." Especially with the major increase in imports from the East Asian "tigers," manufacturing profitability in the U.S. fell (although profitability outside manufacturing didn't do so badly because of the non-manufacturing sector's relative isolation from international competition).

In addition to all this, stockholders in the 1980s secured radically increased dividend pay-outs (which had been cut back in the 1970s). And, encouraged by the deregulation of finance, labor's vulnerability, and tax breaks that ensured higher returns on unearned income and capital gains, "financial manipulators borrowed heavily to purchase controlling interest in companies in expectation of wringing increased returns from them—especially by way of the stepped up exploitation of labour, the speeding up of depreciation and refusal to invest, the shedding of manpower, and downsizing in all forms." Thus, corporations deeply cut investment.

Manufacturing labor productivity did, however, improve significantly from 1979 on—not because of investment, which was low,

but because of the removal from operation of outdated and inefficient plant and equipment (along with the workers who had manned it), as well as from the intensification of work. *Downsizing*, therefore, led to higher labor productivity, but so did technical advance—“secured, for example, by means of robotization and the application of computer-aided production and design.” And so did American firms’ adoption of Japanese methods of making labor input more intense, continuous, and effective. *Outsourcing* was important too, for it allowed employers to pay lower wages.

So, as I said above, all these things in combination with dollar devaluation after the mid-1980s *finally* led to a partial restoration of manufacturing profitability at the end of the 1980s and then even more in the middle and late 1990s. As a result, investment growth finally accelerated in the late 1990s, which “opened up the potential for a decisive US economic turnaround.”

But remember, from 1979 the place of manufacturing employment in the economy shrank sharply, until in 1996 it was only 16 percent. At the same time, service employment rose. These trends weren’t good for the economy because labor productivity growth was much steeper in manufacturing than in non-manufacturing. In fact, the latter’s productivity growth was the lowest in U.S. history. Thus, “far from an expression of economic rejuvenation, the rapid net increase in the number of US jobs during the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, all of them outside manufacturing, was a manifestation of US economic decline.” Why was productivity growth so low outside manufacturing? Because extremely low wages (and no pressure from foreign competition) ensured that employers had little incentive to adopt labor-saving technology. They continued to add jobs in low-productivity sectors like restaurant services and retail sales. Aggregate unemployment did, therefore, decrease, but this was not bad for business because of low rates of unionization and low wages. “The upshot has been a truly vicious circle, in which low wages have made for low labour productivity growth which has in

turn rendered 'unrealistic' any significant growth of wages and thereby provided the basis for continued low productivity growth. So much for the Reagan-Bush-Clinton 'morning in America.'"

"The other side of capitalists' refusal to place much of their capital in production was their search for alternative ways to make money. With profitability down, interest rates up, and instability heightened, investors had increasing incentive to avoid the risks associated with longer-term placements of new plant and equipment. Still, to profit merely by buying cheap and selling dear is normally no simple task: for every gain there is an equivalent loss, for every winner a loser. Capitalists and the wealthy accumulated wealth with such success during the 1980s largely because the state intervened directly to place money in their hands—enabling them to profit from their own business failure through lucrative bailouts, offering them giant tax breaks which played no small part in the recovery of corporate balance sheets, and providing them with an unprecedented array of other *politically constituted* opportunities to get rich faster through fiscal, monetary, and deregulation policies—all at the expense of the great mass of the population." The pattern, he notes, was clearly established under the Carter administration.

The details of the wealthy's increasing wealth are pretty sordid. For example, major tax cuts in the 1980s benefited the rich directly, but in increasing the federal deficit they also benefited the rich indirectly, since those with great wealth did most of the lending to the federal government. Interest payments as a part of the federal budget almost doubled in the 1980s to 13.4 percent. These payments were covered by tax revenues largely from the working class. Thus, despite their low income and standards of living, workers effectively gave their money to the government so that it could then be given to the rich—in *many* different ways, of course, not only as interest payments.

Enough about America; let's look at Japan. I've already said a little about it. In the first half of the 1980s, Japanese money poured

into the U.S. Treasury because of high interest rates; this meant that less money was available for domestic investment in Japan. Then the yen soared because of high current account surpluses (as stated above), exports fell, and a severe recession threatened. Luckily the Japanese government “launched a policy of extreme monetary ease,” sharply reducing interest rates, which stimulated investment and “helped to force-feed a new boom, which lasted through 1990-91.” What it was trying to do was to wean Japan off its reliance on exports, since this reliance always proved self-undermining in the long run. (High growth of exports led to high external surpluses, which led to a high yen, which made exports relatively more expensive, which caused a decline in exports.) For a few years the policy was successful, causing a boom in domestic investment (partly because low interest rates also stimulated consumption, i.e., demand, by giving people an incentive not to save—because of the low returns—but to spend).

While the yen’s revaluation was bad for exports, it was good for foreign direct investment. As a result, Japanese foreign investment skyrocketed in the later 1980s. In many cases firms relocated production to the U.S., both to get around import barriers and to take advantage of the U.S.’s cheap labor. They also invested in the East Asian NICs (newly industrialized countries) and even increased their exports to this region. Etc. Despite all these positive developments, however, the profitability of Japan’s private business economy simply could not withstand “the increase in costs entailed by the massive revaluation of the yen.” With the onset of the U.S.’s recession in 1990 and the Japanese government’s raising of interest rates to gain control over the prior bubble, Japan entered its worst recession of the postwar epoch. This “recession that began at the end of 1991 and continued into the second half of 1995 was, in part, a reaction to the bubble itself. After engaging for almost half a decade in the most massive accumulation of capital stock, inventories, and labour without succeeding in raising their rate of profit, Japanese

manufacturers could not but, sooner or later, cut back compensatorily on the growth of new plant and equipment, inventories, employment, and wages. The reductions had to be that much more severe because so much of the previous spurt of capital accumulation had been financed through the accumulation of debt." So, with the government's turn to higher interest rates, firms had to impose across-the-board cuts. "The resulting, extended collapse of both investment and consumer demand was at the root of the recession."

Actually, the ultimate basis of the recession was the underlying structural problem of the economy's dependence on manufacturing exports together with the secularly rising yen (which rose in the 1990s too) and the consequent inability to restore manufacturing profitability (given international competition—i.e., overproduction "with respect to the prevailing rate of profit").

What about Germany? In the 1980s and 1990s it pursued "monetarism in the name of exports." Balanced budgets and relatively tight money—i.e., holding back the growth of domestic demand—"with the goal of keeping down costs and prices and intensifying competitive pressure on domestic producers so as to spur rationalization and improvement, in the interest of promoting the growth of exports and thereby investment." This policy did succeed in reducing costs of production, such as labor, partly through downsizing, getting rid of inefficient capital and its workforce. Also holding back the growth of wages, etc. The growth of exports did accelerate, but not enough to reduce high unemployment in the late 1980s or to revivify the economy, "for the simple reason that the expansion of exports could not stimulate the required major increase in the accumulation of capital." In the absence of such an increase, labor productivity growth continued to stagnate.

As usual, a major problem with Germany's export-based economic growth was that insofar as it worked, it undermined itself. German current account surpluses led to an appreciation of the

mark in the late 1980s, which reduced the international competitiveness of its exports. Manufacturing profitability therefore remained low. Firms dramatically increased their investments *outside* Germany because there were so few opportunities for profitable investment domestically. –Incidentally, as usual, *non*-manufacturing profitability stayed relatively high because of its insulation from international competition.

By the way, it seems that monetarist austerity tends to undermine the positive effects it can have on the profit rate (by reducing costs) in that it leads to higher real interest rates, which undercut gains in profitability. Also, again, monetarism is partly misguided in that, while encouraging the destruction of unproductive, unprofitable capital, it discourages the introduction of capital into new, potentially profitable lines. In Germany, monetarism led to an average of 8.5 percent unemployment between 1982 and 1990.

After a brief boom between 1988 and 1991 due to capitalist governments' expansionary policies in response to the stock market crash of October 1987, the German government cut spending, raised taxes, and "initiated an extended period of high interest rates to ensure long-term price stability." The result: an undercutting of growth in Europe, and an appreciation of the mark. These and other factors caused a severe recession between 1991 and 1995. Even after the recession, the manufacturing sector continued to shed labor and have very low investment domestically. In 1997 unemployment in West Germany was close to 10 percent.

In the last chapter (before the Afterword written in 2005), Brenner considers and refutes mainstream arguments given in the late 1990s that the U.S. and maybe the world had finally entered a new and long-term boom. For example, cheerleaders for the American economy argued that low rates of price increase and low unemployment were clear indicators of economic vitality. Brenner points out, first, that "even contemporary economic orthodoxy has failed to

establish that inflation rates of up to 8 percent have *any* negative impact on the economy's vitality." Inflation isn't a terrible thing if it's kept below 8 percent. Indeed, "the grand crusade to control inflation" in the 1990s was very costly to most people, as monetarism always or almost always is, benefiting only the owners and lenders of capital.

Actually, the low rates of inflation and unemployment were simply the results of the extraordinarily slow growth of both demand and wage costs. "Nor is the slow growth of aggregate demand a mystery; it is the direct expression of the slow growth of investment demand, arising from low profit rates and secularly high real interest rates, the stagnation of consumer demand resulting from the long-term stagnation of wages, and the collapse of governmental demand stemming from the sharp turn to budget balancing under Clinton."

Another good point: "Most indicative of the real condition of the US economy has not been its ability to control prices, but its dependence on controlling the price of labour, its *incapacity* to accommodate virtually any real wage growth."

Despite all this, it's true that by 1997 the economy's profit rate had finally returned to its level in the late 1960s. Even the manufacturing sector's profitability was high. In the mid-'90s manufacturing investment growth accelerated, as did productivity growth and export growth. These trends, naturally, were based primarily on long-term wage repression, dollar devaluation, and "rationalization [of manufacturing] and technical change." But in 1997 real wages rose noticeably for the first time in five years, though not enough to put a squeeze on profits.

So the U.S. economy seemed to be doing pretty well. But in order for the long downturn to be transcended, a *system-wide* recovery of profitability would have to take place. It didn't. Japan and Germany were in almost as bad a condition as ever; U.S. gains in exports were made at their expense, because of their appreciated currencies. —Re-

member how important exports had become to all these countries by the 1990s. Domestic demand had contracted in the advanced capitalist countries (which means that the world market had contracted) because of semi-monetarist policies intended to slow direct and indirect wage growth and weed out unprofitable capital. Had monetarism worked the way it was supposed to, by eventually stimulating a surge of new investment by surviving firms, the market would not have contracted but expanded. But governments and corporations weren't willing to tolerate recessions severe enough to get the job done (i.e., to reduce wages sufficiently, kill enough redundant capital, etc.), instead relying on various forms of credit and Reagan's military Keynesianism to prop up the world market—policies that, because of continued monetary restrictions, caused a sharp rise in real interest rates, discouraging investment. The upshot was that a system-wide investment boom never materialized; instead, there was declining growth of aggregate demand that exacerbated manufacturing over-capacity and over-production, and sharpened the tendency of international trade to take a "zero-sum" character. One country tended to gain at the expense of another.

Brenner sketches an optimistic scenario for the world economy, according to which the U.S. boom in the late 1990s triggers export expansions in Europe and Japan (as it in fact did a little) such that the classic Smithian scenario is realized of "mutually self-reinforcing growth through [international] specialization and the gains from trade." Complementarity would override competition. Europe and Japan would export to the U.S., which would export other goods to them, etc. He finds this possibility unlikely, however. "The fundamental point is the obverse of the Smithian hypothesis just referred to—that since virtually all of the world's leading economies are seeking to emerge from their difficulties through major, simultaneous increases in their reliance on the world market, based on still another and deeper phase of wage repression and macro-

economic austerity, the inevitable flood of exports is more likely to issue in redundancy of output, intensified competition, and over-supplied markets than in the mutual gains from trade.”

One piece of evidence for the latter scenario is that the 1995 currency accords that raised the value of the dollar in order to prevent Japan’s economic collapse had by the late ’90s caused an erosion of the U.S.’s decade-long export boom. But the resultant increase in exports from Germany and Japan did not catalyze economy-wide expansions. In Germany, the reason is that the cost-cutting and monetary austerity that made possible a new export boom shrank domestic demand. In Japan, the government for some reason raised indirect taxes even as the currency devaluation was failing to secure complete economic recovery, with the result that a new and severe recession arrived. It was temporarily alleviated in 1998 by major fiscal stimulus.

Meanwhile, the other economies of East Asia descended into crisis. They had benefited from the yen’s high value by exporting to markets previously held by Japanese producers—because the NICs’ currencies were pegged to the dollar, so that the dollar’s devaluation (in relation to the yen, etc.) from the mid-1980s until the mid-1990s helped them. Japanese multinationals were also investing in these countries because of their export boom. But then the yen was devalued in 1995, and things went downhill for the NICs. They “suffered sharp reductions in their export growth and/or profits, especially under the impact of intensified Japanese, as well as Chinese, competition...” When it became clear that their future wasn’t bright, “Western and Japanese banks rushed to withdraw their mostly short-term capital, precipitating a run on the money markets.” Foreign lenders withdrew their money in a panic, and eventually the affected currencies were devalued—which worsened the crisis by making it harder for manufacturers to repay their huge loans.

“It was here that the IMF stepped in. The IMF might have attempted to get the international banks to agree formally to act together to keep their money flowing into Asia so as to counteract the panicky withdrawal of credit, for pouring in money is the normal remedy for a liquidity crisis. After all, the underlying problem facing many Asian firms was the insufficient international demand for their goods, not the inefficiency of their production, let alone their dependence upon (nonexistent) government deficit spending. Some firms would no doubt have had to be trimmed back; others would have had to go under. But the whole regional economy did not have to go down. As it was, the IMF, mainly concerned that European, US, and Japanese banks be repaid in full, demanded, in Hoover-like fashion, that credit be tightened and austerity imposed, radically exacerbating the debt crisis and ensuring a devastating depression.” (The IMF also took the opportunity “to break down and open up the East Asian statist and organized capitalisms, notably in Korea.” Naomi Klein discusses that in *The Shock Doctrine*.)

Brenner predicts (in 1998) that among the consequences will be cheaper exports from East Asia (because of the currency devaluation) and a shrinking of the world market because of the depression-induced shrinking of demand in the affected countries. In other words: the intensification of international competition and over-production.

At the same time, China was becoming a growing presence on the world market, even as its consumer demand was growing slowly (which is not good for the world economy).

Japan, by the way, was itself severely damaged by the East Asian crisis because, among other reasons, East Asia was a huge market for its goods. An indirect consequence was that Japan’s aggregate demand shrank.

The 2005 Afterword of Brenner’s book reviews the history and updates it.

“The turn by the Federal Reserve to monetarist tight credit at the start of the 1980s was aimed, in the first instance, to force up unemployment so as to further reduce wage pressure and break the back of inflation. But it was also intended, with the help of big tax breaks for the corporations and a major dose of financial deregulation, to detonate a major restructuring of the US economy—by eliminating the huge overhang of high-cost low-profit means of production that continued to hold down manufacturing profit rates, by dealing a death blow to unions so as to make increases in real earnings ever more difficult, and by opening the way for a re-allocation of means of production out of industry into financial services. In fact, the cataclysms and shifts that were detonated by the Volker quake did set the US economy on a new course—toward manufacturing revival, the expansion and consolidation of a low-wage economy outside of manufacturing, and the dramatic ascent of finance.” The “gargantuan shakeout” caused by the Volker recession “established the necessary condition for the revival of the manufacturing profit rate and thereby that of the private economy as a whole”; as a result, between 1985 and 1995, U.S. manufacturers were able to achieve a dramatic turnaround. Very important to this turnaround was the Plaza Accord of 1985, in which the G-5 powers, “acting in response to the devastation of US manufacturing capacity wrecked by record high real interest rates and the rocketing currency, detonated a decade-long plunge of the dollar.” I’ve reviewed all this above.

Between 1989 and 1993 the Fed brought “the real cost of short-term borrowing in the US close to zero”; “the real cost of long-term borrowing had, meanwhile, continued its long-term slide.” Under these conditions, the U.S. manufacturing sector “was finally ready to shake off its lethargy. Manufacturing investment, output, and exports all suddenly thrust forward, initiating an extended acceleration and providing a major stimulus to the rest of the economy.”

Unfortunately the U.S. had to deal with a world economy, which wasn't doing very well. Here's a good summary:

As a consequence of the continuous, precipitous fall in profit rates that resulted from the worsening of global over-capacity and intensifying international competition between the later 1960s and early 1980s, there emerged, in classical fashion, a dual problem of weakening aggregate demand and weakening productivity growth, which tended to be self-perpetuating. In order to restore profit rates, firms across the advanced capitalist economy moved immediately and decisively to reduce the growth of real wages, while government cut back sharply on the increase of social spending. Because, as an expression of reduced profitability, firms could secure only declining surpluses for any given increase in their capital stock, they were simultaneously obliged to reduce the growth of investment, as well as employment. As a result, the growth of consumption, investment, and government demand were all forced down, leading to the reduced growth of purchasing power economy-wide. Meanwhile, because firms, in the face of declining profits and prospects, neither wished to nor could expand their plant, equipment, and software as rapidly as before, a decline in the rate of growth of productivity naturally resulted. Of course, the slower growth of productivity further threatened profits, leading firms to exert further downward pressure on wages and, thereby, aggregate demand... Slower growth of aggregate demand itself undermined profit rates further and firms responded by reducing capital accumulation and wage growth even more, leading to the further reduction of productivity and aggregate demand growth, and, in turn, profitability...a self-sustaining, indeed self-intensifying, process. Between the

late 1960s and 1995, as profit rates fell and failed to recover on a system-wide basis, private investment (capital stock) for the US, Japan, Germany, the eleven members of the EU taken together, and the G-7 grew ever more slowly, business cycle by business cycle, as also did productivity, employment, and real wages, as well as private consumption and government demand, along with GDP.

Because of the ever-increasing downward pressure on the growth of productivity and aggregate demand, “the advanced capitalist economies were obliged to rely, as they had already begun to do in the middle to late 1960s, on ever larger government deficits to keep them expanding. From the mid-1970s, US federal deficits were responsible for pulling the world economy out of every cyclical downturn.” Only with Clinton’s “epoch-making” turn to budget-balancing and Europe’s macroeconomic tightening in the run-up to the Maastricht treaty did the advanced capitalist countries “shift in earnest toward governance by way of the free market.” Private-sector initiative became more important than ever. But in a situation of low aggregate demand, the way to restore profitability was not to increase investment and employment but to downsize and suppress wage growth. This “made for the weakening of purchasing power system-wide and deepening recession in much of the world economy between 1991 and 1995.”

In 1995 the “reverse Plaza Accord” happened, i.e., the revaluation of the dollar and devaluation of the yen and mark. This was a reversal of policy for the Clinton administration (though probably an inevitable one), because it meant a reduction of manufacturing competitiveness. The new economic trajectory was “based on cheap imports, rising asset prices, and the influx of foreign money to buy US Treasuries, corporate bonds, and corporate equities” (because they were worth more now, given the higher value of the dollar). In broad terms, what the Clinton administration was doing was em-

bracing the political economy of the Reagan administration. “As in the first half of the 1980s, financiers would be favoured not just by low inflation enforced by inexpensive commodities from overseas, but by asset prices that would be driven up in international terms with the value of the dollar. Businesses that relied on imports, either for inputs into production or to sell directly, not least wholesalers and retailers, would also stand to benefit...”

