

**GLOBALIZATION, NEW MEDIA, AND DISSENT:
A FUNCTIONALIST ANALYSIS OF THE DISLOCATION OF INTERESTS**

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By

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**The research and writing of this thesis
is dedicated to a butterfly,
without the flapping of whose wings
this project may never have happened.**

**Many thanks,
Nicholas Anthony Taylor**

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Preface

In the spring of 2000, a band of undergraduate students staged a series of demonstrations against the administration of the Claremont Colleges over the plight of the campus dining hall workers. The malcontents were indignant that the colleges would not censure the contracted food services company over the issue of workers' rights to unionize and their general undercompensation. For several weeks, the protesters camped out on lawns, held rallies and workshops, and, at the more tense moments, boycotted classes and blockaded the entrances to administration buildings. Articles were written about the goings-on in the student newspapers¹ and there was even some coverage by local media.²

I have an intimate familiarity with these events since I was an undergraduate at the Claremont Colleges at the time. As the collective size of the campuses of the five sister colleges was relatively small – perhaps a twenty-five minute walk from southern- to northern-most point – in a typical day I crossed paths with some of the demonstrators. I witnessed a great deal of student activism at the Claremont Colleges but these particular protests have never sat well with me. I have long had the sense that, the students' good intentions notwithstanding, there was something misplaced about this approach. In retrospect, I felt it to be emblematic of a not-uncommon simplified oppositional analysis

¹ See letter, "Stanley Guilty of Acting in Bad Faith," *Student Life* 5 May 2000, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <http://www.tsl.pomona.edu/archives/00/0505/e_1/03.html> and Jeff Gernes and Patrick Resing, "Workers' Group Holds Rally," *Student Life* 9 Apr. 1999, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <<http://www.tsl.pomona.edu/archives/99/0409/index.html>>.

² Naomi Kresge, "Workers and students plan protest at Pitzer this week," *Claremont Courier* 3 Apr. 2002, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <<http://web.archive.org/web/20020716064950/http://www.claremont-courier.com/040302/protest.html>>.

and a preference for spectacle over materiality seen in strategies of dissent generally. I was troubled by the protesters' apparent indifference to the underlying structural relationship between themselves and the workers, and I ask myself: does the privilege to attend an elite, liberal arts college not presuppose complicity with an economic system that depends on inequities such as those that led to the marginalization of the dining hall workers? What did the students ever do to earn the right to be there?

Speaking for myself, I would not say that I had in any material way earned that privilege. There were no doubt many students there like me, advantaged children of upper-middle class, white professionals, and even the ones who were not like me must have necessarily had some especial opportunities. My fortune is explained by that my immigrant great-grandparents had been both resourceful and lucky. They were able to bootstrap their children into a position of sufficient economic stability that my grandparents could then go on to provide my mother and her sisters with the education (much as I was subsequently to receive) that would situate them firmly in the professional class – that class that is primarily the beneficiary rather than subject of the exploitation of labor under capitalism. I believe that no amount of personal virtue justifies this privilege, nor do I subscribe to the fantasy that my great-grandparents worked any harder than the dining hall workers do now. It seems to me that my education was enabled by the accumulation of excess wealth that capitalism permitted. Whether or not that indirectly entailed the disenfranchisement of workers analogous to those dining hall workers, I do not know.

So I guess I felt that it was disingenuous to vilify the administration for an injustice that I, and, by reasonable extension, many of the other students, were complicit with and therefore audacious to claim, as did one student in an editorial directed at the President of Pomona College that, “The dining hall workers have been forced to work at a slave wage, largely without the benefits you take for granted.”³ The protesters took their benefits for granted, too, for as disenfranchised as they apparently felt the workers to be, they considered themselves to be safely outside the production of that disenfranchisement that they could tenably prosecute others for their complicity. Without being willing to admit the contingencies of their position, they were unable to confront them.

Supposing the protesters’ sincerity, I find it odd that there was no discussion of the forfeiture of privilege as a possible solution to the perceived injustice. Rather than internalizing the cost associated with the imposition of their ideological values, the testers wanted the non-party community to assume the burden, either through increased tuition or degraded quality of education and facilities. If they were so passionately dedicated, then why could they not take all of the tuition money that was being paid for them to, among other things, boycott classes and degrade the administrative functionality of the colleges for all of the other students, and just give it to the workers? It was the workers’ money in some sense after all, that the students and their families had only come into by virtue of the inequality that capitalism legitimized.

³ Letter, “Stanley Guilty of Acting in Bad Faith,” Student Life 5 May 2000, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <http://www.tsl.pomona.edu/archives/00/0505/e_1/03.html>.

The same aforementioned student editorialist went on to argue that the plight of the dining hall workers was anathema to the principles that a liberal arts education stood for: “The pursuit of justice, and the development of progressive attitudes toward action to counter injustice, rest at the very core of a liberal arts education...The view from the President’s office seems to have levitated off this hallowed ground and focused its sights instead upon a bureaucratic regulation of the highest order.”⁴ In the case of the university, however, the aim of such “bureaucratic regulation” is not profit. Rather, monetary capital is just a means to the ends of accumulation of knowledge capital and the generation of institutional prestige. The marginal compensation of the dining hall workers incidentally supports this agenda as resources that are not spent on labor can instead be spent on cultural studies professors, lectures by guest speakers, workshops on race and gender, and the recruiting and subsidization of a “diverse” student body. The rationalization of labor thus serves the noble objective that the editorialist identified: the provision of a robust and socially-informed liberal arts education.

If the renunciation of privilege could have led to an actual improvement in the lives of the dining hall workers, this points to the conclusion that its alternative, protest, was not, in this case, a strategy for challenging the inequalities in the system so much as for concealing their perpetuation. The student editorialist affirmed proudly that “The members of the Claremont Colleges Community who still see the world at ground level have risen up in vast numbers in protest of these injustices, and in so doing, have

⁴ Ibid.

courageously restored the faith of their education.”⁵ The irony was that the editorialist was right – not in that our education was meant to show the path to practicing justice in earnest, but rather that the function of our education was to learn how to play the game well enough to self-affirm our commitment to justice while still doing virtually nothing to redress it. As I noted before, we the students were fine with inequality; it served us by furnishing us with an education. However, as would be the case for anyone with a conscience, the idea of our complicity with such an arrangement created cognitive dissonance. So we staged a protest to convince ourselves of our sincerity and solidarity with the worker’s cause, feigning that this was the most bold and efficacious strategy we could employ. This strategy did not aim for material effect, however. It was principally an exercise in ego maintenance: the need to disavow a sense of responsibility for the reality that the disenfranchisement of the workers was our own fault, the need to believe that we have agency, and the desire to feel better that we had had a positive impact on people’s lives.

I am troubled now to see the same disingenuous ritual played out on a far grander scale, aggrandized by the media. Bill Gates is lauded for his \$1 billion contribution to fight AIDS in Africa,⁶ but it is just money expropriated from PC users worldwide via Microsoft’s software monopoly.⁷ We have effectively all paid a tax to Mr. Gates so that

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Nancy Gibbs, “Persons of the Year,” *Time* 19 Dec. 2005, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1142278,00.html>>.

⁷ See Commission Decision of 24.03.2004 relating to a proceeding under Article 82 of the EC Treaty (Case COMP/C-3/37.792 Microsoft), European Commission, 24 Mar. 2004, retrieved 11 Apr. 2006 from <<http://europa.eu.int/comm/competition/antitrust/cases/decisions/37792/en.pdf>> and United States of

he can take credit for his generous philanthropy with our money. The website for a political action committee displays a scanned letter from a disbursement recipient. What cachet we might suppose such an artifact to have is perturbed by the fact that it was composed by a congressional intern, printed, autopenned, faxed, scanned back into digital form, and then ultimately uploaded. Tens of thousands of protesters manifest, logistically facilitated by the consumption of commensurate resources, to protest a “war for oil” in Iraq,⁸ all with the hope of a highballed headcount estimate on the evening news. This is not to dispute that Africa needs aid, that individuals should be made to feel more a part of the political process, that we should get out of Iraq, or even that the dining hall workers deserve more rights, but it is to say that, if these are changes we sincerely mean to effect, we had better start thinking a little deeper about how we are going to go about accomplishing them. This thesis is an examination of the multifarious functions of the dislocation of interests wrought by both globalization and dissent.

America v. Microsoft Corporation, U.S. District Court, District of Columbia, 28 Jul. 1999, retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <<http://www.usdoj.gov/atr/cases/f3800/msjudgex.htm>>.

⁸ “Opposition to the Iraq War,” 31 Mar. 2006, [Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opposition_to_the_Iraq_War#Protests_against_war_on_Iraq), retrieved 31 Mar. 2006 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opposition_to_the_Iraq_War#Protests_against_war_on_Iraq>.

Chapter 1: Globalization and the Crises of Capitalism

“That which one is sure cannot be doubted, that is what one must doubt, because that is what power is most concerned to produce.”¹

Globalization, as the critical enabling process for global capitalism, has provided ample inspiration for dissent. It has caused great disruption in the traditional organization of social life, as the logic of capitalism intercedes more forcefully and ubiquitously. At the same time, globalization seems to have provided a host of new technologies enabling a broad diversity of innovative approaches to the contestation of capitalism. Curiously, not only do these technologies represent the fruits of the capitalist enterprise, they are the critical enabling factors of globalization itself. This prompts the question: what is the efficacy of anti-globalization campaigns predicated on these technologies? What are the consequences of these technologies’ contingent relationship to globalization for dissent? This is the topic of the second chapter.

If this contingency fatally problematizes the efficacy of these much-vaunted technologies in anti-globalization protest, it follows that some alternative function must be filled aside from dissent. The third chapter is an examination of the possibility that, far from actually meaning to effect change, dissent is in some circumstances a strategy for dislocating and obfuscating the continued investment in its supposed antagonist, global capitalism. Dissent serves capitalism by absorbing overaccumulation and by

¹ Lawrence Grossberg, Bringing It All Back Home: Essays on Cultural Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) 260.

reintroducing inefficiency into a system by now marked by hyper-rationalized production. Dissent also fulfills a performative function for its adherents, by which a vital social identity is affirmed and reproduced. Evidently denied recourse to certain strategies of dissent, the final chapter suggests alternative techniques of resistance, taking the individual as its purveyor and aiming to render contingency transparent.

Polysemous globalization

This inquiry begins with the acknowledgment of the provisional and sometimes ambiguous delimitations of the processes and effects taken collectively as “globalization.” Though few theorists would deny its impact on nearly all aspects of modern social life, there is a considerable range of perspectives on what are named as its particular hallmarks,² the extent to which it represents an historically novel phenomenon,³ its effects on legacy configurations of power such as the nation-state,⁴ its relationship to global capitalism,⁵ and its differential facilitation of hegemony and/or the opposition thereof.⁶ However, the polysemy of the term points to the counterintuitive conclusion that globalization contains the seeds of resistance to its own totalizing propensities.⁷ It is the question of what new opportunities for resistance globalization

² John Beynon and David Dunkerley, eds., Globalization: The Reader (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³ Steve John and Stuart Thomson, eds., New Activism and the Corporate Response (New York: Palgrave, 2003) 3.

⁴ Peter Dicken, Global Shift: Transforming the World Economy, 3rd edn. (London: Paul Chapman Publishing, 1998) 79.

⁵ David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Social Change (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1990).

⁶ Douglas Kellner, “Globalization, Technopolitics and Revolution” in John Foran, ed., The Future of Revolutions: Rethinking Radical Change in the Age of Globalization (New York: Zed Books, 2003).

⁷ Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction, trans. R. Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 95.

creates – ironically, in response to accessories of the process of globalization itself – and what possibilities it may conversely foreclose or problematize that I intend to address.

A lack of consensus as to the precise boundaries of globalization notwithstanding, it is worth venturing a few general observations – particularly with respect to historical developments within the last thirty years. This will be useful towards the end of understanding how globalization is broadly situated with respect to both global capitalism and dissent.

To say nothing of other technological modalities of connectivity such as transportation, the twentieth century has witnessed the evolution of communications technology from the novelty of the telegraph through the present-day normalcy of orbiting satellites and the global network called the internet. With peculiar determinism, Moore’s Law obviated the 1960s-era mainframe, paving the way for the ubiquity of personal computers (PCs) and, subsequently, the embedding of increasingly robust and innovative capabilities in portable consumer electronics such as cameras, cellular phones, digital video (DV) camcorders, laptops, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and hybrid devices. The 1990s brought the popularization of the world wide web, the “killer app” for all of this brewing technology, and with it no small amount of exuberance as to the profound importance of the historical moment. Excitement led to investment and an acceleration in the building-out of global telecommunications networks that had been taking place in earnest for the previous twenty years. Down these pipes and over the invisible airwaves, an endless and unimaginably large stream of information and media traverses.

This revolution in digital technologies has been intimately related to other trends within globalization. Primarily, its effect has been to enable and, by extension, demand a more seamlessly global approach to the world. That is to say that the limits of the human purview are no longer a function of the machine. Marxist geographer David Harvey calls this proximity time-space compression: “the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space.”⁸ Journalist Thomas Friedman shares this characterization; his now-popularized metaphor of globalization as “flattening” the world similarly emphasizes connectivity: “it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world.”⁹ Distance has been trivialized and time, or perhaps more appropriately, speed, replaces space as the principal barrier separating people, places, and ideas. At the same time, the decontextualized representation of place precedes it in the form of media, obliterating both space and time, and communities form in configurations that the organization of physical space would neither predict nor allow.

Capitalism has been the strong beneficiary of these trends. It has reconfigured itself to take maximum advantage of the facility with which bits travel. Even the artifacts of labor themselves increasingly assume virtual forms to tap these currents; note the rise

⁸ Harvey, 147.

⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the 21st Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005) 8.

in services-related employment.¹⁰ This is a reflection of the restructuring of the economy to accommodate job roles that have been obviated by technology. Concomitantly to and no doubt partly as a result of this technological revolution, the world market begins to assume primacy over national economic contexts. The increased “bandwidth” of connectivity presents new opportunities for the expansion of capitalism that far exceed those of comparatively limited domestic markets. The emergence of the world market is associated with increasing transnational capital and data flows, the formation of supranational bodies for the oversight of the world economy, the global operation of corporations, a renewed emphasis on international trade, the development of global financial networks, and the delocalization of national markets.

Decline of the nation-state

The subsumption of national economic contexts to the logic of the global market is the primary explanation for the decline of the nation-state. There is much debate over the extent to which the institution of the nation-state remains relevant under globalization, but it is worth contesting the extreme claim that globalization signifies its inexorable decline. Apart from its historical role in the stabilization of capitalism through Keynesianism, the nation-state has long been a potent force in the organization of social life, and it will exercise what power it has to ensure that it remains so. It is difficult to see how global capitalism could so abruptly and so totally displace all of the functions of the nation-state, especially those that do not emerge spontaneously from the market. A

¹⁰ “S: The International Services Economy,” World Trade Organization, retrieved 8 Apr. 2006 from <http://www.wto.org/English/thewto_e/whatis_e/eol/e/wto06/wto6_3.htm#note1>.

more conservative analysis concedes that the nation-state is at least undergoing a process of adaptation, while cautioning against overstating current trends: “While some of the state’s capabilities are, indeed, being reduced and while there may well be a process of ‘hollowing out’ of the national state, the process is not a simple one of uniform decline on all fronts.”¹¹

At the same time, the changing relationship between the global market and national economies has broad implications for the roles that the nation-state fulfills generally. The increasing primacy of the global economy in all aspects of the citizen’s life – cultural, political, and social – may mark a broader decline in the institution of the nation-state than is superficially implied by the depreciation of its power to regulate economic affairs. To the extent that the nation-state does retain agency, it is often captive to the interests of global capitalism, sometimes to the detriment of its own citizens. This is evinced by the adoption of liberalization strategies such as “privatization of state companies, deregulation of financial markets, currency adjustments, foreign direct investment, shrinking subsidies, lowering of protectionist trade barriers, and introduction of more flexible labor laws.”¹² With this qualification, then, perhaps it can be claimed that “Governments are not the passive victims of internationalization but its primary architects,”¹³ but the option to reject or comply with the totalizing agenda of global capitalism hardly indicates the role of a primary and determining actor.

¹¹ Dicken, 80.

¹² Friedman, 314.

¹³ Yongnian Zheng, Globalization and State Transformation in China (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 24.

New actors have emerged in response to the changing configuration of capitalism. Supranational bodies such as regional economic and trading blocs, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Trade Organization (WTO) constitute institutional analogues to the role that nation-states once more unproblematically fulfilled with respect to their own national economies. However, “body” is something of a misnomer since they are not as definitively substantiated geographically as the nation-state nor as subject to the pressures (democratic or otherwise) of national citizens. Former World Bank head and economist Joseph Stiglitz notes that this leads to a lack of transparency and hence, accountability.¹⁴ These regimes are designed with the twofold purpose of more effective coordination of the now-global economy and insulation from the opposition that the same engenders.

Constituted as they are by nation-states themselves, the SNIs would seem to ameliorate the otherwise pessimistic assessment of the former’s waning. The WTO, for example, has a multinational membership and describes itself as “the only global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations.”¹⁵ International economic matters are its exclusive jurisdiction: “The World Trade Organization has the authority to override local and national authority if there is a violation of the terms of the agreement, and hence can discipline sovereign states.”¹⁶ The scope of influence of such SNIs certainly seems adequate to oversee global capitalism

¹⁴ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) 229.

¹⁵ “WTO | What is the WTO?,” 2006, [World Trade Organization](http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/whatis_e.htm), retrieved 1 Apr. 2006 from <http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/whatis_e.htm>.

¹⁶ Saskia Sassen, ed., *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (New York: The New Press, 1998) 98.

where the individual nation-states are unable. For instance, it is estimated that more than 90% of all world trade is subject to the WTO framework.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the involvement of nation-states within the new SNIs, it is unclear that SNIs actually act as proxies for the interests of nation-states. SNIs often carry out the agenda of global capitalism in opposition to the autonomy of nation-states: “Deliberately or subconsciously...[the SNIs] exert co-ordinated pressures on all member or independent states to destroy systematically everything which could stem or slow down the free movement of capital and limit market liberty.”¹⁸ Moreover, the principal beneficiaries of this ideology of liberalism tend to be transnational corporations (TNCs) and the powerful nation-states where they have historically been situated, particularly the U.S. While the SNIs militate against the functional autonomy of the nation-state generally, developing nations suffer the most deleterious effects. The SNIs insist upon structural reforms to national economies that encourage foreign direct investment (FDI) and facilitate integration with the global market. Although this is in line with the goals of the TNCs, such measures frequently produce transitional social hardships.

The decline of the nation-state, the emergence of SNIs, and the growing power of TNCs reflect the primacy of capitalism under globalization. While globalization refers to a host of processes that cannot be merely explained as a product of the mechanisms of capitalism, capitalism has significantly benefited from, as well as driven, globalization. The imperatives of capitalism remain much the same – refashioning the world so as to be

¹⁷ Dicken, 94.

¹⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, Globalization: The Human Consequences (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 68.

conducive to its exigencies – but perhaps it is the scale and not the character of its ambitions and crises that has changed. Even as it expands its influence to hitherto untapped niches, global capitalism is confronted by contradictions and threats, most notably in the forms of overaccumulation and dissent.

Overaccumulation

Even in the absence of external opposition, capitalism would still struggle to reproduce itself. Overaccumulation is a destabilizing threat that arises from within it. This unstable teleology was the insight of Marx. On account of its structural requirement for growth, capitalism tends towards excess in production and, hence, endemic unsustainability: “capitalism – in contrast to all preceding social formations – presents the recurrence of production outstripping society’s ability to consume.”¹⁹ The crisis mode manifests itself as periodic breakdowns in the coordination of production and consumption, leading to overaccumulation. Harvey characterizes this condition as “idle productive capacity, a glut of commodities and an excess of inventories, surplus money capital (perhaps held as hoards), and high unemployment.”²⁰ The indifference of capitalism to its own long-term viability means that, paradoxically, the more successful it is, the more it sets itself up for catastrophic failure. If the virtualization of capital under globalization has intensified this outcome, then the survival of capitalism is predicated on that, concomitantly to its creation of new opportunities for the expansion, dispersion, and movement of capital, globalization has furnished evermore ingenious strategies for its

¹⁹ Karl Marx in David A. Foss and Ralph Larkin, Beyond Revolution: A New Theory of Social Movements (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1986) 30.

²⁰ Harvey, 181.

stabilization. The twin strategies of Fordism and Keynesianism, the approach to the problem of overaccumulation during the twentieth century through the 1970s, are no longer adequate to cope with the disequilibrium wrought by capital's liberation from its historical constraints.

Fordism, the early twentieth-century configuration of modern capitalism, was characterized by the idea that social stability could be assured by means of the coordination of production and consumption on a hitherto unrealized scale. This ambitious project required the cooperation of the two primary non-capitalist institutional actors: the state and organized labor. Corporations would assure economic growth and a steady supply of commodities and, on the other side of the social compact, the state and labor would “[do] whatever was necessary to keep effective demand at levels sufficient to absorb the steady growth of capitalist output.”²¹ Against the relentless expropriation of value from the proletariat, Ford concluded that the worker had to be sufficiently compensated that s/he was able to purchase the neverending flow of commodities that the Fordist production model concomitantly enabled. Consequently, labor became doubly employed as producers and consumers: “Whereas at the primitive stage of capitalist accumulation ‘political economy treats the *proletarian* as a mere *worker*...these ideas of the ruling class are revised just as soon as so great an abundance of commodities begins to be produced that a surplus ‘collaboration’ is required of the workers.”²²

²¹ Ibid., 134.

²² Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (New York: Zone Books, 1994) 30.

Directly, through recourse to such mechanisms as import and export bans, customs barriers, and Keynesian strategies for the generation of internal demand, and indirectly by way of the regulation of labor, the state became the other crucial apparatus for the maintenance of the dynamic equilibrium which political philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis describes as the “approximate equality between the rhythms of the growth of consumption and the elevation of productivity.”²³ National polities maintained their power over mostly national economies, and the capability for the exercising of such power was what defined the state as such: “The meaning of ‘the state’ has been precisely that of an agency claiming the legitimate right and boasting sufficient resources to set up and enforce the rules and norms binding the run of affairs within a certain territory.”²⁴ In the calculation of the state, the stabilization of capitalism was perceived as being in keeping with its institutional interests and those of its citizens.

From 1929-1933, capitalism ran aground on its internal contradictions. Within a brief period of time, the U.S. witnessed an unprecedented economic, and corresponding social, downturn whose effects rippled throughout the industrialized world. The Great Depression testified to the inadequacies of Fordism alone to stabilize capitalism. President Roosevelt’s subsequent intervention in the form of the New Deal demonstrated the important role of the state in the regulation of the economy: “It took Roosevelt and the New Deal to try and save capitalism by doing through state intervention what Ford

²³ Cornelius Castoriadis in Bauman, 65.

²⁴ Bauman, 60-61.

had tried to do alone.”²⁵ The President’s legislative agenda consisted of a mixture of strategies which were largely Keynesian in character: assistance to destitute farmers, the restoration of faith in financial institutions by means of federal backing, and the alleviation of unemployment through the creation of temporary, government-sponsored public works jobs. Despite the socialist overtones of Roosevelt’s many welfare initiatives, the New Deal’s ambitions were not to create an alternative order to capitalism but rather to re-ensure its viability in the face of its proliferating complications.

A conflation of factors in the 1960s and 1970s began to erode the social compact between capitalism and the state, challenging the continued efficacy of the complementary strategies of Fordism and Keynesianism for mitigating overaccumulation. Some of these factors included: the internationalization of business, heightened competition from Europe and Japan, the industrialization of sites in Latin America and Southeast Asia, and the weakening of the dollar.²⁶ Capital became unbound from the processes that historically circumscribed it: “capital flows around in ways that seem almost oblivious of the constraints of time and space that normally pin down material activities of production and consumption.”²⁷ It could now more effectively realize its predisposition towards flexibility. The fact that capital “moves fast; enough to keep permanently a step ahead of any (territorial, as ever) polity which may try to contain and redirect its travels”²⁸ strongly suggests developments that obviate national and territorial economic contexts. As a consequence, “the ‘economy’ is progressively exempt from

²⁵ Harvey, 127.

²⁶ Ibid., 141.

²⁷ Ibid., 164.

²⁸ Bauman, 55.

political control.”²⁹ Under such a conceptualization, nation-states can at best constitute the topography over and around which capital chaotically traverses: “if economic borders have any continuing meaning at all, it is as the ‘contours of information flows’.”³⁰ With the nation-state deprived of the ability to effectively regulate transnational capital, capitalism sought new strategies for its stabilization.

Social control and dissent

A secondary feature and intent of Fordism beyond efficient production was the control of labor. According to Foucault, productivity and control are the dual functions of the process of cybernetic rationalization: “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminished these same forces (in political terms of obedience).”³¹ Ford’s innovation on this model was the assembly line, wherein workers were individuated according to a precise mechanical function within the overall process of commodity production, and he believed that the proletariat could be made to submit to this new logic of production if adequately compensated.

Organized labor was largely complicit with this arrangement, in contrast to Marx’s prediction that such exploitation would push the proletariat towards socialist revolution. They were evidently satisfied with the comparatively unimaginative dispensation of discretionary income, allowing them to participate in the capitalist economy as consumers in return for their submission to rationalization. The discontent of

²⁹ Ibid., 66.

³⁰ Kenichi Ohmae in David Morley, Home Territories: Media, mobility and identity (London: Routledge, 2000) 204.