“The reverse Plaza Accord of 1995 turned out to be the turning point for the US economic expansion of the 1990s and thereby the world economy, as it both set off the ‘New Economy’ boom and ensured that it would have feet of clay. The stepped-up purchases of US Treasury instruments by foreign governments drove down long-term interest rates, even as the Federal Reserve simultaneously reduced the short-term cost of borrowing (to stabilize the economy in the wake of the Mexican peso crisis). The stepped-up purchases of dollars that these purchases required drove up the dollar’s exchange rate against the yen and the mark. Taken together, these two trends—toward cheap credit and an expensive dollar—would persist through the end of the decade and shape the path of economic development on a global scale.” As we saw, among the consequences was a decline in the U.S. manufacturing profit rate and a decline in East Asian manufacturing profit rates leading to financial crisis. Also, consequences included “the greatest stock market bubble in American history; an accelerating economic expansion driven by the wealth effect¹⁰⁹ of rocketing equity values; and a radical worsening of already existing manufacturing over-capacity, which resulted from a massive wave of mis-investment in high-tech industries set off by the bubble in New Economy equities.”

After 1997 the manufacturing profit rate declined precipitously, “depriving the economic expansion of the 1990s of what had hitherto been its main objective foundation.” The expansion actually

¹⁰⁹ According to Wikipedia, a wealth effect is “an increase in spending that accompanies an increase in perceived wealth.”

speeded up because of the spectacular take-off of the stock market—but this was a classic bubble, since corporate profits *declined* between 1997 and 2000. Again, a major reason for the rapid increase in equity prices—an increase that wasn't justified by corporate profits—was the easing of credit brought about by the reverse Plaza Accord.

Alan Greenspan's Federal Reserve did its part to encourage the stock market bubble. After the reverse Plaza Accord and Clinton's shrinking federal deficits—both bad for investment (in the latter case because federal deficits had boosted aggregate demand)—Greenspan evidently decided he had to do something to keep the U.S.'s expansion going. So he turned to the equity markets and their wealth effect to stimulate demand. "Indeed, the strategy that he evolved during the second half of the 1990s—and has continued to implement ever since [up to 2007 at least]—might usefully be called 'stock market, or asset-price, Keynesianism.' In traditional Keynesian policy, demand is 'subsidized' by means of the federal government's incurring of rising *public* deficits so as to spend more than it takes in taxes. By contrast, in Greenspan's version, demand is increased by means of corporations and wealthy households taking on rising *private* deficits so as to spend more than they make, encouraged to do so by the increased paper wealth that they effortlessly accrue by virtue of the appreciation of the value of their stocks, or other assets." Thus, Greenspan kept equities rising by means of ever-easier credit: between 1995 and the middle of 1999 he failed to raise interest rates except once in 1997. His purpose, again, was to keep the economic expansion going by compensating for insufficient demand in the "real" economy.

(But surely—this is me talking, not Brenner—low interest rates are good not only for stock market investment but more substantive investment too. Greenspan kept interest rates low because he wasn't worried about inflation anymore, since the reverse Plaza Accord, the decimated labor movement, and low federal deficits had killed off inflation. His real concern, as Brenner says, was to keep the econ-

omy going; and obviously a good way to do that is to keep interest rates low. For all kinds of investment, not only for equity markets.)

Between 1995 and 2000, “profits became increasingly hard to come by.” Nevertheless, “corporations were able to fund stepped-up capital accumulation with consummate ease on the basis of runaway stock values that bloated market capitalization and thus apparent collateral beyond recognition.” Borrowing increased too: “by the end of the decade, they were using borrowing to fund capital accumulation at the highest rates in history.”

Households—especially the top 20 percent of them in terms of income (which owned 95 percent of all financial assets)—“also treated the rapid rise in equity prices as an opportunity for radically stepped-up borrowing and, on that basis, spending... As the flip side of the coin, they felt free to sharply reduce their rate of savings as a proportion of consumption, so as to raise their rate of spending... As one pundit put it, the boom of the later 1990s was the first in US history to be heavily driven by yuppie expenditures.”

In the second half of the 1990s, “non-financial corporations allocated as much of the huge sum that they borrowed to buying shares as to accumulating capital... Through share repurchases funded by borrowing, corporations avoided the tedious process of creating shareholder value through actually producing goods and services at a profit, and directly drove up the price of their own equities for the benefit of their stockholders, as well as their corporate executives who were heavily remunerated with stock options. Higher equity values made for still more collateral, further borrowing, greater stock purchases, and so forth. The same sort of process would soon be at work once again in the escalation of housing prices.” The New Economy boom was underpinned in this way by the wealth effect of rising equity prices on both businesses and households.

Rising equity prices accounted for between one-quarter and one-third of the increase in GDP between 1995 and 2000. And one-third of the increase in consumption.

At the same time, retail trade and wholesale trade did very well due to the consumer spending spree and cheap imports (a consequence of dollar revaluation). So did the FIRE sector of the economy. The construction industry too, benefiting from an “astonishing, seemingly unending, increase in the demand for homes,” enjoyed what would turn out to be a decade-long boom. And with the abolition of Glass-Steagall, huge conglomerates that combined commercial banking, investment banking, and insurance emerged, such as Citicorp and J.P. Morgan Chase. In 2000, the profits of the financial sector amounted to almost 40 percent of total corporate profits.

“The years between 1995 and 1997 constituted a brief era of overlap and transition, between the extended period of manufacturing-led profitability revival culminating in economy-wide revitalization between 1993 and 1997 and the period of stock-market-driven expansion leading to New Economy boom and profitability crisis between 1995 and 2000. Due to the lagged effect of the revaluation of the dollar, the recovery of manufacturing profitability had not yet ceased to impart its momentum to the economy. The wealth effect of the equity price boom was already, moreover, providing its own impetus. As a consequence, the economy displayed a vitality not seen in decades.”

But then things went bad in East Asia, as we’ve seen. “As the rising dollar, accompanied by easy credit, enhanced US asset prices and thereby US economic growth from 1995, while shifting the weight of international over-capacity and reduced profitability from Japan and Germany to the US, similar forces brought about similar effects and a similar pattern in the economies of East Asia at the very same time, setting off a chain reaction of crisis that would ultimately engulf the US itself.” Stock prices rose in East Asia (excluding Japan)

while profit rates declined (because of revalued currencies and the consequent reduction in earnings from exports). "The growing divergence between falling profits and rising asset prices was unsustainable. As export remittances fell sharply, East Asian producers found it ever more difficult to repay loans." From the beginning of 1997, financial-industrial conglomerates in South Korea started to go bankrupt. "In expectation that loans would henceforth be more difficult to collect, funds began to quit the region, and with ever greater speed. As a consequence, asset prices began to crumble, which accelerated the outflow of funds and soon made for downward pressure on the local currencies. But devaluation only raised the dollar value of foreign debts in terms of the local currencies, making them that much more difficult to repay. Central banks raised short-term interest rates to stem the exodus of capital and prevent currencies from collapsing. But this caused financial institutions, which depended on borrowing from central banks, to go bankrupt, leading to the collapse of asset prices and the panicked flight of capital."

The crisis got worse in 1998. Currencies collapsed and the price of East Asian goods fell with them, "placing great pressure, direct and indirect, on the rest of the world economy" (presumably because of a decline in exports and/or a necessary reduction in their prices in order to compete with exports from East Asia, and a resultant loss in profits). "During the summer of 1998, the East Asian crisis spilled over into the less-developed countries. In August, the Russian government defaulted on its debt. The Brazilian economy started to melt down shortly thereafter..."

Page 302 nicely summarizes the reasons for Japan's stagnation and recession in the 1990s. I'll just say that the East Asian crisis hurt Japan too because that region was the main market for its exports. It collapsed into recession again, which further crippled East Asia and thereby boomeranged back onto Japan.

The annual increase in U.S. exports dropped virtually to zero in 1998. Other bad things happened too, so the Fed stepped in to bail out a hedge fund, lower interest rates, etc., with the result that markets were not only rescued but “sent into orbit.” The new U.S. expansion “pulled the rest of the world from its recession and motivated a new global expansion, most especially in East Asia.” U.S. demand was huge, and by 2000 even Western Europe had emerged from stagnation, “driven by its German dynamo.” The U.S.’s exports could not remotely compete with its imports (partly because of the currency revaluation of 1995), so trade and current account deficits skyrocketed. “These external deficits brought with them enormous downward pressure on manufacturing profits, making a crisis for the manufacturing sector unavoidable.”

“In the end, there was no escaping the fact that the explosion of investment and consumption that drove the last phase of the US expansion—as well as the major uptick in productivity growth to which it gave rise—was heavily dependent upon a historic increase in borrowing, which was itself made possible by a record equity price run-up that was powered by speculation in defiance of actual corporate returns.” There was a titanic misallocation of funds into high-tech paper assets, and a consequent misdirection of new plant, equipment, and software into over-subscribed manufacturing and related lines, especially information technology. This was all largely a result of the deregulated financial sector’s necessity of chasing short-term profits because that’s what shareholders *et al* wanted. “As equity prices began to rise strongly from 1995-1996, fund managers were thus under heavy pressure to buy, even if, in light of the growing gap between stock prices and profits, they doubted the long-term viability of their purchases.” Their competitors were doing the same thing, so if in the end the assets they’d purchased went sour (as they did), they wouldn’t be held responsible. The Fed’s behavior contributed to all this by reassuring investors.

Between 1997 and 2000, total corporate profits after taxes *fell* by 20 percent even as the index of the NYSE rose by 50 percent.

“From July 2000, ever-worsening earnings reported by corporations precipitated a stock-market collapse and, in turn, a sharp cyclical downturn, both by reversing the wealth effect and by revealing the mass of redundant productive capacity and the mountain of corporate indebtedness that constituted the dual legacy of the bubble-driven boom.” Firms found it harder to get loans—and in many cases they didn’t even want to, being overburdened by debt already. With loans and profits harder to come by, the growth of jobs and new plant and equipment was cut back, undercutting both investment and consumer demand and triggering a self-sustaining downward spiral. “The crisis of profitability had, in classical fashion, brought about a crisis of aggregate demand.”

The rest of the world followed the US downward. Just as the stock market’s last upward thrust had rescued not only the US but also the world economy as a whole from the international financial crisis of 1997-98, setting off a short-lived hyper-boom, the collapse of US equity prices and investment reversed the process. As the economy rapidly lost energy, US imports plunged, with the result that the economies of Japan, Europe and East Asia lost steam as fast as the US, while the developing world, notably Latin America, was, after a brief honeymoon, projected back into crisis. A mutually reinforcing international recessionary process was thus unleashed, rendered all the more problematic by the degree to which the rest of the world had, over the previous two decades, in the face of stagnating domestic demand, oriented their economies to exports—and thus perforce to the US domestic market. As the rest of the world, deprived of its US motor, sank ever further into recession,

the US could look only to itself to launch an economic recovery upon which most of the global economy depended.

The center of the storm was in the manufacturing sector, especially in high-technology lines. Because of their immense overcapacity, capacity utilization plummeted. In the year following July 2000, 4200 high-tech companies lost more money than *all* the profits they had realized during the five-year boom of 1995 to 2000. "As one economist wryly noted, 'What [this fact] means is that, with the benefit of hindsight, the later 1990s never happened.' So much for the New Economy boom."

Outside of manufacturing, the economy actually did pretty well during the recession, because the non-manufacturing sector wasn't plagued by systemic over-capacity or intensifying international competition. Critical in the long run was its ability to take advantage of the recession to reduce the growth of real wages. But it was also able to raise prices, unlike manufacturers.

Nevertheless, because of the shock to manufacturing, the growth of GDP, investment, and exports declined faster than in any other twelve-month period since 1945. So the Fed intervened and lowered the cost of borrowing so much that the real Federal Funds rate was *below zero* for three full years. This didn't help much. "Vastly over-supplied with means of production and overburdened by debt, corporations had little incentive to increase hiring or step up the purchase of plant, equipment, and software...no matter how far interest rates came down." Instead, they eliminated millions of jobs.

Nor were households able to increase their borrowing and thereby consumption (and stimulate the economy that way), because jobs were disappearing and wage growth was falling. But the Fed was forced to rely on them anyway because its measures were having little influence on private businesses. So it turned again to "asset-price Keynesianism." This time, though, instead of pumping up corporate equities to spur corporate borrowing and investment as

well as household borrowing and consumption, it had to do what it could to “force down mortgage rates and inflate the value of residential housing so as to facilitate stepped up household borrowing and, in that way, amplify personal consumption. Thanks in large part to the Fed’s actions, long-term borrowing costs did fall significantly and housing prices did rise precipitously [in *real* terms]... These changes together laid the basis for the cyclical upturn.”

At the same time, Bush substantially increased military spending, which did a little to help the economy stay afloat, and pushed through enormous tax cuts for the rich, which didn’t help much because it only encouraged them to buy financial assets and not to raise their consumption. As a result, “the economy would have to continue to rely mainly, as it had been doing since the later 1990s, on asset-price Keynesianism.”

“Households did assume the vanguard role assigned to them. Between 2000 and 2004, they took advantage of rocketing housing values and falling interest rates to raise their annual borrowing as a percentage of personal disposable income to an unheard-of 11.8 percent.” Personal consumption expenditures thus accounted for *all* the growth of GDP from 2000 to 2004.

As the real economy outside manufacturing was doing pretty well because of households’ consumption, the financial sector was doing great too. The housing market simply replaced the equity market. “...Like the stock-market bubble, the real-estate bubble fed upon itself, and increasingly so, with increased borrowing facilitated by rising paper wealth and easy credit making for greater housing demand and still higher real-estate values, which provided the collateral for still more borrowing making for more demand and higher housing prices, and so on.” What set the whole process in motion apparently was the rise in asset values of houses, which allowed homeowners to borrow more and so spend more, etc.

“On the basis of the huge on-paper appreciation of the value of their residences, households were able to withdraw dramatically increased funds from the home equity—by selling their houses at prices surpassing their mortgage debt, buying new ones, and still having cash left over; by refinancing and increasing the size of their existing mortgages, extracting cash in the process; and by taking out new home equity loans in the form either of second mortgages or lines of credit.” Because of housing’s contribution, the average annual growth of GDP between 2000 and 2005 was 2.4 percent instead of 1.7 percent.

In his wisdom, Brenner remarks that “nevertheless, it is hard to see how housing’s huge subsidy to the economic expansion can long sustain itself.” After 2008, we know he was right.

Between 2000 and 2005, U.S. external deficits kept the world economy going, as always. Its imports greatly exceeded its exports, and its share of the world market in manufactures shrank to its lowest level of the postwar epoch (9 percent). This happened despite the dollar’s decline in value. In large part this was due to the annual growth of China’s exports (over 25 percent). The turning point in the expansion of China’s trade occurred in the first half of the 1990s, “when the government opened the way for banks to impose a major tightening of credit...while itself implementing a major devaluation of the renminbi.”

Unlike Japan and the NICs in their periods of development, China did not “tightly control foreign direct investment in statist and mercantilist fashion.” Instead, it welcomed a huge influx of foreign-owned companies and foreign investment. “By 2004-05, foreign firms had come to account for no less than one third of Chinese manufacturing output and 55-60 percent of its exports.” Brenner goes on about China for a few pages, but it’s mostly Greek to me. In the book’s final pages he gives more reasons for pessimism about the world economy, such as the slow growth of investment and job creation resulting from not-high-enough profit rates. —Of

course superficial commentators will say that's absurd, that recent corporate profits have reached celestial levels, but Brenner could retort that the West's recovery from 2008 has been basically a jobless one. Corporate profits have resulted from laying off millions of workers and keeping wages stagnant—which is not the sign of a healthy and dynamic economy. Moreover, about 30 percent of these profits have been made by the financial sector, not through investment in the real economy.¹¹⁰ We're clearly in for a long era of stagnation and crisis—arising out of global over-competition, over-production, and low aggregate demand sustained only by colossal debt. (See, e.g., the 2009 Introduction and the second chapter of Robert McElvaine's *The Great Depression* for obvious parallels between the present and the political economy that caused the 1930s.)

¹¹⁰ Jordan Weissmann, "How Wall Street Devoured Corporate America," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2013.

Chapter Three

More Notes on Economics and Neoliberalism

Robin Hahnel's *ABCs of Political Economy: A Modern Approach* (2002) is a good overview of radical, i.e., commonsensical, political economy. Its information and arguments are very useful for an economics idiot like me.

What Hahnel calls the macro law of supply and demand, postulated by Keynes, is that aggregate supply will follow aggregate demand if it can (if, that is, the economy isn't already producing at full capacity, in which case high demand will lead to inflation rather than an increase in production). This law explains the possibility of "downward spirals," or not-self-correcting recessions. "Keynes pointed out that weak demand for goods and services leading to downward pressure on wages and layoffs was likely to further weaken aggregate demand by reducing the buying power of the majority of consumers. He [and many leftists before him] pointed out that this would in turn lead to more downward pressure on wages and more layoffs, which would reduce the demand for goods even further." Downward spiral.

The reason that few economists before Keynes acknowledged the possibility of such a downward spiral is that they had been seduced by Say's Law, which is basically the reverse of Keynes's macro law of supply and demand. It says that in the aggregate, supply creates its own demand. "Say's Law implies that there can never be insufficient demand for goods in general, and governments therefore need not concern themselves with recessions, which should cure themselves." As David Ricardo expressed it, the rationale behind Say's Law is that every dollar of goods produced generates a dollar of income or purchasing power, either through wages or profits. And while it's true that people don't spend all their income on consumption but instead save some of it, which means that con-

sumption demand falls short of the value of goods produced, the money they save goes into banks that then lend it to businesses—*all* of it, at the equilibrium rate of interest—because if they don't lend, they can't make profits. And businesses in turn use the money to invest. So the shortfall in consumption demand is made up for by investment demand, and as a whole, aggregate demand equals aggregate supply.

The flaw in this reasoning, which Keynes pointed out, is that, “while it is true that every dollar's worth of production generates exactly a dollar's worth of income or potential purchasing power, it is not necessarily true that a dollar's worth of income always generates a dollar's worth of demand for goods and services.” Aggregate demand can be greater than income if, for example, actors use *previous* savings to spend more than their current income, or if they borrow against future income. Or aggregate demand can be *less* than income because the fact that at the equilibrium rate of interest the supply of loans is equal to the demand for loans does not mean that business demand for investment goods has to be equal to household savings. After all, businesses do not use all the loans they receive to buy investment goods (capital goods). Sometimes they buy government bonds or shares of stock in other businesses, which does not add a single dollar to demand.

“A given value of production *does* generate an equal value of income. But *when* that income gets used to demand goods and services can make a great deal of difference. If less income is used to demand goods and services in a year than were produced in that year, aggregate demand will fall short of aggregate supply and production will fall, as the macro law of supply and demand teaches. If the sum total of household, business, and government demand is greater than production during a year, production will rise (if it can), as Keynes's macro law teaches.”

Hahnel's remarks on inflation and unemployment are illuminating. Cyclical unemployment results when “low aggregate de-

mand for goods leads employers to provide fewer jobs than the number of people willing and able to work," while structural unemployment occurs when "the skills and training of people in the labor force do not match the requirements of the jobs available." Structural unemployment can be caused by changes in the international division of labor, rapid technical changes in methods of production, or educational systems that are slow to adapt to new economic conditions. If structural unemployment is the problem, policies that increase aggregate demand won't help much but instead will cause inflation, as in the 1970s. What are necessary are programs to retrain and relocate the workforce.

There are different kinds of inflation too. Demand-pull inflation tends to occur when the economy is reaching its full potential of output but demand is still increasing. So prices rise (because output can't). Cost-push inflation is when, say, employers raise prices because employees have negotiated a wage increase. So the rise in prices compensates for the wage increase.