³¹ Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) 138.

the proletariat thus appeared to be not merely indignation with their disenfranchisement but envy for the riches of the capitalists that it had served to produce. In the calculation of the corporations, the cost of higher wages was deemed a worthwhile tradeoff between social stability and profit margins. The appeasement of labor inoculated against more radical disruptions (i.e. socialism) and fostered greater consumption to keep pace with the volume of production. Despite the structural antagonism between them identified by Marx, both parties benefited from this social contract: “corporations grudgingly accepted union power, particularly when the unions undertook to control their membership in return for wage gains that stimulated effective demand.”³²

The viability of this Fordist arrangement for social control has given way under globalization as various factors have conspired to weaken labor. Neoliberal regimes of the 1980s such as Reaganism and Thatcherism undermined organized labor. Union membership has declined³³ and organized labor has fielded few coherent international responses to transnational capital. Labor unions have historically been, at most, national in scope, under the logic that the solidarity of all of the workers of a given type within a particular territory provided sufficient leverage to exact concessions. This assumption has been problematized by an abundance of cheap labor abroad partnered with globalization’s trivialization of geography. Machine automation and the shift to highly exploitative, flexible employment arrangements have further marginalized the worker.

³² Harvey, 138.

³³ Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 81.

While these trends are consistent with capitalism's profit motive, they aggravate the dilemma of social control, pointing towards an equivocal effect upon capitalism. Productivity is improved, but an important mechanism of social control is compromised: "it demands both less work (to lower production costs) and more (to lessen the social burden of the idle population)."³⁴ Not only are the workers likely to be upset at their displacement, they are liable to have little better to do than to undertake resistance. Political philosopher Antonio Negri likewise acknowledges this affliction of modern capital: "as capital proceeds to substitute ever more robot machines for increasingly threatened and threatening industrial workers, it faces...a growing difficulty in finding new ways of putting people to work in order to control them socially."³⁵ For the displacement of labor to be advantageous to capitalism, the idle workers must be otherwise occupied. This is a challenge given that dissent is a predictable outcome of these processes within globalization.

The pressures of globalization are not merely exerted upon the category of labor. As Marx anticipated, the logic of capitalism increasingly intercedes in the cultural and social spheres, to their detriment: "every hitherto autonomous domain of social life becomes coerced into conformity with the dictates of the mode of production."³⁶ Left unchecked, the elaboration of capitalism means the externalization of all considerations that are not directly related to growth: ecological devastation, exploitation of labor,

³⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) xxiv.

³⁵ Antonio Negri and Jim Fleming, eds., Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse, trans. H. Cleaver, M. Ryan, and M. Viano (South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1984) xxiv.

³⁶ Foss, 34.

complicity with totalitarian governments, and, basically, the subsumption of all social interests to profit. Global capitalism has also been associated with growing disparities in wealth both between nations and within societies. Notwithstanding the ostensible end of the colonial era, longstanding economic inequalities not only persist but are amplified. The broad, regressive repercussions of the ambitions of global capitalism create the potential for broad dissent.

Contours of a solution

It seems, then, that capitalism faces formidable challenges under globalization in the forms of overaccumulation and dissent. However, a consideration of several increasingly popular strategies of dissent, new media and mass protest, opens the possibility that dissent is not invariably a threat to capitalism. It can, moreover, help to serve a compensatory function in the face of the waning efficacy of Fordism and Keynesianism. With some elision of the failed utopian promises made with respect to the many communications and media technologies that have preceded it, new media are put forward as the critical tool in the fight against capitalism. However, these same technologies are themselves heavily inscribed within the system of capitalism and enable globalization. The efficacy of mass protest is also complicated by contingency. The decoupling of the sites of production and consumption and the obfuscation of their relationship has problematized the binaristic oppositional model upon which mass movements are based. The next chapter will evaluate the efficacy of the new strategies of dissent. The third chapter will examine the possibility that dissent conceals interests

other than its ostensible goals. The final chapter will suggest a path to meaningful resistance.

Chapter 2: Technological Utopianism and the Contingencies of New

Media

“The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised,

will not be televised, will not be televised.

The revolution will be no re-run brothers;

The revolution will be live.”¹

New media are the latest set of communications technologies to be celebrated for its potential to foster a more democratic society. History has seen no shortage of “other technological developments originally introduced with utopian expectations of democratic progress, such as electricity, mail, telegraph, telephone, radio, television, and fax.”² Notwithstanding this hope, these technologies have come to be more strongly associated with capitalism than with democracy: “these have all been turned into industries dominated by business, with further developments in their technologies manipulated for profit.”³ In the updated narrative, new media are not merely a tool for effecting democracy, it is also a means of affirmatively contesting capitalism. Do new media successfully facilitate this objective or is it another example of failed technological utopianism?

New media and dissent

¹ Gil Scott-Heron, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” RCA, 1990.

² John D.H. Downing, Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001) 203.

³ Ibid.

There has been increased attention in recent years, both within the mainstream media and academia, on the utilization of new media in strategies of dissent. Meaningful differences do exist between new media and that which preceded it, however. New media consist of the array of new communications and media technologies such as e-mail, listservs, websites, the internet, cellular phones, search engines, satellites, laptops, newsgroups, PCs, and digital video and imaging, which are often utilized by individuals in the context of ad hoc collaborative social networks rather than formal organizational structures. New media are described in opposition to old media which are institutionalized, often corporatized, and based predominantly on a broadcast rather than peer-to-peer (p2p) model of communication. Activists perceive new media as a meaningful alternative to the mainstream media as a vehicle for the dissemination of oppositional ideologies. For example, projects such as Indymedia strive to create alternative media outlets that are democratic, genuinely pluralistic, transparent in operation, and free of the institutional biases of corporations and the state.⁴ Local, autonomous Indymedia centers throughout the world support initiatives like community radio, internet publishing, and webcasting and provide an unmoderated forum for diverse points of view.⁵

Media have become a critical site of struggle: “The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments and other sites of past conflicts,

⁴ “FrequentlyAskedQuestionEn < Global < Indymedia Documentation Project,” 29 Sep. 2005, Indymedia, retrieved 1 Apr. 2006 from <<http://docs.indymedia.org/view/Global/FrequentlyAskedQuestionEn#independent>>.

⁵ Victor Sampedro, “The Alternative Movement and its Media Strategies” in François Polet and CETRI, eds., Globalizing Resistance: The State of Struggle, trans. V. Bawtree (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 254.

but political struggle is now mediated by media, computer and information technologies.”⁶ In this context, new media enable powerful strategies for the opposition of capitalism. They assist in the aggregation and dissemination of dissent, facilitates the globalization of otherwise local activist campaigns, obviate some of the dependence of social movements upon mainstream media, and permit an alternative narrativization (or, indeed, any narrativization) of resistance. New media also present the opportunity for the regeneration of a vital public sphere that was compromised, according to political philosopher Jürgen Habermas, by the commercialization of media: “big economic and governmental organizations took over the public sphere, while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle.”⁷ Whereas the mainstream media have failed to serve the public interest,⁸ Kellner sees hope in new media to foster “a more informed citizenry and more extensive democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyberdemocracy of the future.”⁹

New media have figured prominently in a number of recent activist campaigns. They are credited with the success of a movement to topple the regime of the corrupt President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines – thousands of protesters turned out in massive nonviolent demonstrations, coordinating actions through the text messaging

⁶ Kellner in Foran, 191.

⁷ Douglas Kellner, “Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention,” retrieved 2 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/habermas.htm>>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid..

functionality on their cell phones.¹⁰ New media have created global awareness for what might have otherwise been the obscure struggle of the indigenous peoples of the Chiapas region in Mexico.¹¹ Now Zapatismo is practically synonymous with the new electronic strategies of resistance. Perhaps the best known example is the mobilization of anti-globalization forces against the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle in 1999.¹² Mailing lists and websites were used to organize the event, cell phones facilitated coordination on the ground, and digital video and still cameras coupled with laptops and internet access permitted near real-time independent media coverage of happenings through the internet. Confronted by a loose confederation of adapting opposition, the police were unable to contain the protests and the WTO ministerial meeting was shut down. Other mass demonstrations took place simultaneously in at least eighty-two other cities throughout the world.¹³

The promise of automation

The rhetoric of technological utopianism also celebrates the ever-increasing potential of technology as a factor of production for generating great wealth for all: “Technology makes possible the limitless accumulation of wealth, and thus the satisfaction of an ever-expanding set of human desires.”¹⁴ Implicitly, some of the

¹⁰ Howard Rheingold, Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution (New York: Basic Books, 2002) 157-158.

¹¹ “Zapatista,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 3 Apr. 2006, retrieved 8 Apr. 2006 from <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zapatista>>.

¹² “WTO Ministerial Conference of 1999 protest activity,” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 31 Mar. 2006, retrieved 2 Apr. 2006 from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WTO_Ministerial_Conference_of_1999_protest_activity>.

¹³ W. Lance Bennett, “Communicating global activism: strengths and vulnerabilities of networked politics” in Wim Van de Donk, et al., eds., Cyberprotest: New media, citizens, and social movements (London: Routledge, 2004) 133.

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (New York: The Free Press, 1992) xiv.

necessity for the subjugation of the proletariat should be therefore obviated, as “There is no longer any social necessity for human beings to be treated as mechanical elements in the productive process.”¹⁵ Whereas Taylorist rationalization exercised “a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body, a ‘new micro-physics’ of power”¹⁶ that denied workers recognition by the reduction of their productive agency exclusively to their mechanistic faculties, technology could free them to perform those more creative functions of which the machine was incapable. Automation could liberate the worker from the tedium of labor, as machines assumed the role previously fulfilled by rationalized humans in the assembly line.

Failed promise of technological utopianism

Notwithstanding the promise of automation and new media, the vision of technological utopianism has been differentially realized. With respect to the potential for liberation of the worker through automation, technology has not led to a renewed humanism. The fruits of the unabated rationalization of production continue to be turned into profits rather than forming the basis for leveling inequalities. Witness, for example, the “jobless recovery” of the U.S. in the early 2000s: the fact that the country has averted economic recession is explained by increased productivity through technology¹⁷ and the

¹⁵ Noam Chomsky in Mark Achbar, ed., Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1995) 32.

¹⁶ Foucault (1995), 139.

¹⁷ Ben S. Bernanke, “FRB:Speech, Bernanke--Remarks on the jobless recovery-- November 6, 2003,” 6 Nov. 2003, Federal Reserve Board, retrieved 2 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.federalreserve.gov/BoardDocs/Speeches/2003/200311062/default.htm>>.

offshoring of lower-skill job roles to other countries.¹⁸ At the same time, jobs both at home and abroad are being created under increasingly flexible work regimes characterized by subcontracting and weak organized labor.¹⁹ Sociologist Clifford Paynton notes the perverse irony of that technologies of automation would not only fail to eliminate the rationalization of the worker but instead coincide with his/her renewed subjugation: “Progress in technological terms thus spells regress in human terms, and man sinks to the nadir of wretchedness and self-estrangement in the production process at the very time in history when his productivity, technically speaking, reaches its peak and, providentially, brings with it the possibility of a thoroughly human way of life in production.”²⁰ The excess of this mode of production leads to superfluous overaccumulation.

Even for those who are in the vanguard of the contemporary knowledge economy, Sociologist Tiziana Terranova furthermore notes that knowledge work is not necessarily any less tedious than the factory work to which many workers even now remain consigned.²¹ For example, software coders for the video game developer Electronic Arts complain about sweatshop conditions.²² So-called “click slavery” is a term specific to massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) that describes how the

¹⁸ Charles L. Schultze, “Offshoring, Import Competition, and the Jobless Recovery,” Aug. 2004, The Brookings Institution, retrieved 2 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.brookings.edu/comm/policybriefs/pb136.htm>>.

¹⁹ Harvey, 150.

²⁰ Paynton, 223.

²¹ Tiziana Terranova, Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age (London: Pluto Press, 2004) 73.

²² Randall Stross, “When a Video Game Stops Being Fun,” New York Times 21 Nov. 2004, retrieved 2 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/business/yourmoney/21digi.html?ei=5090&en=40a60cc6d7971ab2&ex=1258693200&partner=rssuserland>>.

most efficient production of value in game worlds, vis-à-vis the generation of saleable virtual artifacts or the accumulation of game currency, depends on boringly repetitive tasks: sitting around and waiting for monsters, items, or quests to spawn and traveling long distances.²³ Virtual production is now capable of so closely approximating the Fordist model that there are factories in China where gamer-workers farm game objects, earning what are above-average wages for factory workers.²⁴ In some respects, there is little difference between these virtual laborers and office workers the world over. The latter spend hours of their waking lives rearranging bits of data and have been conditioned by their own supposed tools to interface with them according to their inhuman logic. Cultural theorist Paul Virilio comments on the reversal by which humans are adapted to machines rather than vice versa: “interactive user-friendliness’ ...is just a metaphor for the subtle enslavement of the human being to ‘intelligent’ machines...the definitive instrumental conditioning of the individual.”²⁵ There is a mutual process of instrumentalization at work, not unlike the Councillor’s musing to Neo about the machines that power the last human city Zion in *The Matrix: Reloaded*: “down here sometimes I think about all those people still plugged into the Matrix and when I look at these machines, I can't help thinking that in a way, we are plugged into them.”²⁶

²³ Dan Hulton, “HOWTO: Make Money Off Your Addiction || kuro5hin.or,.” Kuro5hin 7 Jan 2003, retrieved 21 Jun 2005, <<http://www.kuro5hin.org/story/2003/1/6/222558/0630>>.

²⁴ Edward Castronova, “Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier,” published 2001, retrieved 28 Jun 2005, <http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=294828>.

²⁵ Paul Virilio in James Der Derian, ed. The Virilio Reader (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) 153.

²⁶ The Matrix: Reloaded, dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 2003, DVD, Warner Studios, 2003.

The potential of new media has been undermined by a number of contingencies. Foremost, presuming the efficacy of new media in strategies of dissent, a “digital divide” nonetheless separates those who have access to and thus stand to benefit from these new technologies and those who do not. There are many factors that explain this state of affairs: “Access to the new technologies is an insurmountable barrier for large numbers of people who have been marginalized by social class, educational level, gender, political regime, the technological development of the country or community of origin.”²⁷ The political liberty that new media have the potential to afford – such as giving disenfranchised individuals and communities a voice and the ability to represent themselves – unfortunately presupposes a certain amount of economic liberty. Those who stand to be brought up the most by the kinds of reforms in the economic system that these strategies of dissent seek are simultaneously the least likely to be able to utilize these new technologies. The new technopolitics²⁸ is a domain therefore dominated by parties for whom, it may be presumed, the provision of basic material needs is not a pressing concern. Whether or not the technorati are a suitable revolutionary class is open to debate: “this population is still largely made up of ‘knowledge workers’, a global elite with no ties to a disenfranchised majority.”²⁹ In many respects, they do not resemble the proletariat that Marx imagined.

Contingencies of new media

²⁷ Sampedro in Polet, 252.

²⁸ Kellner in Foran, 181.

²⁹ Terranova, 81.

The digital divide is undoubtedly an issue of critical importance to economic development. ICTs (information and communication(s) technology) and technical literacy are necessary for the transition from an industrial to a services-based economy.³⁰ It is less clear, however, that the digital divide completely explains why new media do not necessarily facilitate efficacious strategies of dissent. Against the rhetoric of technological utopianism, there are a number of problems in the relationship between new media and dissent that cast doubt on the extent to which new media can be used as a tool of anti-globalization. While new media are supposed to be a response to the shortcomings of corporate media, it continues to reinforce rather than mitigate the hegemony of media itself. The prominence of media in anti-globalization protest spells the death of Heron's imaginary untelevised revolution. The semiotic instability of the image and its resulting susceptibility to co-option pose dangers for campaigns that are heavily predicated on media strategies. The material conditions of production that underpin these strategies reinforce the capitalist system that new media are utilized to combat. The media strategy substitutes the spectacle for rational discourse. I will examine each of these contingencies in turn.

The hegemony of media

Articulated emphatically by poet Gil Scott-Heron as “the revolution will not be televised,”³¹ the investment of the corporate media in the status quo suggests minimal potential for the dissemination of oppositional ideologies through mainstream media

³⁰ Carl Dahlman and Anuja Utz, India and the Knowledge Economy: Leveraging Strengths and Opportunities (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2005) 103.

³¹ Scott-Heron.

channels. Not only does dissent disobey the formulaic narrative structure that the mainstream media require, whereby uncertainty is closed rather than expanded, dissent also has potential material ramifications for the media institution itself.³² However, it is no surprise that the interests of the corporate media align with those of capital: “The media elite want to honor the political-economic system as a whole; their very power and prestige deeply presuppose that system.”³³ Against the presumption that the structure of mainstream media necessarily dictates the ideologies it espouses, the political Right argues that the media nonetheless evince a liberal bias. The political Left counters that it would be illogical to conclude that the media would operate against their own interests; corporate media are, foremost, business enterprises. If the Left is correct in the primacy of the underlying economic structure of corporate media, then the only opportunities for counterhegemonic perspectives within mainstream media discourse would be unintentional. This seems like too strong of a claim, given that hegemony “is bound to be uneven in the degree of legitimacy it commands and to leave some room for antagonistic cultural expressions to develop.”³⁴

While the mainstream media support hegemony, it seems as though they could also inadvertently serve oppositional ideologies through their widespread dissemination. The maintenance of journalistic credibility, whose perception matters to corporate media’s advertisement-sustaining audience, requires the admission of ideologies that

³² Todd Gitlin, The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) xix

³³ Ibid., 258-259.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci in Walter L. Adamson, Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political and Cultural Theory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 174.

challenge the status quo into its discourse. In other words, “The network’s claim to legitimate, embodied in the professional ideology of objectivity, requires it...to take a certain risk of undermining the legitimacy of the social system as a whole.”³⁵

Corporations must make a calculation as to whether the mediation of dissent will quell it through suspension in the symbolic plane or backfire and swell the existing social movement. There is some uncertainty in this calculation and, thus, in whether the mainstream media channel is co-opted for the revolution or vice versa. The corporate media seek to commodify protest by rendering it an inert news object and circulating it for consumption, where it finds its terminus. The activists hope that the embedded revolutionary message will prevail, allowing them to leverage the media for their own ends. Reliance on the mainstream media for the communication of revolutionary ideology thus represents something of a gamble: “in a society saturated by mass media, the spectacle always threatens to engulf opposition as soon as opposition turns toward the media for amplification.”³⁶

However, if we consider media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s exhortation to foreground the medium itself – “the medium is the message”³⁷ – it appears that the medium is not where the dialectics of competing ideologies play out but, rather, hegemony is the medium itself. This casts doubt on both the seeds of oppositional potential within mainstream media and the putatively counterhegemonic character of new media. While there may be conflict between the ideologies that different parties promote,

³⁵ Gitlin, 259.

³⁶ Ibid., 161.

³⁷ McLuhan, Marshall. Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964; London: Routledge, 1964).

no one disputes the media as a system of influence and vehicle for the operation of power. Independent and mainstream media want the same thing: that is, ideological buy-in. Independent media may be a means of advocating that people support progressive causes and oppose tyranny by the state, and mainstream media may be a means of telling people to buy things and be invested in the status quo, but the strategies are not differentiated in that both sides reinforce a society that is structured such that the ideologies people buy into are a function of who has the most resources to put into their marketing campaign. Freedom is compromised in a society dominated by media, regardless of whether the ends that the media serve are regressive or progressive.

Death of the imaginary untelevised revolution

It is unclear from Scott-Heron's declaration that "the revolution will not be televised" to what extent he would have distinguished between old and new media in their relationship to dissent, since in the 1970s new media was just beginning to emerge and was far from mainstream. There are two probable interpretations. Either television is antithetical to the revolution on account of that it is structurally a top-down, broadcast, and commercial medium that affords no opportunities for horizontal communication, or television is antithetical to the revolution because mediation itself is anathema, irrespective of the specific medium. If Scott-Heron were taking issue with the broadcast structure of television, then there would seem to be hope in new media as an alternative, but if the latter is the case, then he would be just as unconfident in new media's facilitation of the revolutionary project. Terranova, however, is optimistic about the differences between the two: "A networked multitude, possessing its own means of

communication, freed from the tyranny of broadcasting, would rise to challenge the phony public sphere of television and the press.”³⁸

Broadcast means that the communication is one-way, but with networks everyone can connect to everyone else. Television is a vertical and resource-intensive medium and so tends to be dominated by corporate entities. The structure of the medium thus makes it difficult if not impossible for counterhegemonic messages to be broadcast. The internet, however, creates opportunities for participation so that people are not just passively involved. While resources continue to have an important role in the marketing of a particular message, there is not the same structural limitation for users to communicate. Oppositional messages can originate at the edges, whereas under the centralized television model the audience is relegated to consumption.

The mediation of protest is an implicit affirmation of that order invariably prevails. It is the reassurance that dissent will play itself out “within a field of terms and premises which does not overstep the hegemonic boundary.”³⁹ If “the revolution will not be televised,”⁴⁰ then television itself always testifies to the limits of the revolution. In the event of revolution, the role of the media in informing the populace of as much would be superfluous because its material effects would presumably already be realized. Thus, it is the lack of mention of the revolution or, alternatively, its disruption of mainstream media channels that would otherwise announce it that heralds its arrival. However, the mainstream media seek to at least perpetuate the illusion of difference. By encapsulating

³⁸ Terranova, 135.

³⁹ Gitlin, 263.

⁴⁰ Scott-Heron.

dialectics within a symbolic plane an order removed from the material context in which it might have had some consequence, agency is swapped for “the simulated generation of differences.”⁴¹ In this way, “Content that starts out seeming destabilizing and threatening – a mass demonstration, a riot, a new style of political deviance – may thus end up confirming the inherent rightness and necessity of the core hegemonic principles.”⁴²

Scott-Heron’s point corroborates the idea that the media are part of the hegemonic apparatus that the revolution must seek to undo; the mediation of dissent testifies to its neutralization. Moreover, mediation is the mechanism for the co-option of dissent. Scott-Heron’s exhortation is similar to that of Marx: that the criterion of the success of the revolution is a change in the underlying structure. Set against the pessimism of the rest of the poem that oppositional ideology can fruitfully co-inhabit a media channel utilized for the dissemination of commercial messages, the final line of the poem concludes, “the revolution will be live.”⁴³ Ironically, media have begun to assume greater importance in contemporary strategies of dissent. The increased dependence on the media is a product of the waning faith by the leaders of social movements that the proletariat will come into an understanding of its disenfranchisement by its own accord. If they were confident that the proletariat would spontaneously fulfill Marx’s project, there would be no need to expend so much resources on educating and indoctrinating them. If there ever were such a thing as the live and disintermediated revolution, it is now no longer merely the corporate media that seek to package and commodify it, but

⁴¹ Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra” in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds., Media and Cultural Studies KeyWorks (Boston: Blackwell, 2001) 522.

⁴² Gitlin, 267.

⁴³ Scott-Heron.

also the dissenters as well. In Baudrillard-esque fashion, protest is invariably reduced from all sides to the spectacle of itself. If mediation is antithetical to the revolution, then there can be no revolution in this age of media because it is always already preceded by its representation.

The instability of the image

Another problem with reliance on media strategies is the instability in the connotation of the image. The relationship between the signifier and its signified is arbitrary and historically contingent,⁴⁴ so the signifier cannot be relied upon to invariably produce the intended counterhegemonic meaning. Rather, it can be hijacked, co-opted, and turned to other intents. The iconic image of the Latin American freedom fighter Che Guevara is an example.⁴⁵ While its signified may not be arbitrary, there is nothing immanent to the image itself that necessarily grounds it in a particular politics. Nothing structurally prohibits the erosion of its revolutionary cachet. Nonetheless, the reliance on an image-based strategy does not require that the image stand for anything, and every invocation of that icon that is accompanied by nothing more than a diluted oppositional politics demeans its revolutionary potential. Unfortunately for aspiring social movements, commitment to the reified icon of Che Guevara is far easier than the practice of oppositional politics. One could furthermore question whether oppositional politics “needs” the image of Che Guevara in the same way that the image of Che Guevara “needs” oppositional politics.

⁴⁴ Fernande de Saussure, “Course in General Linguistics” in Richard T. De George and Fernand M. De George, eds, The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1972) 73.

⁴⁵ “Che Guevara (photo),” Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 17 Mar. 2006, retrieved 8 Apr. 2006 from <[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Che_Guevara_\(photo\)>](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Che_Guevara_(photo))>.

Because the significance of the image is unstable, it can be co-opted and turned to other intents. Popularized in the West during the 1960s, era of putative radical cultural upheaval, images of rebellion have become more commercially appealing.⁴⁶ As a cursory search of the world wide web reveals, there is a healthy industry selling all manner of Che Guevara-themed artifacts, and it would be hard to believe that all or even most of the proceeds go to support counterhegemonic causes.⁴⁷ hooks notes that, “As signs, their power to ignite critical consciousness is diffused when they are commodified. Communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption.”⁴⁸ Cultural theorist Henry Giroux uses the example of Benetton’s treatment of politicized topics in its advertising campaigns as both the aesthetization of difference and commodification of social consciousness. The political impact of contentious images such as a dying man infected with AIDS or a child carrying a gun is subsumed by the advertisements’ commercial function so that ultimately, the image “references nothing more than a safe space where the logic of the commodity and the marketplace mobilize consumers’ desires rather than struggle over social injustices and conflicts.”⁴⁹

The material conditions of media

The contradiction of new media leveraged towards counterhegemonic ends is that these technologies are heavily implicated in the structure of capital: “computer networks

⁴⁶ Thomas Frank, The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 4.

⁴⁷ “che guevara – Froogle,” Google, 8 Apr. 2006, retrieved 8 Apr. 2006 from <<http://froogle.google.com/froogle?q=che+guevara&hl=en&btnG=Search+Froogle>>.

⁴⁸ bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” in Durham and Kellner, 433.