"It is important to note that structural unemployment can exist in the presence of adequate aggregate demand for goods and services, and cost-push inflation can exist even when aggregate demand does not exceed aggregate supply." In other words, stagflation can happen. "Our Keynesian macro model does *not* help us understand how stagflation is possible." The point is that "demand-pull inflation can coexist with rising structural unemployment, and cyclical unemployment can coexist with increasing cost-push inflation. Often conflicts over distribution, changes in the international division of labor, and rapid technological changes generate significant amounts of structural unemployment and cost-push inflation to go along with the cyclical unemployment and demand-pull inflation the simple Keynesian macro model explains."

As for inflation, Hahnel debunks some myths. It is *not* bad for everyone. It means that prices are rising *on average*, at different speeds. "If the prices of the things you buy are rising faster than the

prices of the things you sell”—and everyone sells something, be it labor-power or goods or whatever—“you will be ‘hurt’ by inflation. That is, your real buying power, or real income, will fall. But if the prices of the things you sell are rising faster than the prices of the things you buy, your real income will increase. So for the most part, what inflation does is rob Peters to pay Pauls. That is, inflation redistributes real income. ...Inflationary redistribution is essentially determined by changes in relative bargaining power between actors in the economy.” So if corporations and the wealthy are becoming more powerful—as they have been for the last forty years—inflation will make the distribution of income more inequitable, because prices will rise faster than wages.

Sometimes inflation can be so extreme or unpredictable that it makes businesses invest less and people work less, in which case it reduces output. But that’s rare. “Most of us should think long and hard before joining corporations and the wealthy who put fighting inflation at the top of their list of problems they want the government to prioritize. The wealthy rationally fear that inflation can reduce the value of their assets. And employers have an interest in prioritizing the fight against inflation over the fight against unemployment because periodic bouts of unemployment reduce labor’s bargaining power.” It seems to me that, while inflation in the early twenty-first century isn’t good for workers—because the weakness of organized labor means that prices rise faster than wages—it could be the lesser evil if it results from large government initiatives to put more people to work, i.e., to reduce unemployment. But this point is moot, since in the neoliberal age the government, being controlled by the corporate sector, isn’t going to prioritize the fight against unemployment. Realistically, inflation nowadays is bad both for wealthy owners of assets and poorer workers.

Hahnel makes the Keynesian argument that “wage-led growth” is possible, that higher wage rates don’t have to lead to lower long-run economic growth by means of lower capital accumulation (because of a wage squeeze on profits). The reason is that higher wages mean higher aggregate demand, which stimulates greater capacity utilization. “Depressing wages and thereby consumption does leave more output available for capital accumulation, but by lowering the demand for goods and services it also decreases capacity utilization.” It could lower the rate of growth of actual GDP even while increasing the rate of growth of potential GDP.

Such ideas, put forward by Michael Kalecki and Josef Steindl long ago, provide--as we saw in the last chapter--a plausible explanation of the lower rates of economic growth in advanced economies over the past forty years. “As corporations have increased their power vis-à-vis both their employees and their customers, they have been able to drive real wages down over the past thirty years. This has prevented aggregate demand from increasing as fast as potential production and led to falling rates of capacity utilization and lower rates of economic growth.” Think of the fact that Scandinavian economies had higher rates of growth than most other advanced economies for fifty years despite higher tax rates and lower rates of technological innovation. “Could it be that strong unions, high real wages, and high taxes to finance high levels of public spending are not detrimental to long-run growth at all, but quite the opposite?” At least under certain conditions, “quite the opposite” is clearly true.

Hahnel challenges the conventional wisdom regarding international trade, too. Sure, it *can* be efficient because of comparative advantage, but it can also be very inefficient. Adjustment costs, for example, can be significant—moving people and resources out of one industry and into another—and the social costs (environmental, etc.) of a country’s specialization in some good are not reflected in prices, even though these costs can be considerable. They might be

such that the country *shouldn't* specialize in that good, i.e., that its comparative advantage has been misidentified because of the biases and inefficiencies of the market. He also notes that "the theory of comparative advantage is usually interpreted as implying that a country should specialize even more in its traditional export products, since those would presumably be the industries in which the country enjoys a comparative advantage. But underdeveloped economies are less developed precisely because they have lower levels of productivity than other economies enjoy. If less developed economies further specialize in the sectors they have always specialized in, it may well be *less* likely that they will find ways to increase their productivity."¹¹¹ Japan and South Korea, for instance, were smart enough not to accept their old comparative advantages but instead to *create* new ones in industries where it would be easier to achieve large productivity increases. Industries like cars and steel and then, later, electronics and computers. Productivity increases were easier in these industries than in Japan's old comparative advantage of textile production.

International trade also tends to increase global inequality. The terms of trade between countries are usually such that countries that were better off in the first place get most of whatever efficiency gains there are in trade. The main reason for this is that productive capital is more scarce globally than labor, so that relatively poor, labor-rich ("Southern") countries have to compete among themselves for the scarce machines of the capital-rich ("Northern") countries. This gives the latter power to dictate the terms of trade, which therefore end up being disadvantageous to labor-rich countries. Also, if capital-intensive industries are characterized by a faster pace of innovation than labor-intensive industries, the terms of trade will deteriorate for Southern countries. Third, if markets are not all equally competitive but instead Northern exporters have

¹¹¹ See the section of this book, in chapter one, called "*On the 'law' of comparative advantage.*"

more market power than Southern exporters—as they usually do—the terms of trade will be even worse for the latter than in competitive markets.

Trade also increases inequality *within* countries. Mainstream trade theory itself explains why, at least with regard to rich Northern countries. “According to Heckscher-Ohlin theory, countries will have a comparative advantage in goods that use inputs, or factors of production, in which the country is relatively abundant. But this means trade increases the demand for relatively abundant factors of production and decreases the demand for factors that are relatively scarce within countries. In advanced economies where the capital-labor ratio is higher than elsewhere, and therefore capital is ‘relatively abundant,’ Heckscher-Ohlin theory predicts that increased trade will increase the demand for capital, increasing its return, and decrease the demand for labor, depressing wages. Of course this is exactly what has occurred in the U.S., making the AFL-CIO a consistent critic of trade liberalization. In advanced economies where the ratio of skilled to unskilled labor is higher than elsewhere, Heckscher-Ohlin theory also predicts that increased trade will increase the demand for skilled labor and decrease the demand for unskilled labor and thereby increase wage differentials.”

However, Heckscher-Ohlin theory can’t explain rising inequality in less developed economies. In fact, it predicts the opposite: unskilled labor should get higher returns from trade because that is what those countries are relatively abundant in. The problem is that H-O theory, like all theories, is *ceteris paribus*, ignoring dynamics that in this case overpower the theory. Specifically, decades ago large amounts of land in the Third World had a sufficiently low value that billions of peasants could live on them without trouble from local economic and political elites who *now* want to use the land for valuable export crops. So peasant squatters are no longer tolerated. The “Green Revolution” of the 1960s—which made much of the rural labor force redundant in Third-World agriculture—

globalization, and export-oriented agriculture have increased the value of Third-World land, so billions of peasants have been driven out of rural areas into mega-cities where they seek new labor-intensive manufacturing jobs produced by trade liberalization and international investment. But there are far fewer jobs than ex-peasants who need them, so wage rates are low, not high.

International investment, like trade, can either increase or decrease global efficiency and inequality. But it usually comes with the bad, not the good. Direct foreign investment can be very profitable for investors, but, contrary to what mainstream economists think, that isn't necessarily because the plant and machinery are more productive in developing countries than they would have been at home. It could be, in fact usually is, because the bargaining power of Third-World workers is even less than that of their First-World counterparts. Or because governments in the developing world are so desperate to woo foreign investors that they offer large tax breaks and lower environmental standards. Similarly, international *financial* investment can lead to huge efficiency losses, for example when investors panic and sell off their currency holdings, stocks, and bonds in an "emerging market economy," which can erase all the gains that had been made over many years. The 1997 Asian financial crisis is a good example.

International investment also usually increases global inequality. "Global efficiency rises when international loans from northern economies raise productivity more in southern economies than they would have raised productivity domestically. But when capital is scarce globally, competition among southern borrowers drives interest rates on international loans up to the point where lenders capture the greater part of the efficiency gain... So even when international financial markets work smoothly and efficiently, they usually increase income inequality between countries." But when they don't work smoothly and efficiently, it's even worse. For instance, international financial crises give foreign investors the op-

portunity to buy up businesses at very cheap prices. Hahnel explains the “great global asset swindle” as follows: “International investors lose confidence in a third-world economy, dumping its currency, bonds, and stocks. At the insistence of the IMF, the central bank in the third-world country tightens the money supply to boost domestic interest rates to prevent further capital outflows in an unsuccessful attempt to protect the currency [i.e., to prevent it from depreciating more]. Even healthy domestic companies [as a result] can no longer obtain or afford loans, so they join the ranks of bankrupted domestic businesses available for purchase. As a precondition for receiving the IMF bailout, the government abolishes any remaining restrictions on foreign ownership of corporations, banks, and land. With a depreciated local currency and a long list of bankrupt local businesses, the economy is ready for the acquisition experts from Western multinational corporations and banks who come to the fire sale with a thick wad of almighty dollars in their pockets.”

As for *efficiency*, empirical data prove that neoliberal policies have not accelerated world economic growth. Growth rates were much higher in the Bretton Woods era than they have been in the neoliberal era.

Stuff about the IMF:

In exchange for a “bailout loan” that allows the country to pay off international loans coming due that it would otherwise have to default on, IMF “conditionality agreements” typically demand that the recipient government reduce spending and increase taxes, and the central bank reduce the money supply—in addition to demanding removal of restrictions on international trade and investment and foreign ownership. Since the economy is invariably already in recession, fiscal and monetary “austerity” further aggravate the recession. Reducing government spending and in-

creasing taxes both decrease aggregate demand, and therefore decrease employment and production. Reducing the money supply raises interest rates, which reduces investment demand and further decreases aggregate demand, employment, and production...

...The IMF policies are designed to increase the probability that the country will be able to repay its international creditors, and make perfect sense once one realizes this is their goal. If the government is in danger of defaulting on its "sovereign" international debt, forcing it to turn budget deficits into surpluses provides funds for repaying its international creditors. If the private sector is in danger of default, anything that reduces imports and increases exports or increases the inflow of new international investment will provide foreign exchange needed for debt repayment. Deflationary fiscal and monetary policy reduces aggregate demand and therefore inflation, which tends to increase exports and decrease imports. By reducing aggregate demand, deflationary fiscal and monetary policy also reduces output and therefore income, which further reduces imports. Tight monetary policy raises domestic rates, which reduces the outflow of domestic financial investment and increases the inflow of new foreign financial investment, providing more foreign exchange to pay off the international creditors whose loans are coming due. Finally, since all in the country who owe foreign creditors receive their income in local currency, anything that keeps the local currency from depreciating will allow debtors to buy more dollars with their local currency, which is what they need to pay their international creditors. IMF austerity programs are well designed to turn stricken economies into more effective debt repayment machines as quickly as possible.

Incidentally, Joseph Stiglitz's bestselling *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2002) bears out Hahnel's analysis in its condemnation of the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. The evolution of the former two, for example, has been quite ironic. Formed after the Great Depression and World War II, they were originally Keynesian institutions fully cognizant of market failures. The IMF's mission was to prevent another global depression, in part by lending to countries facing an economic downturn so that their level of aggregate demand could be maintained and a depression averted. The World Bank (or International Bank for Reconstruction and Development) for decades took seriously its mission of alleviating poverty by limiting itself to giving loans for projects like building roads and dams. In the late 1970s things changed. "Founded on the belief," Stiglitz says, "that there is a need for international pressure on countries to have more expansionary economic policies—such as increasing expenditures, reducing taxes, or lowering interest rates to stimulate the economy—today the IMF typically provides loans only if countries engage in policies, like *cutting* deficits, *raising* taxes, or *raising* interest rates, that lead to a *contraction* of the economy." Ironic, eh? As the global political economy has changed, so have the functions of these institutions. The World Bank has become more intertwined with the IMF than before, now giving "structural adjustment loans" to countries that accept IMF-imposed conditions. And after the fall of Communism, both institutions, though especially the IMF, guided the transition to capitalism. Badly.¹¹² The point is that, far from facilitating global stability, they have evolved so as to create and exacerbate instability. Because that serves the interests of the institutions whose servants they are. (It used to be that these latter institutions, particularly the financial sector, had an interest in stability; in the 1970s and 1980s, as you know, that changed, when certain regulations were dismantled and instability became wildly profitable for speculators.)

¹¹² See Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007).

To return to Hahnel's book. International economic considerations can help explain political behavior that might otherwise seem paradoxical or stupid. Hahnel gives the example of Jimmy Carter reneging on his campaign promise to prioritize the fight against unemployment over the fight against inflation. His betrayal of this promise was partly responsible for his loss to Ronald Reagan. So why did he do it? In part because of reasons having to do with the balance of payments. In 1977 the U.S.'s trade account deficit was increasing, which put downward pressure on the value of the dollar. "What made this particularly worrisome was that Saudi Arabia was Washington's ally inside OPEC and had prevented the OPEC oil price increases [of the 1970s] from being even greater by increasing its own production and sales. Since the oil price increases were widely believed to be responsible for a substantial part of the stagflation—rising unemployment *and* rising inflation—that rocked the European and U.S. economies in the 1970s, Carter deemed it critical to persuade the Saudis not to abandon their opposition to the majority of their Arab brethren in OPEC who wanted to cut world supplies and boost oil prices even further. But the Saudis were asking why they should continue to trade oil for dollars if the value of the dollar was going to continue to fall—as it surely would if U.S. trade deficits continued to rise." If the dollar was going to fall further, it was better for the Saudis just to leave more oil in the ground where it could only increase in value. Now, if Carter had tried to aggressively combat unemployment this would have increased production and income but also imports, and thereby increased the trade deficit even more. So he adopted deflationary fiscal policies, which caused the trade deficit to disappear in the recession of 1980. Thus he defended the value of the dollar in order to prevent oil prices from rising even more. (The poor guy was caught in a double bind. Had he adopted expansionary policies, the Saudis would have let oil prices rise, which would have exacerbated inflation and maybe unemployment too, since high oil prices were

probably partly responsible for high unemployment. So he adopted deflationary policies, which led to higher unemployment. There was no way out for him, it seems.)

Carter also “betrayed” progressives by reappointing Paul Volcker as chairman of the Fed, which he did in part to show the Saudis he was serious about shoring up the dollar. “The only way to [raise the dollar’s value] quickly was to raise U.S. interest rates significantly above world levels to induce a massive inflow of finance capital on the short-run capital account to counter the trade deficit until it could be reduced.”

In the penultimate chapter Hahnel demolishes Milton Friedman’s apologetics for capitalism. He points out, for example, that the market isn’t “free, voluntary, and non-coercive” if people come to it with different amounts of capital. In a sense, yes, employees have freely chosen to work for someone else. But they’ve been coerced into having to make that unpleasant decision by their relative lack of capital. It’s either rent yourself out or starve.

*

Reading David Harvey’s *The Enigma of Capital, and the Crises of Capitalism* (2011).

Harvey has some things in common with Robert Brenner. (And also with the *Monthly Review* school of Marxists, exemplified by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy in *Monopoly Capital*.) For instance, he makes it clear that in one sense financial institutions are right to say they’re the linchpin of the economy: because incomes are so polarized between the elite and the masses, without absurdly high levels of lending to consumers the economy would grind to a halt. Even those with very low incomes eventually have to receive mountains of credit (as they did by the late 1990s), because confining it to the steadily employed population doesn’t provide enough boost to demand. Hence the infamous “subprime loans” for mortgages—in part the product of political pressure on financial institutions to

loosen credit strings for everyone. (Not only the home buyers but even the property developers were debt-financed! In other words, “the financial institutions collectively controlled both the supply of, and demand for, housing!”) Such loans were risky, but innovations in “securitization” supposedly spread the risk around “and even created the illusion that risk had disappeared.”

So that was one way of solving the demand problem of the 1990s and 2000s. Another way was “the export of capital and the cultivation of new markets around the world.” We’re back to the old imperialism of the 1880s–1910s (dressed in modern clothes), and the old ideas of J. A. Hobson and the classical Marxists.¹¹³ Actually, even

¹¹³ See Hobson’s classic *Imperialism: A Study* (1905). It’s still timely, though the forms of imperialism have somewhat changed in the last hundred years. Now, instead of political colonialism, we have economic neo-colonialism. But the overall objectives, and the specific business interests that guide imperialistic policy, have remained substantially the same. “It is not too much to say,” Hobson argues, “that the modern foreign policy of Great Britain has been primarily a struggle for profitable markets of investment [—but also, he says elsewhere, for sources of raw materials and foreign or colonial markets in which to sell domestically produced goods]. To a larger extent every year Great Britain has been becoming a nation living upon tribute from abroad [as the U.S. has, in various ways, since at least the 1980s], and the classes who enjoy this tribute have had an ever-increasing incentive to employ the public policy, the public purse, and the public force to extend the field of their private investments, and to safeguard and improve their existing investments... Aggressive Imperialism, which costs the taxpayer so dear...is a source of great gain to the investor who cannot find at home the profitable use he seeks for his capital [because of capital over-accumulation and insufficient domestic aggregate demand], and insists that his Government should help him to find profitable and secure investments abroad [as the U.S. energy industry did with the Iraq war, for example].” Nikolai Bukharin’s *Imperialism and World Economy* (1916) is excellent as well. On the history of U.S. foreign policy, see the works of William Appleman Williams, Walter LaFeber, Gabriel Kolko,

as early as England's forcing India to buy its cotton in the early nineteenth century, "the cultivation of new markets around the world" to boost demand was going on. By the 1970s, one form of capital export—a response to the lack of profitable investment opportunities in the U.S.—was to lend massively to developing countries like Mexico and Brazil. (If they defaulted, the IMF could come to the rescue of investors.) In order for capital export to become a really big industry, though, "a globally interlinked system of financial markets needed to be constructed." No more confining banks to their home country; no more "excessive" regulations; no more separating deposit from investment banking. (Accordingly, the 1930s' Glass-Steagall Act was repealed in the late 1990s.) Liquid capital had to roam the world freely, looking for locations with high rates of return. So much surplus capital to be absorbed!

Another way to absorb capital was to privatize state-run enterprises. Hence the global wave of privatization since the 1980s.

Considering all the things that can go wrong with capitalism, it's impressive the system works at all. For example, if organized labor becomes too powerful and wages are too high, the profit-squeeze might cause capitalists to reduce investment. (Alternatively, they might invest more in labor-saving technologies.) They could lay off workers, etc. If this happens on a sufficiently broad scale, stagnation could set in. (But the resulting drop in wages and loosening of the labor market *might* lead to increased investment, ending the stagnation.) On the other hand, if organized labor is very weak, such that wages are low and unemployment high, effective demand might be insufficient to justify high levels of investment, and stagnation sets in. The Great Depression and the current stagnation fall, at least in part, under the latter category. The stagnation of the 1970s, on the other hand, was apparently partly the result of a profit-squeeze in the context of global overproduction. Hence business's

and other historians in this "revisionist" school that understands the importance of economics to government policy.

and the government's attacks on organized labor—which, as Brenner says, have helped cause the low demand of the present. This time, though, there probably isn't going to be a revival of labor unions and massive government spending, as there was in the 1930s and '40s. Instead, I suspect, there is going to be a slow collapse of capitalism, starting in the advanced countries. Will growth in developing countries like China and India come to the rescue? Doubtful. They'll be dragged down by the West, and by their own internal social problems.