⁴⁹ Henry A. Giroux, Disturbing Pleasures: Learning Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1994) 19.

are the material and ideological heart of informed capital.”⁵⁰ The internet was seeded by cold war military spending and has become increasingly commercialized since its inception. Entire industries are based around the development of consumer electronics supporting computing, digital imaging, and mobile communications – technologies which furthermore increase the effectiveness of other businesses.⁵¹ The TNCs that are responsible for the creation of these tools are the principal benefactors of globalization: “using computers...and hooking oneself up to computer networks oneself, involve a form of commodified activity, inserting the user in networks and technology that are at the forefront of the information revolution and global restructuring of capital.”⁵²

If the support of capitalism is a precondition of its opposition, it is difficult to see how the net effect will be to undermine or reform the system. The promise of new media for alternative social movements has increased reliance upon these technologies under globalization. New media have been said to empower discontents, enable decentralized coordination of action, gone some ways towards giving the proletariat a voice, and paved the way for campaigns that are global in their focus. However, new media may offer disproportionately greater opportunities for those already in a position to exploit them, in which case new media may expand disparities rather than equilibrate them.

The material conditions of the production of mediated mass protest also include the fact that efficiency and maximal utilization of limited resources is as much an aim of those coordinating protest as it is for corporations. This imperative would, more often

⁵⁰ Terranova, 80.

⁵¹ Friedman.

⁵² Kellner in Foran, 182-183.

than not, lead to the sourcing of necessary tools from sites where workers were the most exploited: the Che Guevara t-shirts are produced by underpaid garment workers in Bangladesh and the Sony digital video cameras are assembled by similarly disenfranchised factory workers in Singapore. If the campaign is to be subsequently successful in securing reforms, it has ironically come at the cost of merely shifting the externalities elsewhere. As a consumptive practice seeking to reform the injustices that are wrought by consumption, mediated mass protest borrows against the future; it must diminish consumption by at least as much as has been consumed in the generation of the event to merely break even.

Aesthetics over ethics

Habermas identifies the free flow of information as a precondition of democracy: “Only when the exercise of political control is effectively subordinated to the democratic demand that information be accessible to the public, does the political public sphere win an institutionalized influence over the government.”⁵³ However, with the commercialization of mass media in the bourgeois constitutional state, the media no longer facilitate the creation of a robust public sphere.⁵⁴ In his contemporary re-evaluation of whether new media fulfill this role, media theorist John Downing notes optimistically that “The Internet is potentially our first global public sphere, a medium through which politics could be made truly participatory at both regional and

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” in Durham and Kellner, 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 103.

international levels.”⁵⁵ Information is a sufficient but not necessary condition for the formation of democracy. Terranova points out that, “Communication is not simply about access to information and public debate, but is also about manipulation by way of positive...and negative tactics.”⁵⁶

There is a price to be paid for the mass media’s sustained attention, and it is an increasing complicity to the functioning of a media system that thrives on spectacle. Such demands weaken the social movement, which strays ever more from its objective as it fixates upon its mediated self: “What happens when we plan our actions for the cameras but lose focus of who and what we are targeting?”⁵⁷ The receptivity of the audience for the revolutionary message is also eroded as they are desensitized by ever grander rhetoric and spectacles. The primacy of the media in protest politics marks the postmodern pattern of the supersession of ethics by aesthetics.⁵⁸ There has been a shift in the media’s emphasis away from the content of a movement’s cause towards less important details such as the number of people who manifest at the demonstrations. Political sociologist Todd Gitlin notes that even with respect to the protests against the Vietnam War, this was already the case: “each action actually amounted to a form of *petitioning*: large numbers of people were required to locate their bodies on a given spot and get counted.”⁵⁹ Getting counted now features prominently in oppositional strategy, hence the constant indignation of activist leaders over media underreporting of turnout.

⁵⁵ Downing, 202.

⁵⁶ Terranova, 133.

⁵⁷ Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, eds., from ACT UP to the WTO: urban protest and community building in the era of globalization (London: Verso Books, 2002) 263.

⁵⁸ Harvey, 328.

⁵⁹ Gitlin, 159.

That this has become an important frame of the debate reflects the trivialization of the representation of the actual issues.

The function of new media

The contingencies of new media undermine its efficacy for strategies of dissent. However, alternative functions follow from the relationship of new media to global capitalism. Specifically, new media facilitate the elaboration of the simulation of dissent for the cross-purpose of the perpetuation of the status quo. The next chapter will discuss criteria upon which the efficacy of strategies of dissent can be assessed as well as how different strategies of dissent, including but not limited to that enabled by new media, theoretically serve capitalism.

Chapter 3: The Efficacy and Functions of Dissent

“Hegemonic ideology enters into everything people do and think is ‘natural’-making a living, loving, playing, believing, knowing, and even rebelling.”¹

The culmination of dissent manifests itself as revolution, a sudden and radical transformation of society. In Marx’s conceptualization, socialist revolution was both inevitable and final. It was inevitable in that capitalism could not but undo itself; the profit imperative would demand ever increasing expropriation of surplus value and, hence, exploitation of labor. Workers’ growing awareness of their systematic subjugation would ultimately induce them to rise up, dismantle the capitalist system, and establish socialism in its place. Since the division of labor and the inequities in the distribution of wealth that it produces would be thereby abolished, the Marxist revolution is in this sense final as well: “the communist revolution is the supreme revolution of freedom since it does away with this or that specific form of the division of labor but with all forms, and so with bondage as such. By the same token, this is the last revolution.”² As the aim of revolution is freedom from the tyranny of the capitalist mode of production, there can be no subsequent revolution leading to further liberty.

There are several important characteristics of Marx’s idea of revolution that we can derive from this. Foremost is the primacy of the economic. He reasons that the historical organization of societies, from feudalism on through industrial capitalism, has

¹ Gitlin, 10.

² Paynton, 227.

followed from the configuration of activities of production, and the structure of cultural, political, religious, and social institutions are reflections of the economic.³ Thus, he defines the revolution as “a change in the mode of production with consequent change in all subordinate elements of the social complex.”⁴ Under this conceptualization, the efficacy of any strategy of dissent must be measured by its impact upon the fundamental economic structure. The effects thereafter cascade through the other spheres of society. Admittedly, this is a particular definition of revolution that excludes what might be counted as meaningful change based upon other criteria, such as social or cultural factors. There is, however, a danger in mistaking these changes for being necessarily materially meaningful; the alteration of other institutions within society may leave existing class divisions intact and hence not be a revolution at all. Moreover, the presumption of the efficacy of campaigns whose intention is only incidentally to change the economic structure may actually have a countervailing effect, by concealing the perpetuation of inequality and distracting from material struggle. Cultural theorist Thomas Frank points out, for example, that the much-vaunted counterculturalism of the 1960s saw very little change in the structure of capitalism: “Yet, through it all, capital remained firmly in the national saddle, its economic and cultural projects unimpeded even through the years of conformity that had given way to those of cultural radicalism.”⁵

The utility of politics

³ Ibid., 219.

⁴ Karl Marx in A.S. Cohan, Theories of Revolution: An Introduction (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1975) 59.

⁵ Frank, 228-229.

Politics are thought to be a means of reforming society, but it is unclear that the political system can accomplish the ends of the revolution. The playing out of the dialectic within the political sphere presupposes the perseverance of class divisions: “The end result of the ‘normal’ political process may be considerably different from the original state, but this is of no consequence.”⁶ The political order stands predominantly for the interests of the ruling class. If the capitalists hold power, then it follows that the political system will have been configured such that the proletariat cannot simply cast their vote to effect its divestiture. For example, historian Howard Zinn argues that, notwithstanding attributions of more noble intentions, the authors of the U.S. Constitution favored a representative democracy over an unremediated democracy because of the threat that the latter posed to their own economic interests: “For if some people had great wealth and great influence; if they had the land, the money, the newspapers, the church, the educational system—how could voting, however broad, cut into such power?”⁷

Like the rhetoric of liberty that surrounds the U.S. Constitution, neoliberalism now contends that it is an engine of democracy: “Henceforth, more and more economies would be governed from the ground up, by the interests, demands, and aspirations of the people, rather than from the top down, by the interests of some narrow ruling clique.”⁸ For many, however, the supposed inexorability of capitalism has given little cause for the celebration of newfound freedom. There is a contradiction in the neoliberal formulation of the political economy between the egalitarian principles of democracy and the

⁶ Cohan, 13.

⁷ Howard Zinn, A People’s History of the United States 1492-Present (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) 95.

⁸ Friedman, 49.

profound disparities in wealth that its companion capitalism engenders. A cursory consideration of the world's most powerful democracy and neoliberalism booster, the U.S., finds the odd coincidence of a republic "by and for the people" and some of the greatest income disparities of any nation. In the U.S., "the richest 1 percent of the population owns roughly 50 percent of the total financial wealth of the society, the top 5 percent own roughly 70 percent, and the richest 10 percent own about 90 percent of the wealth."⁹ If the economy were subordinate to politics, the expectation would be that the society would collectively effect greater economic equality.

Contingencies of the revolution

The importance of the economic structure makes it easier to see how ostensibly major transformations can take place within a society that are nonetheless materially inconsequential. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser distinguishes between the state, the particular occupants of the site of power, and the state apparatus, the institutions through which power operates irrespective of those who happen to command it. Thus, while dissent may undermine the state, it may leave the state apparatus largely intact; the state may collapse "without the State apparatus being affected or modified: it may survive political events which affect the possession of State power."¹⁰ Sociologist A.S. Cohan suggests a similarly structural approach to the qualification of revolution: "When

⁹ Steven P. Dandaneau, Taking It Big: Developing Sociological Consciousness in Postmodern Times (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2001) 58.

¹⁰ Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. B. Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 94.

we think about revolutionary change we have an image of radical change, of a major alteration, not a mere change of actors performing unchanging roles.”¹¹

Like the state apparatus Althusser discusses, political philosopher Antonio Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as subtle and largely invisible, which mitigates the war of movement as a strategy of opposition. Rather, hegemony is diffuse, and the usurpation of state power tends to elide its continued operation: “Premature attack on the state...would only reveal the weakness of the opposition and lead to a reimposition of bourgeois dominance as the institutions of civil society reasserted control.”¹² This is consistent with poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of power not as the character of a binaristic relationship but instead as a distributed and immanent function:

The analysis, made in terms of power, must not assume that the sovereignty of the state, the form of the law, of the over-all unity of a domination are given at the outset; rather, these are only the terminal forms power takes...power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent to the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.¹³

To confuse the state for the state apparatus is to risk mistaking the occurrence of superficial change with a more profound rearrangement of the system of power. In fact, this conflation is a strategy of the system of power.¹⁴

¹¹ Cohan, 22.

¹² Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, hegemony and international relations: an essay in method” in Louise Amoore, ed. The Global Resistance Reader (London: Routledge, 2005) 38.

¹³ Foucault (1990), 92.

¹⁴ “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” Charles P. Baudelaire, “The Generous Gambler” in Joseph M. Bernstein, ed., Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine: Selected Verse and Prose Poems (New York: Carol Publishing, 1994).

If the state is dismantled, and the inequities of the underlying economic structure are redressed to just such an extent as is necessary to secure a base of popular support,¹⁵ the possibility remains that the previous order will only have been replaced by a functionally equivalent hegemony. The revolutionary project is incomplete if the elimination of the tyranny of the old system is merely a prelude to its reconstitution under the new. This conclusion is in some sense unavoidable, barring the thesis that history, and with it the dialectic, has ended. Philosopher Georg Hegel's formulation of the dialectic implies that the revolution is not indefinitely oppositional; at some point the antithesis cedes its revolutionary character to constitute the emergent synthesis, which is subsequently reified as the new thesis.

It follows that revolution is as much a constructive process as a destructive one: "revolutions ostensibly conducted against the state have been more or less *productive of statehood*."¹⁶ The confrontation with the practical necessities of society requires the production of a state that is invariably more conservative than that laid out in the revolutionary project. This is consistent with sociologist Talcott Parsons' functionalist analysis: "no revolutionary movement can reconstruct society according to the values formulated in its ideology without restriction."¹⁷ The Communist Revolution in Russia is a case in point: the disposal of the autocracy did not lead to the redistribution of power and wealth to the peasants so much as the assumption of state authority by the Communist Party. Socialist China is another good example. From its revolutionary

¹⁵ Zinn, 97.

¹⁶ Noel Parker, "Parallaxes: Revolutions and 'Revolution' in a Globalized Imaginary" in Foran, 43.

¹⁷ Talcott Parsons, The Social System, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 1991) 529.

Maoist roots, the People's Republic of China has become in the present-day a highly autocratic regime focused on suppression of alternative ideologies. Paradoxically, the regime which every revolution produces is no less intolerant of revolutionary affronts to its own rule than those that preceded it. The revolution therefore has little bearing on the fact of the state. That is to say, the state is a feature of power indifferent to whether it is the prerevolutionary status quo or the immediate product of the revolution.

While the revolution reproduces the state, hegemony also contains the seeds of its own opposition. Historian Walter Adamson notes that hegemony "is never a closed, static empire of thought and culture."¹⁸ It cannot enclose all differences within itself. Hall agrees and adds that the preservation of immanent difference is an intentional move: "It is a homogenizing form of cultural representation, enormously absorptive of things...but the homogenization is never absolutely complete, and it does not work for completeness."¹⁹ Under this conceptualization, hegemony is not hermetic but rather invariably gives rise to the forces that oppose it.

That hegemony and revolution are mutually constituting suggests a possible recontextualization of their putative antagonism. Indeed, the recombination of thesis and antithesis to form the synthesis suggests an interdependence, which undermines the position of exteriority upon which dissent might be predicated. Postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard argues, against Marx, that there is no true revolution because resistance to or complicity with capitalism are not meaningfully different: "All that capital asks of

¹⁸ Adamson, 174.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity" in Anthony D. King, ed., Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 28.

us is to receive it as rational *or* to combat it in the name of rationality, to receive it as moral *or* to combat it in the name of morality. Because *these are the same.*”²⁰

According to Baudrillard, hegemony is not subject to the dialectic; it is that which subsumes the dialectic. The presupposition of the meaningfulness of either rationality or morality as a basis for opposing capitalism always already delimits the boundaries of the hegemonic field. Complicity to the will of capital does not mean failing to oppose it but rather failing to oppose it without invoking or depending on its own strategies. In the latter case, the methods of resistance become indistinguishable from those of hegemony.

Dislocation of interests

The dislocation of interests is a maneuver meant to conceal and reinforce their continued operation. This is the common goal of both globalization and mediated mass protest: they are means of laundering our relationship to the tyranny that we effect. Globalization accomplishes this by decoupling the sites of production and consumption, the function of which is not solely economic but also psychological. It is a process whereby consumers can dissociate the excesses of their own consumption from the injustices that their behavior produces elsewhere. Mediated mass protest accomplishes this through the expenditure of material capital in the production of symbolic capital. Like the simulacrum, the maintenance of the illusion of dissent ensures the perpetuation of hegemony by concealing the absence of meaningful opposition: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth – it is the truth which conceals that there is none.”²¹

²⁰ Baudrillard in Durham and Kellner, 530. Emphasis in original.

²¹ Baudrillard in Durham and Kellner, 521.

Such inert resistance is not without its function. Nor is it an historical novelty, considering the roles of the state and labor in stabilizing capitalism during the Great Depression. The dispersal of interests has functioned to inscribe the individual in a contingent relationship with respect to hegemony. Gitlin, Baudrillard, and literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard corroborate the notion that, against its demonstrative purpose, dissent can feed the system. Gitlin notes mutual benefit and mutual complicity: “hegemony is, in the end, a process that is entered into by both dominators and dominated. Both rulers and ruled derive psychological and material rewards in the course of confirming and reconfirming their inequality.”²² Institutionalized inequalities cannot therefore be merely explained as the prevalence of the interests of the powerful over those of the powerless. For Baudrillard, networks have eradicated distance, and the system has cleverly dispersed interests to ensure its own viability: “if the entire cycle of any act or event is envisaged in a system where linear continuity and dialectical polarity no longer exist...every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions.”²³ Dialectics have given way to the simulation thereof, towards the end of the reproduction of hegemony. Finally, Lyotard argues that ostensible challenges to the system are a strategy of self-rearrangement: “even when its dysfunctions...inspire hope and lead to belief in an alternative, even then what is actually

²² Gitlin, 254.

²³ Baudrillard in Durham and Kellner, 531.

taking place is only an internal readjustment, and its result can be no more than an increase in the system's 'viability.'"²⁴

Consequently, the ostensible triumph of oppositional movements sometimes leads to the sublimation rather than eradication of their antagonist. P2p file-sharing networks, for example, have progressively eliminated the artifacts of centralized control and organization in response to copyright infringement lawsuits brought by the content industry.²⁵ All aspects of the p2p clients have by now become decentralized, including search and software development. The net effect seems to be that not only are determined file traders no less interested in infringing copyright, they now have increasingly decentralized and, thus, unassailable networks with which to do so.²⁶ The civil rights movement could be considered a similar case. While the civil rights movement went a long way towards increasing awareness of racism in society and prompting necessary institutional changes, it also pushed racism deeper into the structure of society where its operation became more ambiguous. Having faced down racism in its more overt manifestations, we are left with the more intractable problem of the inadequacy of self-insight for scrutinizing our own prejudices. The end of colonial rule marked the beginning of postcolonial exploitation. Although many former colonies have ostensibly become politically independent, economically exploitative relationships persist

²⁴ Lyotard, 11-12

²⁵ See *A&M Records v. Napster*, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 12 Feb. 2001, retrieved 14 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.ce9.uscourts.gov/web/newopinions.nsf/0/c4f204f69c2538f6882569f100616b06?OpenDocument>>. and *Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. v. Grokster*, U.S. Supreme Court, 27 Jun. 2005, retrieved 14 Apr. 2006 from <http://www.eff.org/IP/P2P/MGM_v_Grokster/04-480.pdf>.

²⁶ Peter Biddle, et al., "The Darknet and the Future of Content Distribution," retrieved 30 Oct. 2004 from <<http://msl1.mit.edu/ESD10/docs/darknet5.pdf>>.

under sanitized guises. Cashed in the rhetoric of development, SNIs push national economic reforms that benefit TNCs at the expense of citizens such as removing institutions for social welfare and making environmental, labor, and monetary concessions to attract FDI.

The corporation as proxy

The dislocation of interests becomes clear in malcontents' vilification of the corporation as the principal agent of globalization. The corporation is a logical configuration not only for the maximization of profit but also for the distraction of oppositional movements. It is the ultimate disposable proxy – the breakaway stage prop that insulates us as individuals from the vagaries of the marketplace and plays the role of the structurally contemptible villain to which we can conveniently ascribe our own vices. It takes the fall for financial failure and bears our hostility to it. Everyone is served by the belief that the corporation is in some sense autonomous, bound by the imperatives of the imaginary will of capital. While the negative externalities the corporation produces are personally disavowed, strangely, the virtue that inheres to its opposition is considered deserved.

But what is this inexorable “will of capital,” if not an aggregate reflection of individual behavior within society? The irrepressible predisposition of capital turns out to be simply the manifestation of our own desire. The corporation is similarly operationalized. And the imaginary autonomy of capitalism as “a system of production

for production's sake"²⁷ is really just meant to conceal our own complicit investment in the status quo:

The economy's triumph as an independent power invariably also spells its doom, for it has unleashed forces that must eventually destroy the *economic necessity* that was the unchanging basis of earlier societies. Replacing that necessity by the necessity of boundless economic development can only mean replacing the satisfaction of primary human needs, now met in the most summary manner, by a ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs, all of which come down in the end to just one – namely, the pseudo-need for the reign of an autonomous economy to continue. Such an economy irrevocably breaks all ties with authentic needs to the precise degree that it emerges from a *social unconscious* that was dependent on it without knowing it.²⁸

The consequence of this sublimation is that the totalizing valence of capitalism becomes inexorable where it need not have been. The disavowal of our relationship to the structure of capitalism presupposes that we will be unable to change it. While we are indignant with the corporation's ruthless externalizing,²⁹ ours was the first act of externalization in creating the corporation to begin with.

Increasingly conscientious consumers petition that the corporation adhere to progressive standards on labor, the environment, or other activist causes, at times even exerting pressure through the marketplace. The efficacy of such approaches is mitigated by the fact that this demand can be fulfilled as readily through the production of a convincing illusion of change than through actual change. Since the prosocial agenda of

²⁷ Foss, 33.

²⁸ Debord, 33-34. Emphasis in original.

²⁹ The Corporation, dir. Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar, Films Transit International, 2003.

the corporation is ultimately subordinate and instrumental to the primary imperative of moneymaking, its predisposition will be towards the least costly option. If the simulacrum is indistinguishable from reality, then the system will tend towards manufacturing appearances. In other words, to the extent possible, increasing public attention to such matters is a problem to be handled foremost through marketing and public relations rather than changing fundamental business practices: “Friends of the Earth, for example, has claimed that oil companies spend more on marketing their green credentials than on cleaning up their operations.”³⁰

Material factors in the production of dissent

Just as the manufacture of the image of social responsibility require the expenditure of corporate resources, so too are strategies of dissent enabled by overaccumulation. Moreover, they help to absorb it: “the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production.”³¹ Mediated mass protest is particularly resource-intensive, and as much as it aims to correct capitalism, its production demands that participants have a certain amount of disposable income. When the demonstration as a discrete event ends, the protesters largely return to their participation in the “normal” economy: they resume complicity with the necessity for making certain concessions to the system. Meanwhile, those who stand to be helped the most by a change in the structure of capitalism are least able to contribute to the project of effecting that change. This is corroborated by Paynton and political philosopher

³⁰ James Lamont and John Mason, “Ecology opens for business,” *Financial Times* 30 Aug. 2002, retrieved 9 Apr. 2006 from http://72.14.203.104/search?q=cache:http%3A//www.eletra.com/ars/e_article000094801.cfm.

³¹ Debord, 13.

Alexis de Tocqueville: “revolutions ordinarily do not occur when a society is generally impoverished – when, as deTocqueville puts it, evils that seem inevitable are patiently endured.”³²

Superfluous wealth is also laundered through professionalized social movements: “social movements are sectors of the economy relegated to the fringes, dependent on discretionary income for their growth and development.”³³ This represents a departure from Marx’s grassroots vision of the unification of the proletariat. Sociologists John McCarthy and Mayer Zald note that even with respect to mythically egalitarian social movements such as those of the 1960s in the U.S., this had been the case: “the functions historically served by a social movement membership base have been...increasingly taken over by paid functionaries, by the ‘bureaucratization of social discontent.’”³⁴ Examples of such entities include non-profit organizations (NGOs) and government itself. The professionalization of dissent is marked by the utilization of mass promotion campaigns and the rise of full-time employees whose work consists of focusing on a particular cause.³⁵

The new prominence of professional organizations in strategies of dissent and the concomitant displacement of grassroots participation implies that dissent itself has become increasingly inscribed within capitalism. McCarthy and Zald contend that “social movements can only mirror social relations in the larger society. Since this is a capitalist society, social movements (presumably even when opposing capitalism) can

³² Paynton, 179.

³³ John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald in Foss, 20.

³⁴ McCarthy and Zald in Putnam, 159.

³⁵ Putnam, 153.

only adhere to a capitalist model.”³⁶ Dissent itself has been rationalized and commodified within the capitalist system; it has become a service subject to the logic of the market. Both corporations and the formalized social movements are subject to competition from other organizations, engage in the promotion of their mission and themselves through media strategies, are driven towards efficiency, and, most importantly, have something to sell. The capitalistic enterprise aims to convince the consumer of the virtues of a product (and, implicitly, of a certain ideology either associated with or inherent to it), and the formalized social movement overtly promotes the adoption of a particular ideology.

Some strategies of dissent thus have a contingent relationship with the hegemony they purport to oppose. The conditions that permit the formation of discretionary income are among those that capital may eventually be earmarked to reform. Can this approach more than compensate for the extent to which it has already leveraged the system in the production of that excess? The second law of thermodynamics, the law of conservation of energy, suggests that a system cannot output more energy than was originally put into it. Though this is a figurative example, it makes some intuitive sense when applied to the case at hand. Not all of the energy invested in a system goes towards the generation of a material outcome; some is lost as heat. In the case of dissent, this might be externalities such as organizational politics or a preoccupation with the media. Since professional organizations cannot leverage donated funds as efficiently for prosocial ends as capitalism must have had to have functioned to have permitted the formation of that

³⁶ McCarthy and Zald in Foss, 20.

excess capital in the first place, the social goals of dissent be better fulfilled if the formation of overaccumulation could be mitigated initially.

The symbolic capital that is produced incidentally to protest takes the form of a self-conception: the fixation of an oppositional identity and the affirmation of agency. Consider the case of the character named Cypher in the film “The Matrix.” Like Cypher, people want assurance as to their persistent identity as historical agents against the problematization of material struggle, but he has gone to the extreme of abandoning the revolution entirely in exchange for the illusion of agency. Recontextualized, not only does the effort expended on revolutions that play out within the hermetic sphere of the matrix present no threat to the machines that have constructed it, but the participation of the matrix’s subjects in the illusion actually sustains the system of power: while the humans dream, their bioenergy powers the machines.

The only reason that a news clip covering an anti-globalization rally that brings together thousands of protesters has any cachet at all is because of the tremendous amount of energy that has gone into its production. If media coverage is the principal intent of the demonstration and the same clip can be produced virtually at far less cost via computer technologies, what is the function of locating so many people on the same spot? After all, it is not as though the actuality of the protest-event is necessarily verifiable for the audience at home by any means other than media. Regardless of whether or not the protest actually takes place, the possibility that such a clip could be produced *in toto* via computer is sufficient to demean the significance of the event. Another case that highlights the shrinking gap between the real and the simulated is the signatures of public

officials. Written signatures used to have cachet because they were unique and hence, not duplicable. Moreover, the signature testified to the an uncontestable commitment of a certain amount of time and energy on the part of the signee. However, now even a signature can be simulated with the autopen, a mechanical device that creates an indistinguishable facsimile. U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld got into trouble in December of 2004 when it was revealed that he was signing the condolence letters sent to the families of soldiers who had died in Iraq with the autopen.³⁷ He has subsequently agreed to sign all such letters in the future, but it is perfunctory. There is no detectable difference between the real and the simulated signature, and yet we still cling to the ritualistic significance of the signature as though it remained unproblematized. The commonality of the two cases is that it is no longer about the effect that it produces – because surely that effect can be produced in other ways – but about the function of the unnecessary degree of energy that is required to produce it

Like the signature, protest becomes performative. Echoing Baudrillard's pessimistic assessment that the "strike-real...is no longer a stoppage of work, but [the work-real's] alternative pole in the ritual scansion of the social calendar,"³⁸ activist Naomi Klein expresses concern with trends in contemporary social movements: "an odd sort of anxiety has begun to set in after each demonstration...To keep up the momentum, a culture of serial protesting is rapidly taking hold. My inbox is cluttered with entreaties

³⁷ Jackie Frank, "Lawmakers Chide Rumsfeld for Auto-Signed Sympathy Letters," Reuters 19 Dec. 2004, retrieved 11 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1304689/posts>>.