Anyway, Harvey's formulations in general are illuminating. His whole explanation of economic activity revolves around capitalism's requirement that capital accumulation flow continuously. "The continuity of flow must be sustained at all times." He emphasizes this again and again. Accumulation is always looking to overcome barriers and limits. If it hits a limit of some sort, problems arise, sometimes leading to crisis. One essential role of the credit system is to stave off for a while "the problem of falling profits and devaluations [of capital] due to lack of effective demand"—but over the long term this tends to accumulate the system's contradictions and tensions, spreading the risks at the same time that it accumulates them. Credit has to grow at a compound rate (because capital accumulation occurs at a compound rate), "as indeed happened over the last twenty years. When the credit bubble bursts, which it inevitably must, then the whole economy plunges into a downward spiral of the sort that began in 2007. And it is at this point that capitalism has to create external power in order to save itself from its own internal contradictions." So in the U.S. it turns to the Federal Reserve, which has the power of infinite money creation.

Harvey opposes all attempts to look for one dominant explanation for the crisis-prone character of capitalism. "The three big traditional camps of thought are the profit squeeze (profits fall because real wages rise), the falling rate of profit (labour-saving technological changes backfire and 'ruinous' competition pulls

prices down), [and] the underconsumptionist traditions (lack of effective demand and the tendency towards stagnation associated with excessive monopolisation).” Adherents of one school often insist that the others are simply wrong.

There is, I think, a far better way to think about crisis formation. The analysis of capital circulation pinpoints several potential limits and barriers. Money capital scarcities, labour problems, disproportionalities between sectors, natural [environmental] limits, unbalanced technological and organisational changes (including competition versus monopoly), indiscipline in the labour process and lack of effective demand head up the list. Any one of these circumstances can slow down or disrupt the continuity flow and so produce a crisis that results in the devaluation or loss of capital. When one limit is overcome accumulation often hits up against another somewhere else. For instance, moves made to alleviate a crisis of labour supply and to curb the political power of organised labour in the 1970s diminished the effective demand for product, which created difficulties for realisation of the surplus in the market during the 1990s. Moves to alleviate this last problem by extensions of the credit system among the working classes ultimately led to working-class over-indebtedness relative to income that in turn led to a crisis of confidence in the quality of debt instruments (as began to happen in 2006). The crisis tendencies are not resolved but merely moved around.

One barrier to accumulation is repositioned at the expense of another. The crises that result are *necessary* ways of rationalizing (temporarily) an irrational, contradictory system. They are “as necessary to the evolution of capitalism as money, labour power, and capital itself.”

“A synoptic view of the current crisis [in 2010] would say: while the epicentre lies in the technologies and organisational forms of the credit system and the state-finance nexus, the underlying problem is excessive capitalist empowerment vis-à-vis labour and consequent wage repression, leading to problems of effective demand papered over by a credit-fuelled consumerism of excess in one part of the world [the West] and a too-rapid expansion of production in new product lines in another [much of Asia].” Similar to Brenner, and a galaxy of other leftists.

Harvey has an interesting discussion of urbanization as one of the primary ways of absorbing capital surplus (i.e., too much capital relative to investment opportunities). As long ago as the 1850s, governments used massive infrastructural investment for this purpose, in other words to rescue society from its economic doldrums. The Europe-wide economic crisis of 1848, which helped cause the political upheavals of that year, was a crisis of “unemployed surplus capital and surplus labour existing side by side with no clear way to put them back together again.” In France, the republican bourgeoisie failed to resolve the problem; only after Louis Napoleon became emperor in 1852 was the solution hit upon, namely a huge Keynesian-style program of infrastructural investment at home and abroad, directed by Baron Haussmann. It entailed the reconfiguration of Paris’s urban landscape, which helped stabilize society by employing vast quantities of labor and capital. Paris was transformed, becoming “the city of light”—and of consumption, tourism, and pleasures galore. New financial institutions and debt instruments were used to allocate capital, and apparently they worked well...until the whole speculative financial system and its credit structures collapsed in the crisis of 1868.

A later example is the U.S. in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. The Second World War lifted America out of the depression, but what was going to happen after the war? In order to contain radical social movements, two things were necessary: repress them (as Napoleon III had

in the 1850s), and solve some of the problems that had given rise to them. New ways had to be found to absorb surplus capital and so keep the economy going. Federal, state, and local governments effectively adopted Bonaparte's solution: invest in colossal projects of remaking metropolitan spaces. The "master builder" Robert Moses, a sort of Baron Haussmann of his day, is still the symbol of all this, all the resultant debt-financed highways and infrastructural transformations, the suburbanization, the urban renewal, and so on. "Where would the capital surplus have gone," Harvey asks, "had it not been for the making of the New York metropolitan region, Chicago, Los Angeles and other places of their ilk after 1945?" All this investment across the country, supplemented by tax subsidies for home ownership, the GI bill, "productivity agreements" between capital and labor, etc., was crucial to stabilizing not only the U.S. economy but U.S.-centered global capitalism. It also made possible the maturation of Fordist mass consumerism, thus changing people's lifestyles.

Of course there were costs, as you know. The dismantling of public transportation, the destruction of old urban neighborhoods and the hollowing-out of city centers, the U.S.'s dependence on the Middle East for much of its oil, the degradation of the natural environment, the urban crisis of the 1960s, etc. Hence, in part, the radical backlash of the 1960s. Another consequence, Harvey argues, was the weakening of the dollar because of excessive U.S. borrowing, and thus ultimately the collapse of the Bretton Woods system in 1971/73.

"After the 1970s, urbanisation underwent yet another transformation of scale. It went global. The urbanisation of China over the last twenty years has been hugely important." China's urbanization has in fact been partially responsible for the stabilization of global capitalism. Think of all the demand it has generated! But China is really only the epicenter of the global phenomenon of debt-financed urbanization projects. I won't list the dozens of cities every-

where, many of them in the U.S., that have been the sites of building booms. And this new wave of urbanization has depended, “as did all those before it, on financial innovation to organise the credit required to sustain it. The securitisation and packaging of local mortgages for sale to investors worldwide, and the setting up of new financial institutions to facilitate a secondary mortgage market, have played a crucial role.” All these developments in the financial sector had the positive effects of bringing aggregate interest rates down and spreading risk. In the end, though, what happened in the financial crisis of 1868 in Paris and in New York City in 1975 (when it almost went bankrupt due to all its debt) and in many other places and times happened again in the subprime mortgage and housing asset value crisis.

What happened in Paris in the 1850s and across the U.S. in the postwar era has lately been going on all over the world: undesirable or economically redundant people are being brutally pushed out of the way by states and businesses seeking to create or “renew” urban areas. Earth is becoming a planet of slums. And social movements are taking up arms everywhere.

One other thing: landowners have taken an active role in pushing all this urban development, because it raises the value of their property and thus the rents they can charge. “The power of land and resource owners has been much underestimated, as has the role of land and resource asset values and rents in relation to the overall circulation and accumulation of capital. This arena of activity accounts for as much as 40 percent of economic activity in many of the advanced capitalist countries.” Wow. That’s a lot of parasites.

Regarding the future of capitalism, the basic point to understand is that compound economic growth forever is not possible. In a finite world, capital accumulation at a compound rate has to end eventually. Crises that restore growth by destroying or devaluing excess capital can only postpone the inevitable, not prevent it.

Harvey notes that, broadly speaking, two different kinds of responses have evolved to the current economic downturn. On the one hand is the West, with its policies of deficit reduction through austerity. I.e., lower standards of living for most people, etc. On the other hand is the East and the emerging markets of the South, which have been following an expansionary Keynesian strategy. In China there is massive investment in infrastructure combined with moderate empowerment of labor (higher wages, etc.), resulting in an increase of demand that gives a boost to the export economies of Latin America, Southeast Asia, Germany, and so on. –History’s twists and turns are fascinating! The erstwhile victors, in the West, rot from the internal contradictions of the economic system that made possible their global domination, while the erstwhile victims *rise* by virtue of the dynamics of this system that ground them under its boot for so long. Poetic justice! The formerly “independent” economies of the West come to depend more and more on their former dependencies. But ultimately it’s all unsustainable anyway.

*

A summary of U.S. interventions in Latin America.— In *Blazing Cane: Sugar Communities, Class, and State Formation in Cuba, 1868-1959* (2009), Gillian McGillivray has some useful comments on the Spanish-American War of 1898. “Between April 1898 and March 1899, President William McKinley sent some forty-five thousand American servicemen to occupy Cuba for an undefined period of time. This was the first of a series of twentieth-century U.S. interventions in Latin America supposedly to help flailing nations free themselves from tyranny and establish democracies. In fact, interventions occurred wherever revolutionaries threatened foreign interests and U.S. capitalists had enough investments at stake to force their government to buttress dependent elite regimes. U.S. forces intervened thirty-four times in nine Latin American countries between 1898 and 1934. Good Neighbor policies from the 1930s on-

ward prompted instead non-recognition of radical governments and behind-the-scenes maneuvering for more U.S.-friendly regimes.

“The most common characteristic of these interventions (beginning with Cuba) was the U.S. administrations’ need to portray them as motivated by humanitarian generosity when what really drove them was U.S. capitalists’ desire for new markets. By the late nineteenth century, many U.S. industrialists were ready to export goods, to import and process primary resources, or to set up export industries abroad. These industrialists lobbied the U.S. government to lower import tariffs. In direct contrast, many U.S. agricultural producers continued to depend almost entirely on protectionist tariffs. Sugar had one group in each camp: U.S. sugar refiners and brokers wanted low tariffs for importing raw sugar from abroad, while most producers of beet sugar in the western United States and cane sugar in the southern United States wanted higher tariffs...

“Within this framework, one can understand the contradiction between what U.S. politicians said they were doing and what they actually did in Cuba and the rest of Latin America. The hypocrisy began with the myth that U.S. forces invaded Cuba to help the Cubans win freedom from Spain. The actual goal was to preclude a social and racial revolution (‘another Haiti’) and to create a new, dependent, and politically moderate Cuba safe for U.S. capital...”

All this ought to be common sense. Political and economic institutions don’t act out of the kindness of their heart, as though they’re so obsessed with improving people’s lives everywhere that they spend trillions of dollars just for that purpose. As if American business and political elites in the 1890s had such overwhelming pity for those poor Cubans that they just *had* to intervene in the war to help them win freedom from Spain! The very idea is too ludicrous to discuss. Institutions do what’s in their interest and what helps them maintain or gain power, that’s all. This is virtually an axiomatic truth. Accordingly, when you hear political officials declaiming about the high nobility of their policies, their wonderful human-

itarian motives, their great concern for people's welfare and security, you can ignore it all. Maybe a few deluded politicians manage to convince themselves of their own rhetoric, but personal motives are unimportant. Self-deception isn't exactly an unknown thing. People do what institutional pressures demand they do—rationalizing their behavior however they want—and if they *don't*, institutions find a way to get rid of them. This turns out usually not to be necessary, because most political actors are perfectly willing to do what's good for the rich.

*

Central America just before neoliberalism.— What were the horrors of the 1980s in Central America all about? If you've read Noam Chomsky, you know a lot of it had to do with the Reagan administration's support for reactionary governments and paramilitary forces to beat back democratic social movements that were strongly opposed to U.S. capital and imperialism. But there's a fascinating background to the story that many scholars have recounted, for example Walter LaFeber in *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (1983). Here I'll summarize some of the main points of a less U.S.-focused work, Jeffery Paige's *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (1997).

As Paige says, his book is about Central America's second "revolutionary decade" (the 1930s being the first), the 1980s. It focuses on El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (which didn't experience the 1980s civil war that the other two and Guatemala did, because of its stable social democratic structure). "The revolutionary crises of the 1980s were crises of the coffee elites and the societies they made at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries." You know, the polarization between the old family-based oligarchies—centuries-old dynasties effectively running the countries—and the impoverished masses. The coffee elite and other dynastic families had immense power, but their political regimes

had only barely survived the tumult of the 1930s “by ceding direct rule to military dictatorships (even in Costa Rica [for a short time]).” Later, “the long economic boom in Central America and the world economy after 1945 created new social and economic forces that could not be contained in the rickety oligarchic-dictatorial structures of the twentieth-century political order. The end of this boom after 1973 detonated the social explosion that had been gathering force throughout the long period of postwar economic expansion.” Good ol’ Marxism: new productive forces and changes in social and/or technical relations of production slowly sweeping aside older production relations and property distribution, eventually—through the agency of mass rebellion and of intra-“elite” competition—bursting their fetters and those of existing political relations, etc. This abstract Marxian schema is most appropriate for truly revolutionary transitions between forms of society, such as that between feudalism and capitalism, but it seems appropriate on smaller scales too. (On such scales, however, no “bursting of fetters” need go on; in general terms, it’s safer to speak merely of *repercussions* in the realm of politics, culture, and so forth.)¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Obviously on such “smaller,” non-transitional-between-different-modes-of-production scales, it is *technical*, not *social*, relations of production that are in question. I.e., the “forms of surplus-extraction” remain the same while the ways in which the productive process itself is organized change (as technology changes, etc.). For example, as cotton production in the American South was mechanized between the 1920s and 1950s, black agrarian labor became largely superfluous. Millions of blacks migrated to northern cities for economic opportunities, and whites no longer had a compelling economic reason to savagely repress the blacks who remained. So it became possible for a Civil Rights Movement to eventually force changes in Southern society. See, e.g., Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), chapter 7, and Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

The agro-export sector was primarily responsible for the new social forces. "The rapid expansion of sugar, beef, and, above all, cotton production in Central America after World War II began to challenge the coffee monoculture that was the basis of the old order. The coffee industry itself experienced a substantial expansion and technical transformation... The expansion of the Central American common market in the 1960s, particularly in El Salvador, created a nascent industrial bourgeoisie."

All this was disastrous for the rest of the population, still heavily rural.

The dramatic expansion of both cotton and cattle created massive displacements of the rural population of a magnitude not seen since the days of the Liberal land tenure revolutions of the nineteenth century. All of the new export crops, including the new coffee system, were more capital- and less labor-intensive than the systems they replaced. Unemployment increased dramatically as owners cleared unproductive serfs and squatters from their lands and replaced payment in subsistence rights and kind with cash wages and rents. The massive displacement of the rural population from the land created two new classes unseen before in Central America—a semi-proletariat of part-time wage laborers, renters, and subsistence farmers, and an urban informal sector of petty merchants, artisans, and day laborers. In many cases the two classes converged into a great mass of desperate people with no firm ties to the labor market, the institutions of property, or the societies of which they were a huge majority.

It's the precariat, created in part by the Green Revolution and associated developments. What happened in those decades reminds me of what happened in early modern Europe. Actually, in both

cases the expulsion of the peasantry from the countryside took centuries; the Green Revolution and other things going on recently (in China, for example, which is forcing hundreds of millions of peasants off the land) have been simply the last stage of it in much of the world. Anyway, the parallels are striking. English landowners getting rid of peasants and the commons when sheep pasturage became very profitable; later, Third World landowners getting rid of remaining peasants and squatters when the land became profitable. An influx of people into insufficiently industrialized urban areas (not enough jobs) and shantytowns, as higher education simultaneously expands and radical “intellectuals” appear who help foster and guide discontent. New parts of the economic elite, too, that are less attached to the *ancien régime* than older economic groups are; in fact, the formers’ interests often lie in the overthrow of the old order. So popular discontent can get support from them, and they can help guide it—and ultimately be its main beneficiaries. (This is what happened in Central America, where much of the economic elite in Nicaragua supported the Sandinistas against Somoza and eventually in El Salvador came to support a negotiated settlement with the rebels.)¹¹⁵ So you get the English civil war and Glorious Revolution, the French Revolution, 1848, the 1917 Russian revolutions—of which the bourgeoisie lost control, succumbing to self-proclaimed representatives of the oppressed masses (i.e., the Bolsheviks)—Central America’s civil wars of the 1980s, and the Arab Spring.¹¹⁶ (Of course there are also important differences between all these events.)

¹¹⁵ Moreover, the ultimate outcome of the 1980s’ so-called revolutions was...neoliberalism, in the 1990s. Good for the elite, not so good for the masses.

¹¹⁶ It’s true that some of those examples, and others in history, involved a still-enormous peasantry. But the urban population, much of it having only recently left the land, was crucial too.

“An increasing body of research indicates that it was these growing classes of unemployed and underemployed rural semi-proletarians and urban informal sector workers, joined, in the case of El Salvador, by a small but well organized formal proletariat in the Common Market manufacturing sector, that made the mass base of the revolutions.” Like with the Arab Spring. (Students, too, were important in both cases.)

To sum up: “The coffee export economy created the oligarchic political structures of Central America; cotton and cattle destroyed them.”

On the nineteenth century: “The revolution from above instituted by the nineteenth-century Liberals was a disaster for most of the population. The most direct assaults on the people were the land and labor laws that abolished communal control over the land by indigenous communities, sold off the commons and public lands to large holders, and instituted systems of state control over labor with varying degrees of stringency. The subsidies, infrastructure improvements, and special concessions went entirely to benefit the elite. The pattern of concentrated land ownership in the agro-export sector and mass poverty and landlessness among much of the population in the 1980s was a heritage of the Liberal revolutions of the 1880s.”

Paige goes into great detail on the class composition of the elites in the twentieth century, and on the economic differences between each country (including Guatemala). The basic point is that the elite in each country is or was composed of two fractions, which until the 1980s were fairly united: the agrarian (landowners, reactionary because of the need to control labor) and the agro-industrial (manufacturers, less reactionary, especially in the 1980s). In Costa Rica, the agro-industrial dominated; hence (in part) the country’s relatively progressive politics since 1948. In Guatemala and El Salvador—especially the former—the agrarian was stronger; hence the predominance of reactionary politics. In Nicaragua, neither fraction was

highly developed...until late in the postwar era, when the technological advances mentioned above strengthened the agro-industrial elite (and to a lesser extent the agrarian), which then largely supported the Sandinistas.

“The rise of the agro-industrialists and the semi-proletariat created [in the 1970s] a revolutionary crisis not only between the popular classes and the elite but between the two fractions of the elite itself. During the 1980s, immense revolutionary pressure from below began to cause the two fractions of the elite, united in all previous crises, to split apart. By 1992 the agro-industrial elite had managed to separate itself from the agrarians everywhere except in Guatemala, and the agrarian order and the authoritarian regimes that had supported it were in ruins. The ultimate beneficiaries of the revolutionary crisis of the 1980s were the agro-industrialists. By 1992 they had emerged triumphant everywhere, again except for Guatemala. In the three cases that are the focus of this study, class relations in 1992 converged on a single pattern—a dominant agro-industrial elite divested from a now largely defunct agrarian fraction, and a large and ever increasing semi-proletariat. The three societies had also converged on the common political form of representative democracy, and the common economic program and ideology of neoliberalism.”

The book follows in the tradition of Barrington Moore, while dissenting from some of his specifics. As Paige says,

In *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* Moore argues that democracy is a product of a “bourgeois revolution” against a backward landed aristocracy (“no bourgeoisie, no democracy”),¹¹⁷ that authoritarian “fascist” regimes result from a coalition between a dominant landed aristocracy and a weak bourgeoisie, and that socialist revol-

¹¹⁷ One should note, however, that it won't be an *inclusive* democracy until the lower classes force it to be.

ution occurs when a massive revolt of cohesive peasant villages overwhelms landed and bourgeois classes weakened by a powerful agrarian bureaucracy... Moore, like many other theorists, both Marxist and non-Marxist, traces the development of democracy to a "bourgeois revolution" in which a rising industrial bourgeoisie and its political allies defeat the entrenched political power of the landed aristocracy. The defeat of the Southern slave-holding aristocracy by the industrialists of the North in the U.S. Civil War is one of Moore's paradigmatic cases. The failure of bourgeois revolution can open the way to conservative authoritarianism (what Moore calls "fascism") through the continued dominance of the landlords, as in Moore's implicit comparative case of Germany. Given the close ties between the agrarian and agro-industrial fractions of the elite [before the 1980s], the prospects for a democratic resolution in the case of Central America [were] not promising. The inability of the agro-industrial fraction to separate itself from, much less defeat [at least until the late 1980s or 1990s], the agrarian fraction, as well as the heavy weight of agriculture in the economic base of the elite as a whole, suggest that conservative authoritarianism would be the expected outcome [as it was, again, until the 1980s]. To this extent the Central America past provides convincing confirmation of Moore's thesis.

He goes on to say, "The dependence of the landed elite on what Moore calls 'labor repressive agriculture' is the key element linking the landed elite with authoritarian anti-democratic politics. The use of extra-economic coercion in slavery, serfdom, or other forms of forced labor requires a powerful authoritarian state and precludes extension of citizenship or other legal rights to the working population." However, it's worth noting the obvious fact that an author-

itarian state can be very useful to industry also, and that for such a state to exist there need not be a dominant landed elite. For instance, a foreign country such as the U.S. can prop it up through military aid, as the U.S. frequently does all over the world.

Interesting comments:

As James Dunkerly has pointed out, the transition to democracy takes on a very different form in Central America than in the Southern Cone of Latin America (Argentina, Uruguay, Chile) and other semi-peripheral regions that have become the model for theorizing about the current wave [in the 1990s] of "transitions to democracy." In the Southern Cone model of "democracy by default," the exhaustion of state-centered import-substitution industrialization, compounded by the debt crisis of the 1980s, led to a loss of foreign and domestic business support and subsequent voluntary withdrawal of the military from rule after it had [crushed] the left through political repression. In Central America, state-centered import-substitution industrialization was not the dominant pattern except in an attenuated form in Costa Rica... The praetorian military dictatorships of Central America have little in common with the "bureaucratic authoritarianism" of the military regimes of the Southern Cone, and the Central American militaries, to put it mildly, did not leave voluntarily...

As Gay Seidman has demonstrated in a comparative study of Brazil and South Africa, parallel processes [to Central America's] were at work in more developed societies. The success of import-substitution industrialization strategies in semi-peripheral authoritarian regimes such as Brazil and South Africa in the post-World War II era created new social movements that could not be contained within these regimes. The creation of a vastly expanded industrial working

class on the one hand, and a vast impoverished urban informal sector on the other, both consequences of successful industrialization without redistribution, created the conditions for what she calls “social movement unionism.”... Critical for the success of social movement unionism was a split between the industrial elite and the state as the world economy entered its downturn after 1973. Given a choice between strengthening the authoritarian state apparatus sufficiently to repress the workers’ movements and making an accommodation with them, the new industrial bourgeoisie abandoned its allies in the military, opening the way for democratic regimes in both South Africa and Brazil [in the 1990s].

This is sort of what happened in Central America. In both cases, “popular mobilization split the more progressive sector of the bourgeoisie off from its authoritarian allies.” The class structures and the agents of the transition were somewhat different, but the outcomes were similar, namely neoliberal democracy. Which is ironically named, given that since 2008 it has been amply demonstrating how illiberal and undemocratic it really is, by suppressing popular movements everywhere. It’s quite possible that Latin America has more revolutions ahead...

*

The Food Wars (2009) is very informative and insightful, since its author, Walden Bello, has a quasi-Marxian view of the world. His concern is with the recent global food crisis—its causes and its possible revolutionary solutions. In the first chapter he places it in its historical context. It’s the expulsion-of-the-peasantry thing, etc. But I’ll go into some detail.—

The first “international food regime” emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century; it “consisted of two food grids existing

under the institutional canopy of a global free-trade system promoted by Great Britain." The first grid was the settler agriculture in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Argentina that specialized in the production of wheat and livestock for the industrializing metropolitan economies, and which displaced much European agriculture. (Hence, in part, mass emigration out of Europe and into the New World.) It was based mostly on family labor, not large, capital-intensive farms. The second grid was the system of capitalist plantation agriculture in what became the global South, which specialized in sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco, and cocoa for export, as well as raw materials like cotton, timber, rubber, indigo, and copper. The plantation economy often coexisted with a peasant economy that helped sustain the plantations' workers (who themselves went back and forth between the two economies).

After the interregnum of war, depression, and protectionism in the first half of the twentieth century, the Bretton Woods food regime emerged. Family farms continued to be important in the developed world, but now there was more corporate control of farm inputs, agricultural trade, and the food industry. Developed states protected their agricultural sectors, especially the bigger and richer farmers, by means of tariffs and subsidies. (Agriculture was exempted from the disciplines of GATT.) Some reasons for the persistence of the family farm are the limits to the advantages of greater scale in agriculture and "a distinct logic that aims not simply at profit maximization but long-term survival as a family enterprise." In the global South they had developmentalism, a key feature of which was the advanced capitalist state's tolerance for import substitution policies that would help the growth of industry. Foreign investment tended to be strictly regulated, too, as in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. "In agriculture, there was strong protection from imports in the form of outright import bans, quotas, and high tariffs." Market relations continued to spread, however, and landlord exploitation intensified. Also, "food aid" programs (a consequence of the U.S.'s

grain surpluses that it wanted to get rid of) undermined the barriers against cheap imports. To prevent peasant-backed radical movements, the U.S. sometimes went so far as to support land reform measures that stabilized the countryside and fostered industrialization, as in Korea and Taiwan in the 1950s. There were also attempts by the World Bank and other entities to improve agricultural productivity in the South through technical and financial support, which didn't succeed nearly as well as hoped.

So eventually came the neoliberal era, with its structural adjustment programs. In agriculture, these entailed "deregulation of land markets and the reversal of land reform policies originating in the national developmentalist era; drastic cuts in farm subsidies and price supports and the disengagement of both postcolonial states and the World Bank from irrigation support; the expanded use of agrarian biotechnologies and expanded commodification of seeds and seed reproduction; a marked and growing dependence on chemical, biological, and hydrocarbon farm inputs;...expanded cash crop production for export as animal feed; [the elimination of tariff and non-tariff barriers;] and the export of niche luxury goods, fresh fruits, vegetables, and ornamental flowers for the global centers of overconsumption." The use of new synthetic compounds for tropical products like sugar also had an adverse effect on agriculture in the South. And then there was the emergence of the genetic engineering industry, which threatens to completely wrest control of production away from farmers and accelerate their conversion into rural workers (in part because corporations have monopolistic intellectual property rights that favor globally integrated production chains). Hundreds of millions of rural and urban poor have, as a result, been shunted off to gigantic slums. But there's hope, reader! Resistance movements have been spreading, and in the wake of the global recession, "deglobalization" has been occurring (as of 2009). Global production and supply chains are, according to Bello, threatening to wither away, and small-scale agriculture serving local and regional

markets is starting to look more viable than capitalist industrial agriculture.

So what's causing the recent food crises? I'll get to the reasons for the recent high prices of food later; more fundamental than such explanations, though, is the fact that structural adjustment in the developing world has led to massive food insecurity there. To explain how, Bello devotes much of the book to analyses of neoliberal restructuring in Mexico, the Philippines, Africa, and China. The first three were turned from net food exporters to net food importers by structural adjustment and trade liberalization in the 1980s and after. The gutting of government budgets, "especially the drastic reduction or elimination of fertilizer subsidies," was the key factor. But unfair trade practices by the EU and the U.S. also contributed: low-priced, government-subsidized beef and cereals from the West displaced native producers. Export-oriented agriculture, such as cotton production, usually couldn't step into the breach successfully, again because of insufficient government investment in the developing countries and unfair trade practices by the West.¹¹⁸ The upshot of IMF-imposed "depeasantization" (and deindustrialization) was that the regions became very vulnerable to price fluctuations: if international prices of food rose too high, millions of people would be left to starve unless their governments somehow intervened. This is what Malawi did in 2005, against the advice of the IMF and World Bank, thereby preventing a famine and turning the country once again into an exporter of food.

The basic and obvious problem with structural adjustment, according to the World Bank's own Independent Evaluation Group, was that in "most reforming countries the private sector did not step in to fill the vacuum when the public sector withdrew." Why not? For lots of reasons, among them poor infrastructure, an inad-

¹¹⁸ Export agriculture had made some progress in the era of developmentalism because of government assistance. But neoliberal dogma forbade such assistance.

equately developed private sector to begin with, and, as Bello says, a lack of business confidence due to the terrible investment climate created by structural adjustment.

China, too, has been liberalizing its trade, which has devastated many farmers (sugarcane, soybean, cotton) and contributed to the recent slowdown in poverty reduction. More broadly, “the adoption [since 1984] of a strategy of urban-centered, export-oriented industrialization based on rapid integration into the global capitalist economy” has harmed the peasantry greatly, since the urban industrial economy has been built on the backs of peasants.¹¹⁹ Heavy taxation of peasant surpluses and falling prices for agricultural products have transferred income from the countryside to the city. Health, education, and agricultural infrastructure haven’t improved. Moves toward a regime of full private property rights in the countryside have been taken, which could cause a capitalist transformation of agriculture. (Big landlords with rural laborers, etc.) And of course millions of peasants have been forced off their land to make way for dams and urban environments. The result of all this is massive peasant unrest and China’s loss in 2008 of its status as a net food exporter.

Getting to the more immediate causes of the crisis... An important reason for the disastrously high and volatile prices of food between 2006 and 2008 (and later, I assume) was the higher global production, stimulated largely by U.S. and EU government demand, of *agrofuels*, mainly ethanol and biodiesel, and the corresponding rise in demand for corn, sugar, beets, and wheat, which are the raw material for these fuels. Midwestern America, for example, is “slowly being transformed into a giant agrofuels factory”: in 2008, about

¹¹⁹ Industrialization is almost always at the expense of peasants and farmers in some way or other. Think, for example, of Soviet and Chinese collectivization—squeezing surplus out of agriculture and transferring it to industry.

30 percent of corn was allocated for ethanol.¹²⁰ As usual, much of the incentive for corporations to invest in agrofuels (or biofuels) is due to government subsidies, begun (in the U.S.) under G. W. Bush. Biofuels are in fact not very good for the environment, but policymakers want “energy security,” you see, so they subsidize the production of these fuels for transportation purposes. The agricultural systems in the U.S. and EU can’t fill the targets set by policies, so agrofuel production is dramatically increasing in the South too, including Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa. (Some of this production is for the sake of the Southern countries themselves, which likewise desire energy independence.) Rainforests are being cut down and workers are being treated like slaves.

Agrofuels production also compromises development in poor countries, “where households typically spend about half their income on food.” Ergo, with higher food prices, less money is spent on other items that can stimulate economic growth, and more people are forced into poverty.

To quote Via Campesina, “The contemporary food crisis is not really a crisis of our ability to produce. It is more due to factors like the food speculation and hoarding that transnational food corporations and investment funds engage in, the global injustices that mean some eat too much while many others don’t have money to buy adequate food and/or lack land on which to grow it, and misguided policies like the promotion of agrofuels that devote farm land to feeding cars instead of feeding people.”

*

For-profit justice.— What’s going on in the prison-industrial complex is almost literally unbelievable. Just read *Punishment for Sale: Private Prisons, Big Business, and the Incarceration Binge* (2010), by Donna Selman and Paul Leighton. Here’s a one-sentence summary of the

¹²⁰ I needn’t point out that this also means less corn, wheat, etc. is used for *food*. So food prices go up.

monumental injustice: “While the United States has a long history of the rich getting richer while the poor get prison, the current situation—private prisons listed on the stock exchange and an expanding number of businesses profiting from the expansion of the criminal justice system—means that rich whites get richer *from* poor minorities being sent to prison.” In 1995 a Latino army veteran with three children was sentenced to a mandatory fifty years in prison for stealing some children’s videos on two occasions. The sort of thing that happens frequently.

How do private companies make profits by managing prisons? By viciously cutting costs more than governments can or will. The government pays them a per diem rate per prisoner, and the company does everything it can to reduce costs so that as much of the per diem rate as possible is kept as profit. (One major strategy is to slash labor costs.) The more prisoners are incarcerated, the more money the company makes. So the industry has an incentive to lobby for harsh laws, as it has done effectively. It also favors crack-downs on undocumented immigrants, since they can be incarcerated.

In addition to the fees they charge governments, companies can make money from prison labor.

As for whether privatization saves taxpayers money, the research has been inconclusive. Some reports have found that it actually costs more money, while others have suggested that privatization yields savings of about 10 percent. But these reports haven’t factored in all the extra costs associated with privatization, such as the time and money it takes to review proposals by various companies, negotiate contracts, review contract terms, renew contracts, deal with lawsuits and prison riots resulting from the terrible conditions in private prisons, etc. Companies have also been known to over-bill governments and not repay them.

In general, the more one reads about any kind of privatization, the more one sees what a bad idea it almost always is.¹²¹ –For one thing, it means less public oversight, i.e. less transparency, which allows for greater abuses. It’s anti-democratic. It also is typically just a giveaway to private business so it can make profits off the administration of functions that are supposed to benefit the public and have public input. For-profit punishment, for-profit education, for-profit health insurance, for-profit soldiering and policing, and for-profit divvying-up-of-the-natural-environment-to-corporations can be seen as good ideas only by a society, like the U.S., that is so completely under the thumb of big business it has lost all rational and moral sense.

¹²¹ See Dave Johnson, “The Privatization Scam: Five Government Outsourcing Horror Stories,” *Nation of Change*, May 20, 2014, at www.nationofchange.org.

Chapter Four

Summaries of Historical Scholarship

Debt in human history.— Reading David Graeber’s massive *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (2011). “This book is a history of debt, but it also uses that history as a way to ask fundamental questions about what human beings and human society are or could be like—what we actually do owe each other, what it even means to ask that question.”

It really is striking to what extent human life revolves around debt, even in the narrow sense (as opposed to the general idea of owing something to someone or having obligations). “For most of human history—at least, the history of states and empires—most human beings have been told that they are debtors... As the great classicist Moses Finley often liked to say, in the ancient world, all revolutionary movements had a single program: ‘Cancel the debts and redistribute the land.’ Our tendency to overlook this is all the more peculiar when you consider how much of our contemporary moral and religious language originally emerged directly from these very conflicts. Terms like ‘reckoning’ or ‘redemption’ are only the most obvious, since they’re taken directly from the language of ancient finance. In a larger sense, the same can be said of ‘guilt,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘forgiveness,’ and even ‘sin.’ Arguments about who really owes what to whom have played a central role in shaping our basic vocabulary of right and wrong.” Some of the most exalted spiritual ideas derive from lowly economic practices. (Cf. Nietzsche too.)

“Christ the Redeemer.” As Graeber says later in the book, “The primary meaning of ‘redemption’ is to buy something back, or to recover something that had been given up in security for a loan; to acquire something by paying off a debt. It is rather striking to think that the very core of the Christian message, salvation itself, the sacrifice of God’s own son to rescue humanity from eternal damnation,

should be framed in the language of a financial transaction.” He also remarks, in the context of discussing *The Genealogy of Morals*, that Nietzsche’s “description of Christianity—of how a sense of debt [to God] is transformed into an abiding sense of guilt, and guilt to self-loathing, and self-loathing to self-torture—all of this does ring very true.” I agree. The sense of debt in this case is absolute, because God has redeemed us from our original debt (Adam’s sin, I guess?) by sacrificing his own son—which surely, in a way, puts us in even *more* debt to him!¹²² We’re totally unworthy of God’s love, but love us he does, thereby permitting us to be saved and go to heaven.

Maybe a better way to interpret it than in terms of debt is to say that Christ “redeems” us from the “other side,” from sin and the devil—he buys us back for God by sacrificing himself. It isn’t that we want to escape our debt to God; we’re always in infinite, everlasting debt to him. But Christ’s love for us convinces God to accept us into the kingdom of heaven. Or something like that. Christianity is incoherent, so it’s hard to make sense of it.

Anyway, the first myth Graeber attacks is the conventional Adam Smithian idea that societies evolved from barter to money (cash) to credit. The reverse is closer to the truth. For most of history, economic transactions have been organized by keeping an “account,” i.e., on credit, which might be measured according to some unit of currency even though that currency (as cash) doesn’t actually circulate or is very rare. In other words, money served as a unit of account rather than a means of payment or store of value.¹²³ Barter

¹²² How is God’s sacrifice of his son supposed to redeem us? It makes no sense. If anything, it makes us even more puny and worthless compared to him. Or maybe the point is that God’s love for us proves we must have *some* kind of value, at least in his eyes.

¹²³ Most gift economies apparently haven’t used money even in this sense. They have simply established a system of ranked categories of things that were roughly equivalent to one another, such as pigs and shoes. One could

did happen, but usually between societies (tribes or whatever) that were enemies or strangers and came into brief contact. *Within* a society, no, it was rare. In comparatively recent times, cash has become a widespread means of payment; and barter has typically happened in societies where cash has been used but for some reason is not widely available at the moment. Russia in the 1990s and Argentina around 2002 are examples—both resulting from the failures of capitalism! Ironic.

“No example of a barter economy, pure and simple, has ever been described, let alone the emergence from it of money; all available ethnography suggests that there has never been such a thing.”

Another myth coming from Adam Smith is that states and markets are radically opposed. This, too, is false. From ancient times, states have used tax policies to create markets. (By forcing people to pay taxes in cash, governments effectively force them to participate in the market (in order to get cash).) Conversely, “stateless societies tend also to be without markets.” The reason governments imposed markets and coinage on their subjects—coinage was invented between 600 and 500 B.C. in China, India, and Greece—is mainly that that made it much easier to provision large standing armies, which arose around the same time.

Returning to Nietzsche for a moment...I have to agree with Graeber (and Georg Lukács and other Marxists) that in many respects his thought is little but a radicalization of the bourgeois tradition. For example in much of *The Genealogy of Morals*, and more generally in his viewing life as an arena of competition, a struggle between the weak and the strong and between all individuals, a series of expressions of the will to power. His is an atomistic vision, a world stripped almost bare of human solidarity—although it’s true he interprets society as a struggle between *races* too. Which is a singularly bourgeois notion, perfectly compatible with capitalist

give one in return for the other (though there was usually a time-differential, so it wasn’t true barter).

structures. He's kind of like La Rochefoucauld, determined to strip human relations of all "sentimentality," as capitalism itself does. His psychologism and idealist tendencies are also bourgeois, "decadent." It's ironic but telling that postmodern thinkers consider him more radical than Marx. (Postmodernism as a movement is but a decadent expression of a certain stage of bourgeois society, of corporate capitalism in its age of greatest atomism.)¹²⁴

To say, as Nietzsche does, that the feeling of personal obligation "has its origin in the oldest and most primitive personal relationship there is, in the relationship between seller and buyer, creditor and debtor," is silly. "Here for the first time," he continues, "one person moved up against another person, here an individual *measured himself* against another individual... Selling and buying, together with their psychological attributes, are even older than the beginnings of any form of social organizations and groupings..." It's the old bourgeois fantasy that the state of nature is atomistic, that commercial or contractual relationships precede any others.

It's true that commercial practices and institutions have done much to shape human behavior and thought, but there is a deeper substratum in the mind, in human nature, that has nothing to do with them. Love, compassion, empathy, creativity, curiosity, self-expression. (And other less noble things too.) Nietzsche was surely aware of this, but in his philosophical experimentation he tended to forget it or ignore it.