³⁸ Baudrillard in Durham and Kellner.

to come to what promises to be ‘the next Seattle.’”³⁹ One could easily imagine that these petitions appear along side automated messages advertising discounted airfares or a sale at a favorite store, suggesting starkly that protest is just another commodity, albeit a symbolic one, clamoring for time and/or money.

A public performance springing out of an alternative vision of society, contemporary protest is akin to literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of the carnival. The carnival is a time marked by State-sanctioned disorder, hedonism with the blessing of the Church, and the ritualistic inversion of power relationships in the society. Protest similarly imagines that, like the credo of the World Social Forum, “another world is possible.”⁴⁰ However, critiques of Bakhtin’s carnival point to that “in some overall functional way [it] reinforces the bonds of authority by allowing for their temporary suspension.”⁴¹ Anthropologist J. Lowell Lewis elaborates: “Although participants in such celebrations may interpret such reversals as the total suspension of all social rules, this is usually only a convenient fiction. In most cases, ‘anarchic’ festivals are in fact carefully controlled by the elites, for whom true chaos is a persistent fear, since it would be extremely threatening to the status quo.”⁴² Analogously, the function of protest relative to the system is to create the illusion of the possibility for change.

Something more than nihilism?

³⁹ Naomi Klein, “The vision thing: were the DC and Seattle protests unfocused, or are critics missing the point?” in Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk, eds., from ACT UP to the WTO: urban protest and community building in the era of globalization (London: Verso Books, 2002) 271.

⁴⁰ José Corrêa Leite and Carolina Gil, The World Social Forum: Strategies for Resistance, trans. T. Romine (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005) 4.

⁴¹ Simon Dentith, Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader (London: Routledge, 1995) 73.

⁴² J. Lowell Lewis, Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 5-6.

Having thus reached the point where even such ostensibly oppositional practices and posturing themselves appear complicit with all that we deplore, we are left with an intractable problem of agency. Not resisting capitalism surely leaves it intact. Refusing to cooperate as consumers punishes labor. Protests both depend on overaccumulation and mitigate it, the latter through the reintroduction of inefficiency into the system as well as the resources consumed in the production of the spectacle. Invariably, as the vehicle of the parties most invested in the status quo, politics cannot be a means of re-equilibrating wealth. Finally, the revolution that overthrows the state merely presages the reconstitution of a no-less tyrannical hegemony. The next and final chapter will consider the implications of these conclusions for what have traditionally been our contexts of agency and pose some tentative ideas on how to contend with these conundrums.

Chapter 4: Towards an Alternative Formulation of Resistance

“Smoking dope and hanging up Che’s picture is no more a commitment than drinking milk and collecting postage stamps. A revolution in consciousness is an empty high without a revolution in the distribution of power.”¹

Thus, we find ourselves apparently constrained in our ability to move, circumscribed by a field of proliferating contingencies. The viability of the enterprise of mass protest or mediated dissent was perhaps the luxury of another time when we were not so self-conscious and did not suppose that there was another order of intention behind the surface meanings of actions and events; i.e. that creating a world that was consistent with our own values really was as simple as locating ourselves at certain spot at a designated hour or disseminating a message advancing a particular ideology. The problem we face is that of position; the binaristic logic that constructs “self” against “other,” subject against object, and the would-be revolutionary against the hegemonic system would seem to require that the former and the latter, in all three examples, be discrete from one another not merely in language. This requirement appears unmet: the creation of categories of “others” bulwarks the identities of certain privileged subjects,² quantum mechanics undermines the autonomy of the observer and the observed,³ and, as this project has thus far attempted to show, our inscription within capitalism has always

¹ Abbie Hoffman, Steal This Book (New York: Pirate Editions, 1971) v.

² Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 54.

³ Werner Heisenberg, The Physical Principles of the Quantum Theory, (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 3.

already preceded our intentions and moves to contest it. I will begin by briefly covering the contexts in which we have thought ourselves to possess agency: as citizens, employees, producers, consumers, and, finally, as protesters. Concluding that the efficacy of these roles in effecting change is problematized at best, how do we formulate a tenable conception of agency? What are practical steps the individual can yet take? Where can pressure be applied to the system that does not just indirectly feed it?

Contexts of agency

A democratic government or a close approximation thereof would ostensibly provide the means for bringing about a more equal distribution of wealth. However, in the case of the democratic republic of the U.S., this expectation is strongly contradicted by the persistence of economic inequality. The subsumption of the interests of the nation-state to the logic of global capitalism analogously suggests that the power of the vote to affect the economic sphere has diminished as well. If voting were an efficacious means of changing the system then society would look much different than it does now, since the proletariat outnumbers the capitalists. Therefore, the ability to vote does not necessarily imply power: “simply having elections does not ‘prove’ that democracy exists.”⁴ Moreover, there is the additional danger that voting engenders complacency by offering the illusion that it is a context of agency when it is not. Hence, “The ballot box is the coffin of revolutionaries.”⁵

⁴ John and Thomson, 10.

⁵ Jeff Goodwin, “Is the age of revolution over?” in Foran, 2.

As employees, we can determine the criteria under which we choose to work for particular organizations. Choosing on the basis of ideological congruity can pressure organizations to conform to certain principles. Allowing for the fulfillment of basic material needs, the forfeit of greater discretionary income can be a means of changing the system, since the amount of discretionary income a job affords is a reflection of its complicity with capitalism. Although as higher-paying positions go unfilled, they may become more lucrative offers for those willing to take them, undoing what value might otherwise accrue. The expansion of discretionary income cannot be justified by it being earmarked for constructive ends; the public good would be better served if its formation were disallowed in the first place.

New modes of production permit the disruption of technological determinism in some cases, implying that what individuals do with new media may not necessarily play out within the hegemonic boundary. Unlike the case for analog objects, the linear progression of production – distribution – consumption for digital objects does not hold. Instead, the “consumption” of digital technologies frequently constitutes an act of production as well. Various trends problematize the category of work: telecommuting, mobile computing, and communications devices that enable permanent connectedness and contactibility; the sale of virtual artifacts generated in MMORPGs; and “altruistic” acts of both collaborative (open source software development, wikis, folksonomies) and individual production (blogs, online photo albums, social networking profiles, and other network-accessible media). There is room for the displacement of models that are based on intangibles: for example, open source may prompt a rearrangement of the business

models of proprietary software companies. This kind of production, however, will always be second-order because of the fact of the materiality of the underlying infrastructure. Code is not scarce in the same way that resources are.

As global capitalism increasingly assumes primacy over nation-states, the primary context of agency shifts from the political to the economic. So, what about the power of the consumer to effect change? Diminishing consumption outright is suggested by some as a strategy for reforming capitalism. This is the premise behind AdBusters' Buy Nothing Day,⁶ which "aim[s] to encourage people to have one day when they would think about excessive consumption and inequalities between rich and poor countries."⁷ However, it seems unlikely that curbing consumption will force a rearrangement in the relations of production unless practiced widely and deeply, else the economic effect would just be marginal. Moreover, it is not the capitalists who suffer the punitory effect. The structure of capitalism remains insulated by the disempowerment of labor, and it is labor that will consequently suffer the brunt of the lack of growth. Diminishing consumption means that production will have to scale down, which translates to fewer people being employed for less money. In other words, poor quarterly performance is more likely to lead to layoffs than to painful cuts in executives' salaries. Capitalism can be starved significantly and still remain unchanged. It is like the larger company that can afford to adopt a strategy of underpricing their competitors, thereby running smaller companies out of business.

⁶ "Buy Nothing Day," AdBusters, 2005, retrieved 3 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.adbusters.org/metasteco/bnd/>>.

⁷ John and Thomson, 8.

The efficacy of boycotting is similarly equivocal: “While [boycotting] produces media coverage and gives people an easy way to become activists, it can also be a boost to those companies not tainted.”⁸ In other words, boycotting may just externalize the problem by shifting it elsewhere without actually reforming the system. The incidental effect is to make a spectacle of the difference that is being made by people becoming activists and through media coverage. However, giving a boost to those “untainted” companies is only negative if the practices of the boycotted company are otherwise indistinguishable and it just happens that it is the only one to be made into a spectacle. Buycotting, a variant of boycotting that involves informed consumption, however, can make the market mechanism meaningful; it can be a means of forcing the re-internalization of the externalities of production. The expropriated surplus, disposable income can be forfeited to turn capitalism into a progressive instrument for the purchase of more expensive domestically-produced goods, fair trade products, or obviation of the middleman; cosmetics and pharmaceuticals designed without cruelty to animals; crops grown in a sustainable fashion; seafood caught and harvested or aquacultured without ecological devastation; precious minerals mined not under the auspices of military totalitarianism, and so on. This is a less than perfect solution from the perspective of correcting the inequalities in society, that the formation of excess income ever occurs to begin with, but it is the right approach. New media can be used to inform consumption.

The efficacy of the mass protest and the media strategy is predicated on a belief in the power of awareness. They are techniques that function at best to summon the

⁸ Ibid., 4.

attention of the uninformed masses to the outstanding injustices in society that they will be impelled to take action. The presumption of this approach is that the problem is principally one of the disparities in consciousness: that is to say that the exploitative structure of power is a reflection of ignorance rather than desire. Thus formulated, oppositional movements' leveraging of the hegemonic system of media to influence is justified by the ends that they seek. The logical conclusion of the notion that the media can be used to positive effect is the contradiction that if it were a perfect coercive instrument, it could be used to ensure that everyone subscribed to progressive ideologies. Such an outcome seems hardly different from the totalizing valences of capitalism, which desires that ignorance be colonized by its own ideological imperatives.

It is difficult to see how the confidence of knowing what is best for everyone else, whether now espoused by neoliberals or globalization's malcontents, does not lead to domination. It is, after all, a familiar historical discourse in the justification of power. Plato professed the virtues of the cession of governance to wise philosopher kings in the ideal republic.⁹ Colonialism cloaked itself in the transparent rhetoric of helping the "poor, uncivilized savages" of the territories it subjugated. And the framers of the U.S. Constitution saw a representative democracy as necessary because of their belief in people's incapacity for self-rule.¹⁰ Politics is consequently a career undertaken with the presupposition that s/he know what is better for the people than they are able to realize themselves.

⁹ Plato, Plato's Republic, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1982) 214-240.

¹⁰ Zinn, 95.

If the ideological investments of the multitude are so susceptible to media influence, there is a greater threat to democracy than that they are simply not committed to the *right* ideologies, as the dissenters might argue. The fact that the ruling powers use ideological apparatuses such as the media and politics to promote capitalism is taken to point, I think, mistakenly, not to the problem of the fact of such apparatuses but rather to that different ruling powers are needed. In other words, the means are considered irrelevant as long as the desired ends are achieved. A change in consciousness thus effected amounts to a pyrrhic victory, for not only has the approach failed to confront the hegemony of media, it has reinforced its power as a system of influence and domination. The structural critique of the contingencies of media cannot be suspended just because new media appears to permit the dissemination of oppositional ideology.

Those who rely on ideological apparatuses, both ostensibly in support of and in opposition to capitalism, would argue that change is not possible without resorting to power, but, of all the ends that power can serve, it cannot be made to effect its own dispersal. Power does not voluntarily divest itself: ideological apparatuses survive the usurpation of the state.¹¹ Political scientist Robert Putnam notes that this is even the case for non-profit organizations: having accomplished their mission they do not dissolve but rather repurpose and expand.¹² Even if power can be co-opted in the service of a progressive agenda, it can only be a means of exercising discipline over others, thereby reproducing hegemony. For example, the U.S. has been trying to install democracy in

¹¹ Althusser, 94.

¹² Putnam.

Iraq since it forcibly removed Saddam Hussein from power in 2003. However, this effort seems destined to fail. Democracy is structurally non-authoritarian; it cannot be imposed from above but must emerge spontaneously from below. The people must decide for themselves what they want, and, paradoxically, freedom must include the ability to reject the very system that has allowed it to emerge.

Capitalism constituted by complicity

As much as we can compress the systemic inequities stemming from others, I think we will ultimately discover that *we* constitute the limit to the changes we can effect in the structure of capitalism. Our inability to escape from our own circumscription within the system is a more intractable problem than influencing others. For one thing, we overlook many of the concessions we make to capitalism as being necessary: we have to buy gasoline to fuel the car that takes us to work to earn the paycheck that subsidizes food and shelter. There is no unimplicated action, no gesture in support of capitalism that somehow does not count or can be effaced through some subsequent gesture.