Anyway, Graeber makes the excellent observation that one of the moral foundations of ordinary life in any society is *communism*, which he defines by the slogan "From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs." Basically, sharing, helping, and cooperation. "All of us act like communists a good deal of the time." He's trying to get away from the common interpretation of morality and social life in terms of strict reciprocity, "balanced exchange,"

¹²⁴ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

“fairness,” “symmetry,” the repayment of debts, etc. According to this theory, which was enthusiastically defended by Claude Lévi-Strauss among others, “all human interaction can best be understood as a kind of exchange.” (With language we exchange words, with kinship we exchange women, and so forth.) And if that’s true, “then debt really is at the root of all morality, because debt is what happens when some balance has not yet been restored.” But of course reciprocity (in the strictest sense) is inadequate as a universal foundation for ethics. For example, where is the “reciprocity” in the mother’s relationship with her child? No child can ever repay his or her mother. And the law “an eye for an eye,” while embodying reciprocity, doesn’t seem particularly moral. So Graeber proposes instead, as one of the foundations for social life and morality, a kind of basic communism.

“Baseline communism [as he calls it] might be considered the raw material of sociality, a recognition of our ultimate interdependence that is the ultimate substance of social peace.” It’s a sensible view, which would be useful to invoke in polemics against apologists for capitalism. (In fact, the Marxist slogan “From each according to his abilities...” is little but a corollary of the Golden Rule. See my *Notes of an Underground Humanist*, chapter two.)

Partly against Graeber, it seems to me that, in an extended sense, the logic of reciprocity is (and/or should be) at the root of most human interactions. It has to do with respecting others, treating them as you’d like them to treat you, applying to yourself the standards you apply to them, treating them as more-or-less equals. Nevertheless, it’s true that *literal* reciprocity is often not applicable, is not even the ideal.

The origins of prostitution and patriarchy are intimately tied to debt. As Gerda Lerner says, “[One] source for commercial prostitution was the pauperization of farmers and their increasing dependence on loans in order to survive periods of famine, which led to debt slavery. Children of both sexes were given up for debt

pledges or sold for 'adoption.' Out of such practices, the prostitution of female family members for the benefit of the head of the family could readily develop. Women might end up as prostitutes because their parents had to sell them into slavery or because their impoverished husbands might so use them... By the middle of the second millennium B.C., prostitution was well established as a likely occupation for the daughters of the poor. As the sexual regulation of women of the propertied class became more firmly entrenched, the virginity of respectable daughters became a financial asset for the family." Various means were used to differentiate respectable from non-respectable women, including the practice of veiling respectable women, which first appeared in Assyria between 1400 and 1100 B.C.

"States seem to have played a complex dual role, simultaneously fostering commoditization and intervening to ameliorate its effects: enforcing the laws of debt and rights of fathers, and offering periodic amnesties. But the dynamic also led, over the course of millennia, to a systematic demotion of sexuality itself from a divine gift and embodiment of civilized refinement [as it had been in Sumer] to one of its more familiar associations: with degradation, corruption, and guilt"—because of its association with debt, poverty, the market, sexual slavery, and prostitution.

"'Patriarchy' originated, first and foremost, in a rejection of the great urban civilizations in the name of a kind of purity, a re-assertion of paternal control against great cities like Uruk, Lagash, and Babylon, seen as places of bureaucrats, traders, and whores. The pastoral fringes, the deserts and steppes away from the river valleys, were the places to which displaced, indebted farmers fled. [The Old Testament was a product of some of these pastoral rebels.] The extraordinary emphasis we find there [in the Old Testament] on the absolute authority of fathers, and the jealous protection of their fickle womenfolk, were made possible by, but at the same time a protest against, this very commoditization of people in the cities that they fled." Most of the world's Holy Books "echo this voice of rebel-

lion, combining contempt for the corrupt urban life, suspicion of the merchant, and often, intense misogyny." Graeber quotes a denunciation of Babylon, "the great whore," in the Book of Revelations, and then comments, "Such is the voice of patriarchal hatred of the city, and of the angry millennial voices of the fathers of the ancient poor." Fascinating! It's true that Judaism and Christianity originally represented these interests, although Christianity also represented the poor and oppressed of all kinds. It was a reaction against urban decadence, inequality, and injustice, though it was so broad that it contained conflicting impulses, some authoritarian and some egalitarian. Needless to say, in the long run the authoritarian tended to predominate (because a Church was established and became an ally of, and then a successor to, the Roman empire).

These patriarchal trends ultimately triumphed in all major civilizations, from China and India to ancient Greece. "Between the push of commoditization, which fell disproportionately on daughters, and the pull of those trying to reassert patriarchal rights to 'protect' women from any suggestion that they might be commoditized, women's formal and practical freedoms appear to have been gradually but increasingly restricted and effaced. As a result, notions of honor changed too, becoming a kind of protest against the implications of the market, even as at the same time (like the world religions) they came to echo that market logic in endless subtle ways."

Let's skip ahead. To Rome, to the decline of the empire after the third century A.D. This too was largely a result of the accumulation of debt on the part of huge masses of people. "The works of the early Christian fathers resound with endless descriptions of the misery and desperation of those caught in rich lenders' webs. In the end, through this means, that small window of freedom that had been created by the plebs [over centuries of struggle] was completely undone, and the free peasantry largely eliminated. By the end of the empire, most people in the countryside who weren't

outright slaves had become, effectively, debt peons to some rich landlord—a situation in the end legally formalized by imperial decrees binding peasants to the land. Without a free peasantry to form the basis for the army, the state was forced to rely more and more on arming and employing Germanic barbarians from across the imperial frontiers—with results I need hardly relate.”

Remind you of anything? Like...the present? The working and middle classes staggering under the burden of debt and unfreedom... The rights won by modern-day “plebs” through decades of struggle are being undone, and the civilization is collapsing under the weight of debt and income inequality.

I like Graeber’s semi-Weberian reflections on the relations between markets and the systems of thought and ways of life that arose in the Axial Age, when coinage, impersonal markets, philosophical systems, and world religions first appeared. It was also an unprecedented time of war, from Greece to China, and of slavery on an enormous scale.¹²⁵ “The growth of markets played a role [in the spread of intellectual movements], not only helping to free people from the proverbial shackles of status or community, but encouraging a certain habit of rational calculation, of measuring inputs and outputs, means and ends, all of which must inevitably have found some echoes in the new spirit of rational inquiry that begins to appear in all the same times and places. Even the word ‘rational’ is telling: it derives, of course, from ‘ratio’—how many of X go into Y—a sort of mathematical calculation previously used mainly by architects and engineers, but which, with the rise of markets, everyone who didn’t want to get cheated at the marketplace had to learn how to do... [In short, there emerged] impersonal markets, born of war, in which it was possible to treat even neighbors as if they were strangers.” In archaic “human economies” (as opposed to commercial ones), motives are assumed to be complex, not aiming

¹²⁵ “Money was needed to pay armies to capture slaves to mine gold to produce money.”

solely at private profit but relating to all sorts of social needs and desires. Not so with the impersonal market. The notion of “profit” became very common in the Axial Age, as self-interest came to be seen as fundamental. So in China you had Legalism, a kind of Machiavellianism, and in India the materialist school of Charvaka, as well as the inevitable reactions against them in the forms of Mohism, Confucianism, Buddhism, etc. But these were really reactions against all the materialist, selfish ways of life that had emerged with the rise of coinage and markets.

“Axial Age spirituality is built on a bedrock of materialism. This is its secret; one might almost say, the thing that has become invisible to us.” This is evident even in metaphysics, with the materialist systems of Thales and many others. Drawing on scholarship, Graeber even suggests connections between coinage itself and philosophical materialism and dualism.

Here’s his summary of all these ideas:

- 1) Markets appear to have first emerged, in the Near East at least, as a side effect of government administrative systems. Over time, however, the logic of the market became entangled in military affairs, where it became almost indistinguishable from the mercenary logic of Axial Age warfare, and then, finally, that logic came to conquer government itself; to define its very purpose.
- 2) As a result: everywhere we see the military-coinage-slavery complex emerge, we also see the birth of materialist philosophies. They are materialist, in fact, in both senses of the term: in that they envision a world made up of material forces, rather than divine powers, and in that they imagine the ultimate end of human existence to be the accumulation of material wealth, with ideals like morality and justice being reframed as tools designed to satisfy the masses.

- 3) Everywhere, too, we find philosophers who react to this by exploring ideas of humanity and the soul, attempting to find a new foundation for ethics and morality.
- 4) Everywhere some of these philosophers made common cause with social movements that inevitably formed in the face of these new and extraordinarily violent and cynical elites. The result was something new to human history: popular movements that were also intellectual movements, due to the assumption that those opposing existing power arrangements did so in the name of some kind of theory about the nature of reality...
- 6) [The impulse emerged] to imagine another world where debt—and with it, all other worldly connections—can be entirely annihilated, where social attachments are seen as forms of bondage; just as the body is a prison...
- 8) The ultimate effect was a kind of ideal division of spheres of human activity that endures to this day: on the one hand the market, on the other, religion. To put the matter crudely: if one relegates a certain social space simply to the selfish acquisition of material things, it is almost inevitable that soon someone else will come to set aside another domain in which to preach that, from the perspective of ultimate values, material things are unimportant; that selfishness—or even the self—are illusory, and that to give is better than to receive. If nothing else, it is surely significant that all the Axial Age religions emphasized the importance of charity, a concept that had barely existed before. Pure greed and pure generosity are complementary concepts; neither could really be imagined without the other; both could only arise in institutional contexts that insisted on such pure and single-minded behavior; and both seem to have appeared together wherever impersonal, physical, cash money also appeared on the scene.

The movements of protest, whether religious or not, that emerged in this era eventually helped achieve great things. “Wars became less brutal and less frequent. Slavery faded as an institution, to the point at which, by the Middle Ages, it had become insignificant or even nonexistent across most of Eurasia.”

Given our tendency to glorify the ancient world, it’s ironic that things got a lot better for most people in the Middle Ages. In Europe and India empires collapsed—and even in China, the Han empire fell apart (though it was succeeded by others)—but slavery largely disappeared and religious institutions began to regulate economic activity.¹²⁶ Coinage tended to disappear in Europe and India with the weakening of central governments; the use of money solely as a unit of account returned, and economic activity was organized mainly on credit.

“If the Axial Age was the age of materialism, the Middle Ages were above all else the age of transcendence... Once-subversive popular religious movements were catapulted into the status of dominant institutions.”

A new age began in the mid-1400s in Europe, “with a turn away from virtual currencies and credit economies and back to gold and silver. The subsequent flow of bullion from the Americas sped the process immensely, sparking a ‘price revolution’ [i.e., inflation] in Western Europe that turned traditional society upside-down. What’s more, the return to bullion was accompanied by the return of a whole host of other conditions that, during the Middle Ages, had been largely suppressed or kept at bay: vast empires and professional armies, massive predatory warfare, untrammled usury and debt peonage, but also materialist philosophies, a new burst of scientific and philosophical creativity—even the return of chattel slavery.” Between 1500 and 1650, prices in England increased 500

¹²⁶ Even in the Arab world, where slavery existed throughout the Middle Ages, its horrors rarely compared to those of the Axial Age and later New World slavery.

percent while wages rose much more slowly. In five generations they had fallen to about 40 percent of what they had once been. And the same thing happened all over Europe. The consequent empowerment of bankers, large-scale merchants, and governments led to major changes in the fabric of European society.

—To sum up: while Graeber’s analytic framework isn’t as powerful as the Marxist one, which uses such concepts as production relations, economic exploitation, and class struggle—concepts on which mountains of brilliant historiography have been erected—his book is definitely worth reading. We need more grand historical syntheses like this.

*

A book review.— *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (1987), by David Montgomery, has been compared with E. P. Thompson’s masterpiece *The Making of the English Working Class* in that, to paraphrase Thompson, it is essentially a biography—an extraordinarily rich one—of the U.S.’s working class in its formative years. It is, therefore, a work of synthesis. However, like Thompson’s book, it goes beyond mere synthesis to provide a specific, and powerful, framework within which to interpret the fortunes of this class in its political and economic battles. In fact, Montgomery’s account is arguably more focused than Thompson’s: Montgomery sees struggles at the workplace over who will control work—the employer or the employee—as the crux of early industrial labor history, the most important source of conflict between workers and capitalists, and he emphasizes that the worker’s worldview was formed above all at the point of production. Analytical continuities thus help to cohere what might otherwise have been an apparently arbitrary and bewildering discussion of a huge range of topics. Instead, the product is simply a monumental testament to scholarly rigor and capaciousness of thought.

The book is loosely divided into three parts of three chapters each. In the first part, Montgomery recreates in vivid detail the world and the work of three categories of workers in the late nineteenth century: skilled craftsmen (especially iron- and steelworkers), common laborers, and female factory operatives in the garment and textile industries. In the second part, he traces the rise of scientific management, which was a key component in employers' struggle to wrest control of the work process away from employees. The book's final three chapters are devoted to the explosive labor unrest that preceded, accompanied, and followed World War I—and business and the state's reactions to this unrest—as well as the creation of a conservative welfare-capitalist regime after 1922 characterized by a quiescent labor movement. The capitalism of the 1920s was the apotheosis of that social order whose construction had begun with the decline of competitive capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century and the rise of corporate capitalism: it saw the final victory of management's attempts to control production and degrade the worker's conditions of work (while sometimes compensating him with company-designed "welfare"). Only with the coming of the Great Depression would this form of capitalism, too, collapse—at least in part—thus providing America's labor movement with the opportunity for a new beginning.

Several noteworthy themes emerge in the course of Montgomery's analysis. As already stated, a particularly important one is the progressive degradation of work as management took over more and more productive functions and deprived workers of what autonomy they had once had. In the 1870s, many craftsmen had "exercised an impressive degree of collective control over the specific productive tasks in which they were engaged and the human relations involved in the performance of those tasks" (p. 13). They developed a group ethical code around their work relations, the most important component of which was the "stint," or "the collective definition of a reasonable day's work" (p. 17). That is, they

restricted their output—unilaterally, not in negotiations with their employer—for the sake of maintaining regular employment, higher piece rates, and relative comfort in their work. Employers, understandably, could not abide such behavior that went on behind their backs; hence arose, eventually, Taylorism and scientific management, which entailed, for instance, “centralized planning and routing of the successive phases in fabrication [of a product]” (p. 217), as well as the standardization of work practices and the detailed supervision of workers. These developments, in addition to the rise of mechanization, contributed to an “epidemic of strikes” in the early twentieth century as workers rebelled against being reduced to machines.

An even broader theme, illustrated by the concept of the stint, is that an ideology of mutualism was fostered among workers by their relations with each other at the point of production—an ideology quite opposed to the acquisitive individualism engendered by competitive relations between businesses. On the other hand, the racism and nativism that persecuted black and immigrant laborers tended to vitiate working-class mutualism. Montgomery paints the harassed lives of these laborers in poignant detail, illustrating in the process his point that “laborers’ struggles bore the clear imprint of their rural origins and continuing ties to the land” (p. 87). Indeed, this is one of the great strengths of the book, namely that it places American labor history in the context of international capitalism and its devastating effects on the agricultural “periphery” of the industrial “core.” Developments in the former influenced tendencies in the latter. For example, the increasing mobility of rural people due to railroads and steamships allowed them to travel to industrialized countries by the tens of millions, among the effects of which in the West was the slowing-down of the improvement (due to high demand) in laborers’ wages after 1878 (p. 70). By thus taking an international perspective, Montgomery avoids the parochialism of much labor history.

Being a social history, the book might have benefited from greater attention to the role of gender in conditioning behavior. Gender is by no means completely absent, however, for instance in Montgomery's account of the ethical code that governed machinists' behavior. "The moral imperative of a 'manly bearing,'" he notes, appeared often in machinists' discourse, as in that of other craftsmen. "The workers' code celebrated individual self-assertion, but for the collective good, rather than for self-advancement" (p. 204). Manliness was defined, therefore, not in relation to the individual but in relation to the group: if an individual upheld the code of the group and acted in solidarity against the common employer, he was prized as a man. Norms of femininity, on the other hand, appear even less often in the book than norms of masculinity, although Montgomery does devote many pages to the experiences of female factory operatives.

The Fall of the House of Labor is far too rich to be reproduced even in outline in a book review, but hopefully the foregoing has at least given the reader a small sense of its richness. The theoretically minded reader might appreciate the work for its substantial, though implicit, validation of Marxian historical methods and concepts, given Montgomery's constant return to the importance of production relations in shaping workers' experiences, hopes, and ideologies. In this respect, as in others, the work is very traditional. Whether that is a weakness is debatable; in fact, one might argue that the book itself proves the continuing value of traditional concepts and theoretical programs. For it remains a classic, almost twenty-five years after its publication.

*

I'm reading Harry Braverman's classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (1974), which is "an attempt to inquire systematically into the consequences which the particular kinds of technological change characteristic of the mono-

poly capitalist period [since about 1900] have had for the nature of work and the composition (and differentiation) of the working class." It's influenced by the *Monthly Review* school of Marxism.

Long discussion of Frederick Winslow Taylor and scientific management. Insistence that the latter, interpreted broadly, is of essential importance to labor processes in mature capitalism. (Management taking knowledge of technical processes away from skilled workers and forcing them (over decades) to be dumbed down, to be mere instruments that have little or no understanding of how all the work they do in factories "fits together." Management becomes the brain, whereas formerly the skilled workers were both the brains and the brawn. "Conception is separated from execution," which in the 1870s, 1880s, and even afterwards was not the case. Hence the thickening of management, the addition of many layers of bureaucracy for the sake of planning and supervising.) The absurd extremes of the dehumanization of industrial labor under the impetus of the "scientific-technical" revolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

And machinery. 'Oh, the machinery!' "The capacity of humans to control the labor process through machinery is seized upon by management from the beginning of capitalism as the *prime means whereby production may be controlled not by the direct producer but by the owners and representatives of capital*. Thus, in addition to its technical function of increasing the productivity of labor—which would be a mark of machinery under any social system—machinery also has in the capitalist system the function of divesting the mass of workers of their control over their own labor." (Italics in the original.) Braverman gives myriad examples.

"Machinery offers to management the opportunity to do by wholly mechanical means that which it had previously attempted to do by organizational and disciplinary means. The fact that many machines may be paced and controlled according to centralized decisions, and that these controls may thus be in the hands of man-

agement, removed from the site of production to the office—these technical possibilities are of just as great interest to management as the fact that the machine multiplies the productivity of labor.”

To reiterate what I’ve written elsewhere, the capitalist drive to increase labor productivity can become socially irrational in its unstoppable frenzy. In the obsession with cutting labor costs, more and more people are eventually thrown out of work; more and more people lose their source of income and become economically redundant. Machines take the place of workers. As a result, aggregate demand falls, which causes a fall in capacity utilization, which causes a fall in investment, which further decreases aggregate demand, etc., until eventually a recession or depression hits. Since profitability is the goal, the only cure that units of capital know to all this is to keep cutting labor costs and in the long run keep increasing productivity—which exacerbates the systemic problems and keeps the vicious cycle going. In the long run, governments, too, aid capital in cutting labor costs and financing improvements in productivity.

“Each capitalist nation will further degrade its own working population and social life in an attempt to save a social system which, like the very planets in their orbits, will fall to its destruction if it slows in its velocity. Here we have the *reductio ad absurdum* of capitalist efficiency, and the expression in concrete terms of the insoluble contradiction that exists between the development of the means of production [or the productive forces] and the social relations of production that characterize capitalism.” The development of the forces of production in the long run tends to undermine the social relations of production, by causing (indirectly) economic crises and long-term stagnation. (The latter, too, tends to obstruct further growth of the productive forces (by discouraging investment)—though not to the point of stopping such growth altogether.)