However, the rationalization of our complicity with capitalism transcends the procuring even these basic necessities. Graduate education is a good example. Particularly in the liberal arts, there are at least a subset of graduate students who understand their studies as a means of developing the skills and critical consciousness that will empower them to change society for the better. However, while an advanced degree is instrumental to personal and/or professional self-advancement, it is only equivocally instrumental to the project of social change. The appeal to empowerment masks the more crucial justification that aims to mitigate the dilemma of our implicit

complicity with the conditions of the production of that education, namely, the material inequalities that capitalism sanctions. The development of a critical consciousness does not materially offset these concessions; capitalism could be sustained by nothing more than the discounted effects of the trivial complicities of otherwise-aware individuals. As political philosopher Edmund Burke famously credited as remarking, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”¹³ We have more to fear from indifferent complicity than from malevolence.

The revolution as internal

Our having located the source of the inequalities in society as external to ourselves reinforces this complicity; the focus on impelling others to change has to give way to a more self-critical approach. This is to propose a reconceptualization of what is meant by the term “revolution.” The revolution is made possible by learning to locate that which we need to change, reform, destroy, overthrow within rather than outside of ourselves. Towards this end, Foucault suggests that we work to deconstruct the subject positions that inhere to us through the operations of disciplinary power: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political ‘double bind,’ which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures.”¹⁴ This is a struggle “against the tendency of normalizing-disciplinary power

¹³ Interestingly, while this quote is attributed to Edmund Burke, it is unclear where it actually came from. See Martin Porter, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing,” Jan. 2002, retrieved 25 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.tartarus.org/martin/essays/burkequote.html>>.

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in Durham and Kellner, 785.

to tie individuals to their identities in constraining ways,”¹⁵ which requires not only contesting processes of subjection but also not invoking disciplinary power to subject others.

Effectively, this is an exhortation to eschew ego maintenance, in the Buddhist rather than Freudian sense of the term. Action that is not formalized into categories and yet taken to constitute an identity will be more flexible and efficacious in responding to power than rigid, oppositional identities. Martial artist Bruce Lee articulated this premise forcefully with respect to potency in the martial arts: “Don't get set into one form, adapt it and build your own...Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless — like water...Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water my friend. Adapt!”¹⁶ This lesson is just as relevant to the project of dissent.

Complications for the individual strategy

The primary difficulty, however, in negotiating the adoption of an individual strategy is the status of freedom, which remains problematized by the fact that it can only ever exist in opposition to its counterpole oppression. Belonging as it does to a spectrum that acknowledges the possibility of oppression, freedom is always therefore necessarily provisional. I would suggest that true freedom is the non-position in which we are no longer subject to a continuum that locates us as either free at one end or oppressed at the other. Freedom is the state in which there is no subject who can be free, for then neither is there a subject that can be oppressed. In short, freedom can only come with the

¹⁵ Aurelia Armstrong, “Foucault and Feminism,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2006, retrieved 3 Apr. 2006 from <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/f/foucfem.htm#H4>>.

¹⁶ Bruce Lee in John Little, ed., The Tao of Gung Fu: A Study in the Way of Chinese Martial Arts (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 1997) 138.

negation of the subject. However, there are a number of problems with this feint, including the practical critique of historically marginalized subjects and the impossibility of positionlessness.

Among other critics, feminists have argued that Foucault's analysis of the subject as that which is primarily *subject to* power rather than that which embodies and exercises it has underacknowledged political ramifications for historically marginalized groups. They are uncomfortable with the abandonment of "some essential, liberatory subject rooted in 'women's experience' (or nature), as the starting point for emancipatory theory."¹⁷ The response to disperse the subject strikes them as suspicious in light of the longstanding complicity of Western thought to imperial aspirations.¹⁸ Specifically, the maneuver appears to coincide too conveniently with the nascent empowerment of certain categories of subjects such as women, ethnic minorities, and homosexuals. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak suggests that Foucault's gesture in fact conceals the continued wielding of power by the Western intellectual: "The theory of pluralized 'subject-effects' gives an illusion of undermining subjective sovereignty while often providing a cover for this subject of knowledge."¹⁹

Positionlessness is complicated by the fact that we are always already constituted as subjects by disciplinary power.²⁰ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall points out that subjectlessness can never precede subject formation and the subsequent deconstruction or

¹⁷ Jana Sawicki, "Foucault, feminism, and questions of identity" in Gary Gutting, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Foucault (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 289.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 75.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ Foucault (1995).

attempted abandonment of the subject position invariably relies on the same conceptual artifices that have defined and delimited the subject to begin with: “You have to be positioned somewhere in order to speak. Even if you are positioned in order to unposition yourself, even if you want to take it back, you have to come into language to get out of it. There is no other way.”²¹ Literary theorist Jacques Derrida concurs: “We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.”²² Moreover, the effacement of the subject requires that the subject initially be constituted. However, Foucault’s conception of resistance is consistent with Hall’s observation as it does not require a secure position of exteriority: “Foucauldian resistance neither predates the power it opposes nor issues from a site external to power. Rather it relies upon and grows out of the situation against which it struggles.”²³ What is required is that the subject understand what constitutes resistance within the field in which it struggles.

Critical reflexivity is a provisional tool for better understanding the contingencies that circumscribe the subject, but it remains burdened by the subject’s Cartesian formulation. While philosopher René Descartes’ presumption to have been able to “get under” the subject to then step into it in a deliberate fashion is no longer considered tenable, critical reflexivity represents only a minor improvement on this approach. The lack of a new paradigm for thinking about the subject is evinced by that we are still trying

²¹ Hall in King, 51.

²² Jacques Derrida, Writing and Difference (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 280-281.

²³ Armstrong.

to cogitate our way out of the conundrum of position. Having recognized the intertextuality of subject and object, the logic of their discreteness has yet to be transcended and the mediating process of interpretation itself is objectified. Like ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail, this recursive process does not lead to a point of closure. The desire for apprehension continues to be confounded by the endless meta-interpretation, regressing into an imaginary vanishing point: “Doesn’t every science live on this paradoxical slope to which it is doomed by the evanescence of its object in the very process of its apprehension.”²⁴ Hence, the closure of contingency seems unattainable.

As a practical matter, this provisionality of awareness and position cannot be a deterrent to action. While our inscription within the system reflects the nature of power, it is also the origin of resistance: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.”²⁵ Dissent therefore eschews the impossibility of total liberation, instead concentrating on “more specific, local struggles against forms of subjection aimed at loosening the constraints on possibilities for action.”²⁶ It seems that understanding our own position, however, necessarily precedes demanding that others address their own complicity; how can we lobby others to change in the world what we are unable to change in ourselves?

A new paradigm of the subject

²⁴ Baudrillard in Durham and Kellner, 525.

²⁵ Foucault (1990), 95.

²⁶ Armstrong.

Having thus registered the principal objections to the Foucauldian/postmodern rendering (or deconstruction, as it were) of the subject, I am going to propose a lateral movement. Just as we cannot simultaneously enjoy the illusion of our dissent vis-à-vis protest and the disproportionate fruits of the system of capitalism that opposition must sincerely mean to undo, we cannot simultaneously secure the liberatory potential of postmodernism and salvage the agency of the modern subject. As I see it, the problem is that we remain wedded to an untenable subject paradigm and that if anything is to go, it is the fixation on the unified subject. This is an oblique answer to the question of “where does the subject have agency?” It suspends our preoccupation with the fate of agency by turning to an interrogation of the deterministic aspect of language, that presupposes discrete things called “subject” and “agency” mediated by a somehow autonomous process of “possession.” This parsing is conventional.

Our contemporary paralysis is a product of the ways in which we have alienated ourselves from the world and our own desires. Thus, the ability to change the world is not a matter of trying harder in the ways in which we have become accustomed, but rather it calls for a new approach altogether: that is the remapping of our own selves and the realization of our non-separation from the world. Recognizing that capitalism does not exist over-and-above our own desires points to the simple conclusion that power does not need to be forcibly reclaimed. This was spiritual leader Mohandas Gandhi’s insight about the power of individuals: “what individuals accept or tolerate serves to perpetuate institutions and practices that would otherwise languish and disappear. [Gandhi] holds that individuals, having transferred their power, can recover it when they wish, with civil

disobedience if necessary.”²⁷ The revolution which we typically understand as the overthrowing of institutions is superfluous in that the power is always in our hands to begin with; we must merely make the choice not to cede it. This is not to say that resistance does not require action or that there will not be adverse material repercussions for those who defy the hegemonic order, but rather that the elusive revolution is internal rather than external.

The understanding that participation in the reproduction of the status quo is a choice is the necessary precondition of being able to make an alternate decision. Resistance that does not proceed from this understanding is destined to fall short because it always already overlooks the complicity of self to the system. Comparative religion scholar Alan Watts moreover argues that as long as we understand the troubles of the world as external to ourselves, we will only secure diminishing returns: “It is hard for compulsive activists to see that the vast social and economic problems of the world cannot be settled by mere effort and technique.”²⁸ This approach concedes no room for coercion or the justification of the utilization of ideological apparatuses for “socially constructive” ends; everyone has to come to terms with their relationship to the system for themselves. Gandhi elaborates this concept of *swaraj* or self-rule: “It is *swaraj* when we learn to rule ourselves. It is, therefore, in the palm of our hands...But *swaraj* has to

²⁷ Ronald J. Terchek, “Gandhi’s Politics” in Richard L. Johnson, ed., Gandhi’s Experiments with Truth: Essential Writings by and about Mahatma Gandhi (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006) 201.

²⁸ Alan Watts, The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are (New York: Pantheon Books, 1966) 99-100.

be experienced by each one for himself. One drowning man will never save another. Slaves ourselves, it would be a mere pretension to think of freeing others.”²⁹

The individual approach is therefore fundamentally non-coercive. While Gandhi is typically lionized as having been instrumental to India achieving national independence, he himself viewed indigenous sovereignty as undesirable as a project unto itself; the kind of “rule” that mattered was *swaraj* not that of the nation-state.³⁰ An Indian government whose function it was to exercise law and dominative power over the freedom of Indians would be only a marginal improvement compared to British rule. So, if we cannot resort to the structures of power such as politics or the media without recreating hegemony, then all there is for us to do is to model behavior. Change is thus operationalized by exemplary actions of individuals: “lonely assertions of power can have a powerful demonstration effect as others come to see their complicity in their own domination and understand that they can recover the power they ceded to others.”³¹ We must anticipate the society we wish to ultimately effect by living it now, and I do not suppose that that society is marked by the political polarization, demonization of one’s enemies, and simplified oppositional analyses that are common today.

It may seem as though we are without recourse, but the hope is that this feeling of desperation can presage a beginning rather than signify an end: “The sense of paralysis is therefore the dawning realization that this is nonsense and that your independent ego is a fiction. It simply isn’t there, either to do anything or to be pushed around by external

²⁹ Mohandas Gandhi in Johnson, 193.

³⁰ Terchek in Johnson, 199-200.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

forces, to change things or to submit to change.”³² I think that paralysis can be positive, for it is only from the despair of the ultimately vain quest to salvage the agency of the Cartesian subject that we can get beyond it. Having journeyed as far as we could in the vehicle of our analytic machinery, what follows next can only be a spiritual move. This development is neither metaphysical nor transcendental; it is in fact very much in keeping with the deconstructive impulse of the poststructuralist tradition from which it departs.

Watts explains:

the deeper troubles arise when we confuse ourselves and our fundamental relationships to the world with fictions (or figures of thought) which are taken for granted, unexamined, and often self-contradictory. Here...the ‘nub’ problem is the self-contradictory definition of man himself as a separate and independent being *in* the world, as distinct from a special action *of* the world.³³

The tireless debate about how and under what circumstances we are able to change the world gives way to the realization that we cannot but change it. Action is not something we do; action is something we are.

Globalization and dissent

The media, in the form of both the corporate mainstream and nascent decentralized countermovements, present an unprecedented opportunity for the dissemination of ideology as well as diversions of focus from the material advancement of professed causes. The most efficacious strategies may turn out to be far more unassuming than the spectacle. If revolutionaries begin to eschew the preoccupation with

³² Watts, 109.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

manufacturing media effects and instead start to think more practically and holistically about the contingencies that underlay their practice, they will realize that there is potential in the aggregation of individual decisions that are so trivial as to be overlooked or dismissed as inconsequential. Oppositional strategies founded on consumption or that appeal to ideological apparatuses run the risk of becoming merely another mechanism of capitalism for dealing with its own crises. The revolution can yet be recovered, and social philosopher Guy Debord demonstrates the path: “the practical current of negation in society...the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, will become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle which is the theory of its real conditions (the practical conditions of present oppression).”³⁴ We must work harder to understand how and where we are situated in globalization’s web if we are to discover where we still have leverage and where we are just serving capital’s ends.

³⁴ Debord, 143.

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