Braverman’s discussion of the modern corporation demonstrates the insane complexity of corporate structures. For example,

...Thus marketing became the second major subdivision of the corporation, subdivided in its turn among sales, advertising, promotion, correspondence, orders, commissions, sales analysis, and other such sections. At the same time, other functions of management were separated out to form entire divisions. Finance, for example, although not as a rule large in size, became the brain center of the entire organism, because here was centralized the function of watching over capital, of checking and controlling the progress of its enlargement; for this purpose, the finance division has its own subdivisions for borrowing, extending credit, collections, supervising cash flow, stockholder relations, and overall supervision of the financial conditions of the corporation. And so on, throughout the various functions and activities of the corporation, including construction and real estate, legal, public relations, personnel and labor relations, etc.

Each of these corporate subdivisions also requires, for its own smooth functioning, internal departments which reflect and imitate the subdivisions of the entire corporation. Each requires its own accounting section, ranging from the complex cost accounting of the manufacturing divisions to the simpler budgeting functions required of even the smallest divisions. Each often controls its own hiring through its own personnel department; many require separate maintenance and cleaning sections, as well as traffic and routing, office management, purchasing, planning correspondence, and so forth. Thus each corporate division takes on the characteristics of a separate enterprise, with its own management staff.

The picture is rendered still more complex by the tendency of the modern corporation to integrate, vertically as well as horizontally. Thus, by growth and by combination,

the manufacturing corporation acquires facilities for the production of raw materials, for transportation, semi-banking institutions for the raising of capital or extending of credit, etc...

And people deny that economic institutions (in their interrelations) are the central determinants of social dynamics!

The overall purpose of administrative controls is to reduce uncertainty and contingency with regard to the basic goal of making profit and accumulating capital. "Since markets must remain the prime area of uncertainty, the effort of the corporation is therefore to reduce the *autonomous character* of the demand for its products and to increase its *induced character*. For this purpose, the marketing organization becomes second in size only to the production organization in manufacturing corporations, and other types of corporations come into existence whose entire purpose and activity is marketing." All the mainstream intellectual fetishism of "free markets" is, therefore, sheer intellectual fraud. Corporations want to *control* markets, not let them be "free."

Needless to say, just as production jobs have become more and more degraded in skill and intellectual stimulation as mechanization has proceeded and the division of labor has become more minute, so the whole world of management (not just "managers," and not the upper ranks) has become characterized by degraded, semi-skilled clerical work, increasing mechanization, and a minute division of labor. Antagonistic class relations are reproduced in the ranks of "management" itself.

Braverman's discussion of the nature and history of clerical work, how it has grown incalculably since the 19th century and lost status and pay in the process, is excellent. In the early 20th century it, too, was subject to the discipline of scientific management. And then mechanization, etc. For all intents and purposes, clerical work ceased to be "mental" and became "manual." A nearly unthinking

repetition of simple operations. (Manual labor, too, had once been quite “mental,” requiring great intelligence and understanding, but gradually was reduced in skill level.)

And then there are the service and retail occupations.

The reasons for the rapid growth of service occupations in both the corporate and governmental sectors of the economy [are as follows]: the completion by capital of the conquest of goods-producing activities; the displacement of labor from those industries, corresponding to the accumulation of capital in them, and the juncture of these reserves of labor and capital on the ground of new industries; and the inexorable growth of service needs as the new shape of society destroys the older forms of social, community, and family cooperation and self-aid...

As labor is displaced from manufacturing, which is more easily unionized than clerical, service, and retail labor, and so tends to have (after unionization has happened) higher rates of pay, society’s aggregate demand starts to decrease because of the lower pay rates in non-manufacturing sectors.¹²⁷ In order to keep the economy going strong, consumer credit becomes increasingly important. As it has been from the 1970s on.

Based on extensive statistics and calculations, Braverman concludes persuasively that in the early 1970s, two-thirds to three-fourths of the total working population appeared “readily to conform to the dispossessed condition of a proletariat.” This category excludes, of course, “the engineering, technical, and scientific cadre, the lower ranks of supervision and management, the considerable numbers of specialized and ‘professional’ employees occupied in

¹²⁷ Before mass industrial unionism, too, severe recessions and depressions were more frequent than in the era of unionism, in part because of insufficient aggregate demand.

marketing, financial and organization administration, and the like, as well as, outside of capitalist industry proper, in hospitals, schools, government administration, and so forth." According to Braverman, these categories embrace (or embraced) "perhaps over 15 but less than 20 percent of total employment." *Formally* they have the same proletarian condition as the others just mentioned...but increasingly these days, even *substantively* they have a similar position. More and more every year, as Marx predicted, the economy is being polarized into a tremendous majority of the dispossessed and a tiny minority of the possessors.

In the last chapter, Braverman demolishes the myth that most work tended to become *more* skilled during the 20th century by considering mainstream writers' arguments on their merits (or lack thereof). For example, most people in the West associated "white-collar" occupations with skill and "blue-collar" occupations with a lack of it, so that the rise of the former and decline of the latter was seen as proof that skill levels were rising. But we've already dispatched the myth that clerical, service, sales, and retail work is usually "skilled." In fact it's far less skilled than the work of the old craftsmen and even their semi-skilled assistants, and also the work of farmers and often their helpers (the number of (both of) whom declined sharply in the 20th century), who had to master "a great many skills involving a knowledge of land, fertilizer, animals, tools, farm machinery, construction skills, etc., and the traditional abilities and dexterities in the handling of farm tasks." (Plowing, milking, caring for animals, harvesting, mending fences, etc.)

What about the fact that the length of the average period a person spent in school before getting a job increased in the 20th century? Doesn't this indicate that the skill levels of jobs increased? No. First of all, basic literacy and familiarity with mathematics has become more important just for getting around in society. Second, the provision of *socialization* has been increasingly taken over by schools (whereas it used to be done by farm, family, community, and

church). So basic education has had to be prolonged. Third, in the late 1930s legislation was passed “restricting the labor-force participation of youths, the object of which was to reduce unemployment by eliminating a segment of the population from the job market. The anticipated consequence of this was the postponement of the school-leaving age.” Later, after the postwar surge of school- and college-enrollment (a result of government programs designed partly to reduce unemployment), there began to be an *over*-supply of educated people by the end of the 1960s. Millions of these people ended up being overqualified for their jobs.

At the same time, the expanded education sector furnishes jobs for millions of teachers, administrators, construction workers, etc., thus providing a huge boon to the economy.

I’ll end the summarizing here. In any case, by the twenty-first century the main conclusions of the book have become common sense.

*

The Nineteenth-Century Campaign to Control Working Women’s Leisure
(A short academic paper)

Since antiquity, authorities and men have been alternately fascinated and horrified by women’s supposed bacchanalian inner tendencies ever ready to unrepress themselves in riots of sexual abandon. In Greece there were the maenads, orgiastic followers of Dionysus; in nineteenth-century England there was something quite different but similarly appalling to middle- and upper-class sensibilities: working-class women uninhibitedly enjoying their off-hours. The ways they did so, and the ways that their social betters tried to prevent them from doing so, are the subjects of Catriona Parratt’s stimulating book *“More Than Mere Amusement”: Working-Class Women’s Leisure in England, 1750-1914* (2001).

One way to read this work is as a study in what the pioneering social historian E. P. Thompson might call the disciplining of the “instincts,” or of humans’ essentially ludic nature, for the sake (indirectly) of a smoothly functioning industrial capitalism. It is one part of the story of how English peasants’ and ex-peasants’ obstreperous life-celebrating culture was disciplined out of existence from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, helping make possible first a repressive Victorian society and later our own sexually unrepressed but communally fragmented society.

The world that is gone was indeed a “communal” one, as is evident from Parratt’s first paragraph:

Throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, women were visible and vital participants in popular recreational culture. In their cottages and workshops, in urban streets and on village greens, in alehouses and on farms, they worked and socialized alongside men. In the daily ebb and flow of labor and release from labor, and in the seasonal and annual round of celebrations, feasts, and holidays...they shared in an array of amusements that were gregarious and open. They gossiped and gambled...got drunk and got rowdy at private parties and public assemblies...and trekked out into open fields and onto moors to listen to ranting preachers...

It was a culture of hard physical labor and hard partying, alcohol flowing abundantly at popular festivals where fights broke out frequently (women participating), “lads and lasses [meeting] at the public-house” where they drank, smoked, and danced, and women battling one another in prizefights, sword fights, footraces, cricket, handball, and “folk” football.

As the eighteenth century progressed, such unrestrained merry-making became more offensive to many among the aristocracy and

middle classes, who from the 1780s or so started trying to tame it or eliminate it. Before, the governing classes had treated the “almost Rabelaisian” popular recreational culture with good-humored tolerance, as befit the “benign paternalism” that they thought characterized their relations with the lower orders. But the long era of relative tolerance came to a convulsive end with the Industrial Revolution. The founding of the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1802 marks this new stage of culture, although it was far from the only such organization. “Magistrates, justices of the peace, and the new police force vigorously licensed, prosecuted, and jailed in an attempt to promote the moral elevation of the nation... Alehouses were closed, fairs were suppressed, wakes and other customary holidays were ‘tamed.’” Employers, reformers, evangelicals, and politicians all had their own interests and goals in the transformation of popular culture they oversaw.

It’s an old story that Parratt tells, but unlike other scholars she focuses on the mutations in women’s, not men’s, leisure during the nineteenth century. What fascinates her is the laborious, and only partly successful, domestication of working-class women. One of the catalysts of this domestication, not surprisingly, was religion, which has so often proved invaluable to “domesticators” of whatever sort. The evangelical movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did much to popularize conservative notions of femininity and masculinity, a patriarchal order of subservient females. Upper-class evangelicals such as Hannah More, author of *Cheap Repository for Moral and Religious Tracts* (published between 1795 and 1798), did moral missionary work among the benighted poor, particularly women, to prepare them “to be good wives and good mothers, as well as good Christians.” These well-intentioned bringers of the truth were precursors, as Parratt remarks, of upper- and middle-class Victorian purveyors of “rational recreation” schemes to fill young women’s idle hours.

We should always keep in mind, however, that people are not merely passive receptacles for indoctrination. "The working class made itself as much as it was made," E. P. Thompson said. Accordingly, Parratt devotes much space to analyses of working-class men's and women's self-education and self-disciplining. Chartism, for instance, a mid-nineteenth-century workers' movement, "played a major role in inscribing...restrictive gender ideologies deep within popular and working-class culture." Married women were expected not to work outside the home; working people's leisure was not to be consumed with drinking and dissipation; the working-class wife's purpose in life was to give comfort and happiness to her husband and raise his children to virtue and knowledge. Earlier, the Owenite movement had urged similar practices among the laboring classes in preparation for socialism—i.e., had similarly emphasized order, decency, sobriety, frugality, and familial responsibilities (although its understanding of the relations between the sexes was more egalitarian than that of Chartism). Later in the century, trade unionists continued this tradition of exalting women's domestic role, their function of providing men with a "haven in a heartless world," and often protested as much as middle-class reformers the existence of female wage-labor, which supposedly corrupted women and rendered them deficient in housewifely skills.

A working-class married woman's leisure was thus severely constrained, so that she could devote herself to satisfying her husband during *his* hours of leisure. But in addition to these cultural constraints, Parratt has a chapter on the material constraints that tended to deprive working-class women of their former leisured pastimes. She notes that as unionized male workers were getting the nine-hour- and then the eight-hour-day in the late nineteenth century, many women still had to work ten hours a day or more because their industries were not unionized. Female domestic servants often had it even worse: "In the 1890s, many could expect to

have only two or three hours of free time a week, taken on a Sunday." Women's wages were of course much lower than men's, which further restricted their leisure activities. And wives and mothers had the unending housework to take care of.

All this adds up to a pretty bleak picture, perhaps misleadingly bleak. Throughout the nineteenth century, millions of working-class women found ways to spend their leisure time as they wanted. Even the ones who barely earned enough to live on somehow found the means to go on shopping sprees. "One week they have been on the verge of starvation," a contemporary said, "another they have shared in a 'blowout.'" They were inveterate hedonists who had "learnt to hate monotony, to love drink, to use bad language as their mother tongue." And the street culture in which they cavorted was a world of infinite stimulation. Crisp Street in London, for example, was a universe of entertainment: "the barrel organ playing outside the public house, the man playing the violin with his eyes closed, the Indian man with his head and legs all bound round with cloth...the noise, the smell, the music and, oh, the life!" Upper-class observers noted that "people laughed easily, whistled, sang on high days and jigged in the street—that great recreation room." Working-class women were thus not necessarily doomed to lives of uninterrupted drudgery and monotony. Quite the contrary.

Parratt devotes the last part of her book to the late-nineteenth-century phenomenon of "rational recreation" organized by middle- and upper-class women who wanted to guide their less privileged sisters into the light, to prepare them for the woman's proper roles in life. Working girls' clubs offered classes, lectures, space to indulge young women's love of dancing—men were even allowed on such occasions (though subject to strict supervision)—and simply opportunities to socialize with friends. Some employers even organized classes and recreational programs at the workplace and offered such amenities as dining rooms, sports fields, and rose gardens to exert a "healthful" influence on the young female employees. The efforts

that were taken to control or influence young women's leisured pursuits are astounding—and yet despite everything they were only partly successful. Working-class women, as a group, had a magnificent willfulness and pride.

That, indeed, may be the central theme of Parratt's book. Nineteenth-century English women among the lower orders would not let upper-class reformers destroy their independence or their raw passion for life. Their "bacchanalian" spirit remained subversive right up to the time of World War I and beyond.

*

On the historical logic of fascism.— Fascism is sometimes considered an enigma, due to its heterogeneity and mutability, but it is really rather simple. In a sense, its essence is just populist conservatism, or mass commitment to a cause that, whatever its followers might think of it, is "objectively" anti-egalitarian, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic.¹²⁸ If one wants to limit the concept to its classical European examples, one has to invoke ultra-nationalism, faith in a Leader, exaltation of violence, disgust with modern "decadence," and other specific features; the more general definition just given, however—not a full definition but only a description of the core—accounts for the intuition that, say, popular enthusiasm for Ronald Reagan was reminiscent of fascism, or that the Ku Klux Klan was somewhat fascist, or that even movements like the contemporary Tea Party or Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority are vaguely fascist. Whatever the rhetoric associated with them, these phenomena have been essentially anti-egalitarian. In his book *The Anatomy of Fascism* (2004), Robert Paxton, too, pays at least as much attention to classical fascists' *acts* as to their *words*. Specifically, he charts a middle path between the extreme "intellectualism" of Zeev Sternhell (who is interested mostly in the intellectual progenitors of fascism) and the

¹²⁸ The fascist *state*, of course, has different features than fascist movements, although there are also similarities.

extreme Marxism of someone like Daniel Guérin, who considers fascism mostly from the perspective of its usefulness to big business. Paxton also sensibly rejects the Sternhellian contention that the “essence” of fascism is genuinely revolutionary and has as much intellectual content and coherence as liberalism and socialism. Rather, it is more like a “mood” —popular anti-democracy—than a fixed ideology with a set program. In short, *The Anatomy of Fascism* is a lucid, thought-provoking work.

For example, the survey from pages 77 to 81 of common explanations of fascism’s taking root when and where it did is tantalizing (partly due to its brevity). The virus originated in the “crisis of the liberal order,” and it grew most virulent in countries of weak or failed liberalism, such as Germany and Italy (as opposed to France and Britain). But what caused this crisis? It was most severe in countries that had industrialized late and so suffered from more social tensions than Britain, for example. “For one thing, the pace [of industrialization] was much faster for the latecomers; for another, labor was by then much more powerfully organized” (p. 79). Marxists have accordingly argued that in many nations the economic system could “no longer function without reinforced discipline of the working class [which was provided by fascists] and/or a forceful conquest of external resources and markets” (ibid.). Whether or not this is true, Paxton is surely right that fascism presented conservative elites in late-industrializing countries with new methods of social control, methods harnessing the power of public-relations techniques that had become essential in an age of mass politics.

According to another interpretation that similarly focuses on the pitfalls of transition to a modern industrial society, certain countries had a social structure that was too heterogeneous, “divided between pre-industrial groups that had not yet disappeared—artisans, great landowners, rentiers [and peasants]—alongside new industrial managerial and working classes. Where the pre-industrial middle class was particularly powerful, according to this reading of the crisis of

the liberal state, it could block peaceful settlement of industrial issues, and could provide manpower to fascism in order to save the privileges and prestige of the old social order" (ibid.). In the context of this interpretation, one is reminded that support from the peasantry was key to fascists' success, since they reached out to peasants and farmers who often considered their economic interests opposed to those of industrial workers and felt ignored or even harmed by workers' parties (in light of their demand for cheap food, etc.). Societies that became fascist were thus stuck between the legacies of feudalism and a not-fully-realized industrial capitalism.

One might also consider fascism an early phase in the mature statist period of European history. There is a logic to the sequence: as big business and industry increased in size and power from the late nineteenth century on, the state had to grow in order to assist business and regulate a society that was ever more plagued with social tensions. As the state's power grew, nationalist ideologies would naturally spread, especially because they legitimized power-structures and diverted attention from class conflict. They helped keep the masses under control. If in times of social or economic crisis certain states became deadlocked or ceased to function properly due to extreme polarization between radicals and conservatives (or between workers, peasants, landowners, petty bourgeois, big capitalists, and the "new" middle class), ultra-nationalism would probably conquer unprecedented political terrain, since it has the advantage of not being *a priori* committed to any particular set of social and economic doctrines but rather allowing anyone to fill it in with whatever social content he desires. It could mean one thing to landowners, another to peasants, another to big industrialists, and another to the petty bourgeois, such that it would attract more widespread support than, say, Communism, an ideology catering only to one class. Whether an ultra-nationalist party came to power in a given country would depend on circumstances and personalities, but there would be strong pressures for it to do so if the

existing government was no longer functioning. In any case, the continent-wide environment of vicious nationalism would eventually impel many governments, especially the weaker or non-functioning ones, towards nationalist extremism, i.e., some version of fascism. Said differently, in order to solve the social crisis, a strong state would have to come about sooner or later.¹²⁹ And in an atmosphere of ultra-nationalism, such a state might very well have affinities with a fascist regime.

We can continue the thought-experiment: what would happen next? There are many possibilities, but the one certainty is that a continent could not remain forever boiling with nationalism and having a few fascist or semi-fascist states. The situation would have to end eventually, either in a whimper, with the ultra-nationalism and fascism just dying out somehow, or, more probably, in a bang, with a cataclysmic war.¹³⁰ In either case, the result would be a more benign, *stable* form of statism. States would find, would *have* to find (in order to prevent societal destruction), a way to keep the extreme social and economic regulation while shedding the virulent nationalism. This, of course, is what happened after World War II. A new phase of European statism began, a more “technocratic,” less “ideological” (nationalistic) phase.

Anyway, the fact that these speculations have been inspired by Paxton’s book proves its fruitfulness. It is perhaps a bit too cursory in parts, such as in its survey of the many interpretations that have been offered of fascism’s origins, but that’s probably an unavoidable

¹²⁹ Alternatively, the government would succumb to revolution—but even then a strong state would probably emerge afterwards, as it did in Russia during the 1920s.

¹³⁰ Had Hitler not existed, it’s quite possible that a European war would have happened anyway, in the 1940s or maybe the 1950s. Fascist movements marched all over the continent in the 1930s and were probably bound to lead to war eventually. It’s hard to imagine them all dissolving peacefully away.

fault in a work that aims to be a brief and readable overview of an immense subject.

*

U.S. labor history.— Power-structures never want people to remember history, because knowledge empowers. Knowledge of how the oppressed have won victories, or how the oppressors have warred against freedom, threatens the powerful, so they do everything they can to present a whitewashed and Big Brother-approved version of history. In the interest of getting information to the public, here are highlights from a timeline of U.S. labor history I wrote for the Hull House in Chicago. It lacks context, but it does give some sense of what it takes to make progressive changes in society.

1866: Founding of the National Labor Union

The NLU is the first national labor federation in the United States, dedicated in large part to fighting for the eight-hour day. This goal is not achieved nationally, though in 1868 Congress does establish the eight-hour day for government employees (a law not consistently enforced). The organization falls apart during the depression of the 1870s.

1869: Founding of the Knights of Labor

This nationwide organization grows in the 1870s as the NLU fades; by 1886, in the wake of major victories in strikes against railroad companies, it has 800,000 members. Its long-term aim is to bring about a cooperative commonwealth of labor in the United States, in which the wages system would be abolished and workers would control their own work. More immediately, it fights for the eight-hour day, higher wages, women's economic rights, racial equality, laws against child labor, and industrial unionism (according to which all workers in the same industry are organized into one

union rather than separated by skill-level and occupations, as in craft unionism). It also facilitates the establishment of hundreds of worker cooperatives around the country.

Summer, 1877: the Great Railroad Strike, a.k.a. the Great Upheaval

In response to wage cuts, depression, unemployment, and savage treatment by capitalists, spontaneous strikes spread along railway lines from West Virginia to cities in Maryland, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Missouri, and other states. By the time the colossal strike is crushed by state militias, police forces, and federal troops—after 45 days of fierce resistance by workers—a hundred people have been killed and 100,000 workers have gone on strike. Despite its defeat in 1877 by the combined forces of private power and government, the labor movement continues to grow rapidly in the 1880s.

May 4, 1886: Haymarket bombing in Chicago

At a rally in support of the national movement for an eight-hour day—a movement that has inspired half a million workers to go on strike on May 1, 1886—an unidentified person throws a bomb into the crowd that kills seven policemen and several civilians. In a subsequent trial much criticized for its lack of objectivity, eight anarchists are convicted of conspiracy (though not of throwing the bomb), seven of whom are sentenced to death. The bombing triggers a nationwide crackdown on the militant labor movement, dealing a tremendous blow to the Knights of Labor and the revolutionary hopes it symbolized.

December, 1886: Formation of the American Federation of Labor

The AFL is founded as a craft-union-based alternative to the Knights of Labor, and accordingly takes a relatively conservative approach to labor activism. It eschews “social movement unionism” and opposition to capitalism as such, focusing instead on bread-and-butter issues like wages and other incremental demands that can be

won through collective bargaining. As the Knights of Labor collapses, the AFL slowly grows to encompass millions of (mostly skilled) workers.

July 2, 1890: Passage of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act

This law is intended to prohibit business activities that interfere with free competition. In one of history's many ironies, though, it is frequently used to justify injunctions against union activities, such as strikes, that are said to interfere with competition.

Summer, 1892: Homestead strike

In an attempt to destroy the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (AA), the powerful union of skilled workers at the Carnegie steel plant in Homestead, Pennsylvania, Henry Clay Frick locks them out of the plant. Other workers in the plant and town then go on strike in solidarity with their fellows. The conflict escalates as Frick tries to break the strike with the help of 300 Pinkerton "detectives"—effectively a private army—but a bloody battle ensues between them and the townspeople of Homestead. The strike is finally defeated after the governor dispatches a militia against the workers, with the further result that the AA's power in the industry is broken. For the next forty-five years, the steel industry will remain essentially non-union.

Summer, 1894: Pullman strike

Factory employees of the Pullman Company in Chicago go on strike to protest their low wages and abysmal treatment by George Pullman. In solidarity, Eugene Debs and his American Railway Union declare a boycott of all trains carrying Pullman cars; at its peak, the boycott involves 250,000 workers. President Grover Cleveland sends troops to Chicago to get the trains moving again, which infuriates the strikers, who react with violence. At length the army is able to subdue the workers (at the cost of many lives) and

end the strike, which results in the dissolution of the American Railway Union and the arrest of its leaders for violating a federal injunction against the strike.

1905: the Industrial Workers of the World is formed

Despite its many defeats, the militant wing of the labor movement remains unbowed. It forms the IWW as a radical, anarcho-syndicalist alternative to the more conservative AFL, and organizes workers along class lines rather than occupational lines. It is the only union at the time to welcome *all* people into its ranks, including immigrants, women, and African-Americans. Before it loses influence during the waves of government repression that follow World War I, it plays a major role in campaigns for free speech and in some of the era's most important industrial conflicts.

1909: Shirtwaist strike in New York

Workers in the garment industry, which employs primarily young women, vote for a general strike against low pay, long hours, awful working conditions, and discrimination for union activity. Led mostly by rank-and-file women, the strike of almost thirty thousand lasts eleven weeks. Finally employers give in to most of the workers' demands, including a shorter week, no discrimination against union loyalists, and negotiation of wages with employees. The groundwork for industrial unionism is laid in the garment industry as the International Ladies Garment Workers Union gains thousands of members, proving to conservative AFL leaders that a multi-ethnic, immigrant, female workforce is worth organizing.

March 25, 1911: Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City

Locked inside the factory by its owners, 146 garment workers (mostly young women) die during the fire, many by jumping to their deaths from the ninth and tenth floors. While the factory's

owners are not convicted of any crime, the incident leads to new safety regulations and a modernization of New York's labor laws.

January–March, 1912: Textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts

More than twenty thousand workers, again primarily women and girls, walk out of the mills in response to a pay cut. The IWW takes over leadership of the strike and establishes several innovative practices, such as sending strikers' children to sympathizers in other states who will temporarily care for them. The police beat mothers, children, and pregnant women, which so inflames national sentiment that Congress holds investigative hearings that reveal the terrible conditions at the Lawrence mills. Eventually the company agrees to nearly all the workers' demands, thus furthering the unionization of the garment industry.

April 20, 1914: Ludlow massacre

This event is the climax of the deadliest strike in U.S. history, called by the United Mine Workers in 1913 to protest horrific conditions at John D. Rockefeller's mines in Colorado. For months, company-instigated violence failed to break the will of the strikers and their families. On April 20, the National Guard and local militiamen attack the strikers' tent colony with machine guns (killing several people), then set fire to the tents as workers and their families flee. Eleven children and two women suffocate and burn to death under one of the tents. Ultimately the strike is lost, but the government commission that investigates the massacre provides support for many union demands, such as the eight-hour day and abolition of child labor.

1916: Congress passes the Adamson Act

This law establishes the eight-hour day for railroad workers, with additional pay for overtime work. It is the first federal law to regulate hours of work in private companies.

1919: Postwar strike wave

Following World War I, four million workers go on strike for higher wages and better working conditions. The response by business and government is the "Red Scare," or demonization of strikers as Communists. The violent repression of the strikes presages a decade of terrible setbacks for labor, which end only with the upsurge of popular protest in the Great Depression.

1932: Norris-La Guardia Act is passed

This law bans "yellow-dog contracts," which stipulate that an employee cannot join a union during the course of his employment, and forbids federal courts from issuing injunctions against non-violent labor disputes such as strikes. It is a great victory for organized labor, anticipating the more comprehensive Wagner Act of 1935.

April–June, 1934: Toledo Auto-Lite strike

Led by the small American Workers Party, and with the decisive help of class-conscious unemployed workers, employees of an auto parts plant in Toledo, Ohio walk off the job to achieve union recognition, improved working conditions, and a wage increase. The strike lasts almost two months and survives a five-day battle between workers and thousands of police and National Guard troops (a battle in which hundreds are injured and several killed). Under the threat of a general strike, Auto-Lite finally agrees to nearly all the union's demands. This victory leads to the rapid unionization of other workplaces in Toledo.

May–August, 1934: Minneapolis Teamsters strike

Local 574 of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters strikes for union recognition and its right to speak for all of its members. The city's commerce virtually shuts down as trucking operations come to a halt. Serving, as usual, as the business community's en-

forcers, the police violently but fruitlessly attempt to break the strike. After weeks of virtual civil war, employers finally give in to the union's demands—a victory that sets the Teamsters up to eventually become a major national union.

May–July, 1934: West Coast waterfront strike

First longshoremen, then sailors and other maritime workers, in every port on the West Coast go on strike for union recognition, a coast-wide contract, and a union-controlled hiring hall. After a brutal police action a couple months into the strike, dozens of unions in San Francisco vote for a general strike, which lasts four days. The dispute finally goes to arbitration, which hands the maritime workers several victories: for example, the International Longshoremen's Association gains substantial control over hiring on the docks, employees' wages increase, and shift hours are reduced.

September, 1934: Textile workers strike

Under the leadership of the United Textile Workers, 400,000 workers from New England to the South go on strike for a thirty-hour week, a minimum wage, union recognition, and better working conditions. "Flying squadrons" travel from plant to plant, calling workers out. In response, employers call on local and state authorities, who send the police and National Guard to wage near-war on the strikers (especially in the South). At length the UTW calls off the strike, which ends in total failure. For the rest of the century the South remains largely un-unionized, despite CIO efforts to organize it.

July, 1935: Franklin Roosevelt signs the National Labor Relations Act into law

One of the U.S. labor movement's greatest victories, the NLRA (otherwise known as the Wagner Act) guarantees the right of private-sector employees to organize into unions and bargain

collectively, and to strike. It forbids discrimination against workers for engaging in union activity or filing charges against their employer. For purposes of enforcement it establishes the National Labor Relations Board, which oversees elections for union representation and investigates charges of unfair labor practices.

August, 1935: Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act

This law creates the foundation of the modern U.S. welfare state, by providing federal assistance for the elderly, unemployment insurance, and assistance to children whose families have low income. In later years, particularly the 1960s, the law's provisions are made more generous, though still not comparable to the generosity of many European welfare systems.

November, 1935: the Committee for Industrial Organization is formed

Later called the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), its purpose is to do what the AFL has failed to do: organize workers in the mass-production industries, such as automobile and steel production, into one big union each. In the following years, such iconic mass unions as the United Autoworkers, the United Electrical Workers, the United Steelworkers, and the United Packinghouse Workers achieve unprecedented successes in their respective industries, and the CIO, having left the AFL, grows to encompass millions of workers by the late 1940s. At long last, the "industrial unionism" dream of the Knights of Labor and the IWW has to some extent been realized.

Winter, 1936-37: Sit-down strike against General Motors in Flint, Michigan

One of the most celebrated events in U.S. labor history, this strike leads to the unionization of much of the automobile industry and thereby the first major victory of the newly formed CIO. The new

tactic of occupying the factory—rather than forming a picket line outside—is used to prevent the company from using strikebreakers and to make it harder for police to break up the strike. Within six weeks GM realizes it has no choice but to negotiate with the UAW; the resultant contract gives the union such prestige that in one year it gains 500,000 members.

March 2, 1937: U.S. Steel concedes the unionization of its employees

Since the summer of 1936, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) (of the CIO) has been signing up thousands of steel workers as members, in the first stage of its drive to organize the steel industry. Early in 1937 the head of U.S. Steel, Myron Taylor, secretly meets with John L. Lewis, head of the CIO, and agrees not only to recognize SWOC as a bargaining agent but also to an eight-hour day for employees, a wage increase, seniority protection, and a grievance procedure. These astonishing concessions are due to Taylor's desire to avoid a strike at a time when Europe is preparing for war and needs to import steel.

May 30, 1937: Memorial Day massacre in Chicago

Chicago police shoot and kill ten unarmed demonstrators (injuring many others) in a crowd of hundreds who have gathered to protest the refusal of small steel manufacturers to negotiate with SWOC. No policeman is prosecuted.

1938: Fair Labor Standards Act is passed

In a sense the culmination of decades of activism, this law mandates an eight-hour day and forty-hour week (with "time-and-a-half" for overtime), the abolition of child labor, and a national minimum wage. It applies to employees whose work relates to interstate commerce. In subsequent decades the law is expanded and improved upon many times, for instance by raising the federal

minimum wage and by expanding coverage to some farm workers (in 1966).

1945-46: Postwar strike wave

After the conclusion of World War II, six million workers in the railroad, coal, automobile, oil, steel, electrical, maritime, and telephone industries go on strike—the largest strike wave in U.S. history. The pent-up frustrations of the war years, primary among them wage grievances, erupt in this rank-and-file upsurge met by repression that is not nearly as serious as in 1919. The workers win many of their less-radical demands, but the settlements negotiated by unions, companies, and the federal government set the stage for the conservative “liberal consensus” of the 1950s.

June 23, 1947: Congress passes the Taft-Hartley Act

Perhaps the most significant event in the early backlash against the New Deal and its empowerment of unions, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act rolls back many of the advances labor has gained by the Wagner Act. It prohibits secondary strikes and boycotts, wild-cat strikes, strikes by federal employees, and the “closed shop,” and allows states to pass “right-to-work” laws that ban the “union shop” (in which newly hired employees must become union members within a specified period of time). It also requires union leaders to sign affidavits saying they are not members of the Communist Party, a requirement that effectively purges many of the most militant activists from unions and contributes to the anti-Communist hysteria of the postwar years.

1955: Merger of the AFL and the CIO

In the context of the Cold War, the AFL-CIO is a conservative, bureaucratic organization that shows none of the social movement mentality of the CIO in the 1930s. Under George Meany, it supports U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and Latin America, and takes a gen-

erally conservative stance on the civil rights movement and feminism. Later, under Lane Kirkland in the 1980s, it is largely ineffectual in defending workers and unions from conservative attacks.

January 17, 1962: Federal employees win the right to collectively bargain

This landmark executive order signed by John F. Kennedy is a factor in the explosive growth of public-sector unionism in the 1960s and 1970s, as many states follow Kennedy's example and permit state employees to unionize. The number of public-sector strikes also dramatically increases, even in cases where they are illegal.

June 10, 1963: Kennedy signs the Equal Pay Act

An amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act, this law is intended to end wage disparities between the sexes. It prohibits sex discrimination in the payment of wages, thus allowing women's pay to rise dramatically in the next fifty years (though on average it remains lower than men's).

July 2, 1964: Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act

Title VII of this Act outlaws workplace discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin (age and disability being added later).

Late 1960s–1970s: United Farm Workers organizes workers in California

Under the leadership of César Chávez, the UFW does what Saul Alinsky thought impossible: it organizes tens of thousands of farm workers and forces growers to sign union contracts. This is achieved through such unconventional tactics as mass boycotts (by 1975, 17 million Americans are boycotting grapes), hunger strikes, marches, and community organizing. In 1975 the Agricultural Labor Relations Act is passed in California, guaranteeing farm workers the right to

organize, bargain with employers, and vote in state-supervised union elections.

December 29, 1970: Occupational Safety and Health Act becomes law

Before this law, government's attention to issues of workplace safety has been scattered and minimal. Thousands of workers were killed in the workplace each year, and millions were harmed or disabled. The OSH Act establishes an infrastructure (the OSH Administration, or OSHA) to enforce health and safety regulations.

August, 1981: Air Traffic Controllers strike

The Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) goes on strike for better working conditions and higher pay. President Reagan fires the 11,000 employees who have ignored his order to return to work, essentially destroying PATCO and signaling to employers that it's open season on unions. In the 1980s, the federal government stops enforcing many of the Wagner Act's provisions to protect workers and unions.

1985: Hormel Foods strike

In one of the longest strikes of the 1980s (lasting ten months), Hormel workers in Austin, Minnesota take a stand against the epidemic of wage cuts occurring in the U.S. manufacturing and food industries. The strike becomes a media sensation and leads to a national boycott of Hormel products, but in the end the workers cannot hold out against the opposition of their parent union (the United Food and Commercial Workers) and Hormel's determination to defeat them.

Late 1980s: SEIU's Justice for Janitors campaign begins

One of the most successful organizing campaigns in recent history, it has its first major victories in Los Angeles and spreads

around the country in the succeeding decades. It uses many of the tactics of the United Farmworkers, which draw media attention. The campaign succeeds in raising wages for many thousands of janitors and improving their working conditions.

December 8, 1993: Bill Clinton signs NAFTA into law

The North American Free Trade Agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico continues the neoliberal attack on workers and unions (under the guise of promoting “free markets”). By cutting back numerous regulations and social protections, in the next twenty years it contributes to record income inequality in North America, wage cuts, the loss of a million U.S. jobs, unions’ catastrophic loss of power, the decimation of Mexico’s peasantry and resultant influx of immigrants into the U.S., and the erosion of environmental protections. (See the Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch report “NAFTA’s 20-Year Legacy,” at www.citizen.org.)

November 30–December 1, 1999: Seattle protests occur against the World Trade Organization

Tens of thousands of protesters, including trade unionists, environmentalists, students, and representatives of many left-wing groups, demonstrate and march through the streets of Seattle as the WTO meets downtown. The first major U.S. protest against corporate globalization, it provokes a savage response by the Seattle police force and hostile treatment by the media. Nonetheless, it successfully disrupts WTO negotiations and forces the mainstream media to acknowledge the alter-globalization movement.

February–June, 2011: Protests in Madison, Wisconsin

Over a hundred thousand people demonstrate in and around the Capitol building in protest against Governor Scott Walker’s bill to strip public employees (excluding police and firefighters) of the right to collectively bargain over pensions, health care, hours, safety,

sick leave, and vacations, and to limit their pay raises, in addition to ending automatic union dues collection by the state. The bill passes and subsequently survives legal challenges. In the following years anti-union measures continue to pass in other states, as when Michigan and Indiana become “right-to-work” states in 2012.

Fall, 2011: Occupy Wall Street

While not strictly a labor action, this series of protests initiating in New York City and spreading around the world continues the post-NAFTA tradition of organized labor’s allying itself with other progressive forces to achieve common ends. The immediate target of OWS is the growing income inequality in the U.S., but more fundamentally it is directed against the very political economy of neoliberalism. On November 15 the New York protesters are forcibly evicted from Zuccotti Park, and similar crackdowns are coordinated across the country. Nevertheless, OWS succeeds in putting the issue of economic inequality onto the public agenda.

September, 2012: Chicago Teachers Union strike

Rejecting the paradigm of narrow “business unionism” and concessionary bargaining that most unions have followed in recent decades, the CTU embraces a militant, social-movement strategy to fight back against the national assault on public schools and teachers’ unions. Having painstakingly built up community support for teachers and students, the CTU is able to mobilize many thousands of people in picket lines and protest marches through the streets of Chicago to fight for improved public education. Drawing international attention, the strike makes possible what is widely considered a victory for the union in its contract negotiations with the Chicago Public School system.

FINDING OUR COMPASS

-What the next chapters in this epic story will be is up to the millions who are fighting for their basic human rights, and to the millions who have yet to join the struggle.

“

There's a time when the operation of the Machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part, you can't even passively take part." So said Mario Savio in 1964; so say millions of the disenfranchised now. As the apparatus of elite institutions grinds on, pushing society to the brink, protesters across the world are putting their bodies upon its gears and its wheels, to open up space for freedom and creativity unconstrained by institutional strictures. It's time we all followed their lead.

In a series of free-wheeling reflections and summaries of historical scholarship, this book reinterprets history and culture along anarchist lines. From a rationalistic and Marxian point of view it illuminates capitalism, economics, U.S. history, popular culture, gender relations, and human psychology, even the nature of the fascinating concepts "genius" and "greatness." Its agenda is that of the 17th-century Levellers: deflate the pomposities of elite authority, and bring the world down to the level of democratic reason. In the process, one hopes, we will find our way out of the crisis of the present and into a more just civilization in the future.



Chris Wright is a Ph.D. candidate in U.S. Labor History. He also has a Master's degree in Philosophy and another in History, and is the author of *Notes of an Underground Humanist* (2013) and *Worker Cooperatives and Revolution* (2014). He can be reached at WrightsWriting@gmail.com.

Cover images: © Dreamstime.com

